

Political debate about economic inequality

An information resource

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An exploration of politicians' attitudes to economic inequality.

This study aims to increase understanding of how politicians think and talk about economic inequality, both in private and in public. It compares politicians' attitudes across and between five major political parties: the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish National Party. The research is particularly relevant given the recent turbulence with the financial system, the correspondingly high levels of attention upon the City and bonus culture, and the recession.

Main contents include:

- the extent and location of political debate about economic inequality;
- the forms of economic inequality under focus;
- identification of key themes and divergence within the debate;
- how politicians present responses to economic inequality;
- the future of political debate about economic inequality;
- gaps within the debate.

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Executive summary

In 2008, the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) to explore and analyse the nature of the political debate about economic inequality. The research consisted of:

- a debate audit, which examined 64 sources, including speeches and articles by politicians, between July and October 2008;
- interviews and discussion groups with 44 politicians from the five main political parties.¹

This analysis of political debate forms an important aspect of JRF's programme on public interest in poverty. The way that politicians frame and discuss economic inequality provides part of the context within which public attitudes are formed. Public attitudes in turn influence the Government's ability and willingness to act to address inequality.

The extent to which economic inequality is perceived to be a problem

Discussions about disadvantage were widespread across all parties. Overall, politicians focused much more on the related issues of poverty and social mobility than on the economic gap between richer and poorer people, organisations or areas. They were very imprecise in their use of the terms 'poverty', 'social mobility' and 'inequality', and the term 'economic inequality' was not used in the public arena by politicians.

Articles authored by or directly quoting politicians on this subject were most likely to appear in left-leaning broadsheets.

The framing of economic inequality

Politicians focused on people on low incomes, with minimal discussion about extremely wealthy people. While the term 'middle incomes' was commonly used, a definition of who was included in this group was not elaborated. Economic inequality was often framed as a dichotomy between 'ordinary' people and everyone else. Politicians from the SNP and Plaid Cymru emphasised national-level economic inequalities between England, Scotland and Wales.

Forms of inequality

In public speeches and articles, income inequality received greater attention than wealth and asset inequality. Economic inequality was related to health and educational inequalities but there was little discussion about the relationship between different types of inequality. The subject of economic inequality often arose in the context of discussions about the recession, which emphasised the need to support those on low incomes through this difficult time and raised questions about fairness and responsibility in relation to those on high incomes, notably, in this time period, to bankers.

Dominant themes

The discussions were underpinned by a strong cross-party emphasis on the principles of equality of opportunity, social mobility and fair reward for hard work. Perceptions of the relationship between social mobility and economic inequality were mixed. Some politicians felt that the objectives of increased social mobility and greater economic

equality were compatible. However, Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians in particular argued that some level of inequality is necessary in order to encourage aspiration and ensure fair rewards. There was also disagreement about whether the priority should be on overall economic prosperity or the level of equality in society.

Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians in particular argued the case for greater economic equality using arguments about the intrinsic need for a more equal society and about the instrumental benefits that equality would have for the economy and for social cohesion. They did not specify the level of economic equality that would be desirable.

A cross-party theme was that the same rules should apply to rich and poor people in society, although discussions about responsibility tended to focus mostly on the responsibilities of people receiving benefits to work if they could.

The presentation of responses

Policy proposals were presented as benefiting the vast majority, while an 'other' group would need to contribute more or act more responsibly. For example, all parties agreed that taxes should be reduced for 'ordinary' people.

Discussions of tax policies tended to focus on criticisms of other parties' policies for benefiting richer people, with the exception of the Liberal Democrats who explicitly presented their tax proposals as redistributive.

There was a stronger emphasis on the responsibility of individuals and communities to improve their lives than on the responsibilities of the wealthier members of society to support the poorer members. All parties particularly emphasised the importance of education in improving life chances. Another cross-party theme was that Government had the responsibility to help people improve their lives but that dependency on the State was undesirable. This common rhetoric might have masked more subtle differences between the parties. For example, Conservative politicians explicitly argued that economic interventions have not worked and the Government should focus more on social reform to tackle issues such as intergenerational unemployment and family breakdown.

Perceptions of the future of the debate

Politicians felt that the public tend to adopt a self-interested view of these issues and were critical of the media coverage for encouraging this. However, they also suggested that poverty and social justice were the new political battleground between parties. There were differing views on how the recession might affect the debate; one perception was that the public would be more concerned with self-preservation as the economic climate became increasingly difficult. However, others felt that there would be more space for talking about wealth, privilege and, therefore, inequality.

Conclusion

Issues relating to economic inequality arose in a broad range of speeches, articles and debates. However, much of the debate about economic inequality was not made explicit. Privately, some politicians suggested that there was a lack of coherence across the parties on these issues.

This study has highlighted a number of areas for future investigation. For example, there was little discussion of economic differences between different ethnic groups or about the circumstances, role and responsibility of people on upper-middle incomes. There was also little discussion about the structure of the