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A duke's wealth is the natural result of a free society - and should be celebrated

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Gerald Cavendish Grosvenor

What does Theresa May think of the Duke of Westminster, who died this week? I ask because she says she wishes to lead a country that works “not for a privileged few

but for every one of us". So is she someone who feels it monstrously unfair that Gerald Cavendish Grosvenor should have ended up "worth" more than £9 billion, essentially because of the accident of birth, or does she think such accidents are symptoms of a free and stable country?

Mrs May is by no means the first Tory Prime Minister to say such things against privilege. Margaret Thatcher (teasing Tony Benn in 1987) spoke of "irreversible shift ... of power ... in favour of working people and their families". John Major said he wanted to create a "classless society". David Cameron promised at the 2015 general election that he would reward "ordinary people who play by the rules". He was trying, before a certain other matter deposed him in June, to concentrate on what he called "a life chances agenda" to achieve this.

No Conservative is going to come into office saying he or she wishes to entrench privilege and increase inequality. They will all speak of the needs of the many. But one needs to ask them what they mean by what they say. If they are not careful, they will find they are advocating socialism.

To a true socialist, any substantial difference in wealth is always a bad thing. It is evidence of selfishness, because wealth is to be held in common and distributed only according to need by an all-wise state which can mysteriously judge that need aright.

Billionaire Duke of Westminster dies aged 64
01:28

The most obvious Conservative answer to this is "No, because people must be free to get rich by their merit, and there won't be any wealth if they aren't." This is true so far as it goes, but is merit much easier to adjudicate than need? Besides, it does not reflect the full reality. The truth is that some people are richer and more successful than others for a wide variety of reasons – luck, ability, upbringing, health, inheritance, education,

marriage, even looks (as in “Her face is her fortune”). None of these is strictly a matter of merit, yet few would tolerate a Conservative government who tried to punish everybody who is rich for these reasons.

That being so, surely non-socialists should not fret unduly about differences of wealth. They should even give thanks for some of the results. Most Oxford and Cambridge colleges give dinners called Commemoration of Benefactors, where they rightly pay tribute to rich people who gave generously for the high purpose of education, often many centuries ago. The late Duke of Westminster gave £50 million for the new Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre for injured servicemen now being built near Loughborough.

People with a conservative cast of mind (and one hopes this applies to Conservatives with a big C, though quite often it patently doesn't) also have a sense of history. Continuity in a nation is generally a benefit. It is encouraging that a man whose family first got rich because his ancestor was the fat huntsman (gros veneur) of William the Conqueror has £9 billion today, 950 years later. It shows that our culture respects private property over government interference. It gives hope to us all.

None of this means that a Conservative government should be any less committed than a socialist one to social reform and economic advancement. In a democracy, the condition of most people is what matters. But “opportunity” and “security” are much better words to express this than “equality”. In this respect, Mrs May is quite right to fasten on the lot of she calls the “ordinary, working-class family”. She says it is “much harder than many people in politics realise”.

By identifying the “just about managing” classes as the most important, she is taking the best measure of which way the economy and the country are going. Problems like the housing shortage, or energy bills inflated by green levies, or the attack on savings made by persistently low interest rates, then come into proper focus. This is much nearer the mark than the liberal agenda, sometimes known as “Soho modernisation”, which dominated the Cameron-Osborne era. It appreciates the importance of what Mrs Thatcher used to call “our people”.

Theresa May holds her first Cabinet meeting

01:03

It will all go wrong, however, if it fails to appreciate the importance of wealth creation, of which Mrs May has hardly spoken, and the low taxes and sparing regulation this requires. Few things in British history have done less for well-distributed prosperity than “industrial strategy”, yet Mrs May says she wants one. Most wealth creation works to the general good, but one of its inevitable consequences is that some people do a lot better than others. This helps provide an index of what works and what doesn’t. She is right that too many CEOs are better at taking large sums out of their companies than in improving their long-term profitability, but if she tries to lay down exactly how companies should be run, she will only ensure a flight of talent, and mediocrity for all.

One trouble about the obsession with equality is that it creates a chippy, negative disposition about almost everything. It is so much easier to find someone who is rich, and start complaining about him, than it is to help people who aren’t.

There is a similar problem in the field of education. For years now, politicians, including Tories who should have known better, have made widening access their priority in universities. Because it is easier to blame superficial symptoms rather than real causes, they have persistently attacked the best universities in the country for admitting “too many” students from independent schools.

Greening replaces Morgan as Education Secretary

00:32

Actually, it would be a truly disgraceful situation if good schools could not get their pupils into good universities because of social engineering. It would break the virtuous circle by which high standards are maintained. The right question, barely addressed in public policy, is “Why are so many state schools still so bad that they cannot prepare pupils for the top level of higher education?”

Recently, Mrs May’s people have started to test the water about bringing back grammar schools. It is apparent from the reaction, including among some Tories, that the bad fairy of equality leads many people to think that selection, because it leaves some out, must automatically be wrong. But surely a good school is better than a bad one, and more grammars mean more good schools. “Life chances” cannot, in reality, be absolutely equally available to everybody, everywhere, always. That is why they are called chances, not certainties. The art is to create a culture in which they are more likely to crop up.

The late Frank Johnson, famed sketch-writer on this newspaper, once commented to me on how the Left had changed in the past 30 years. “They failed when they nationalised companies,” he said, “so now they are trying to nationalise people instead.” This is what the rage for equality does, taking power over ethnic and sexual questions, over relations between men and women, over children, over tax rates, over education, over employment and who pays whom what. A prime minister who accepts its premises, because they sound “fair”, will find herself trapped in its oppressive conclusions.



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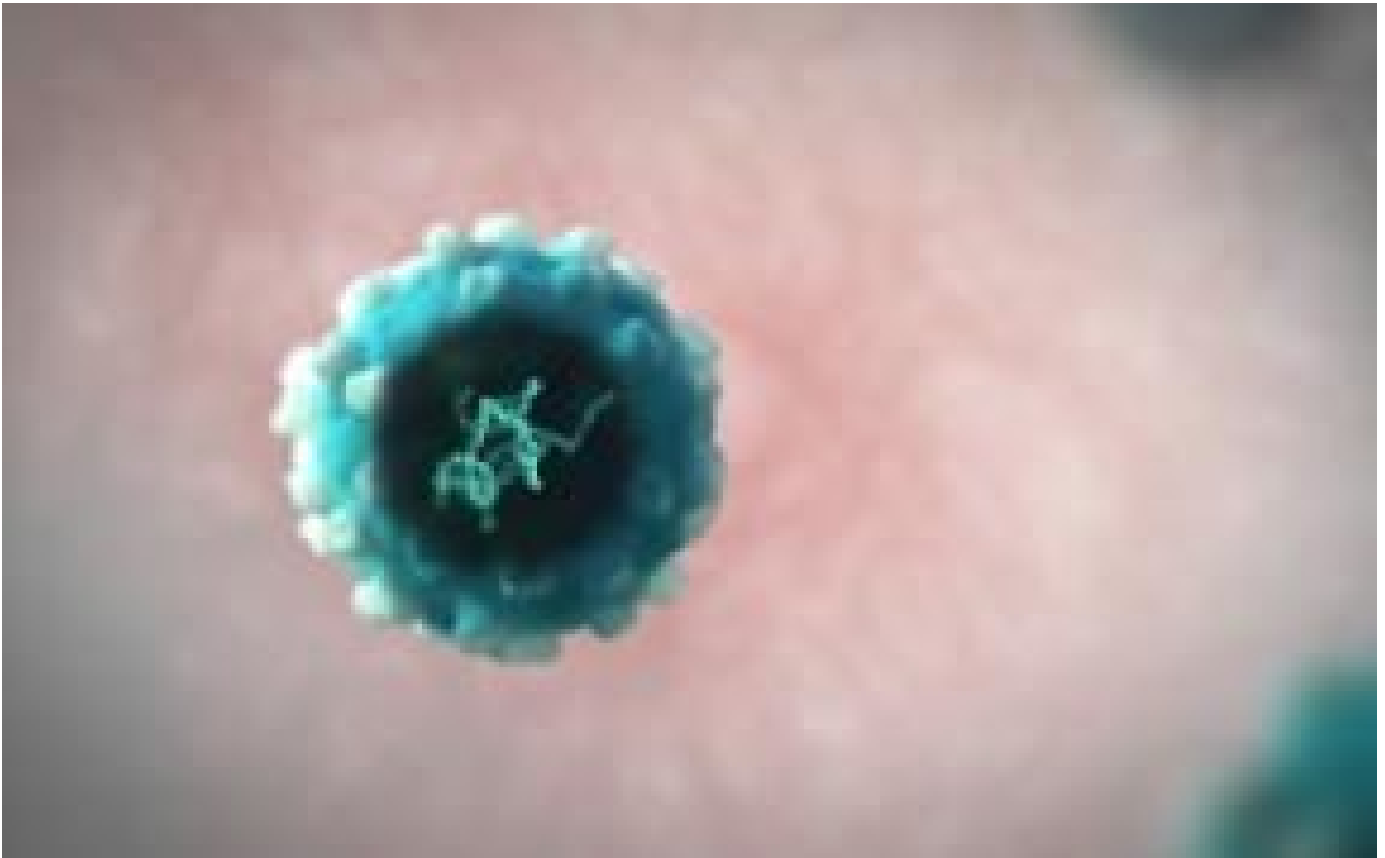
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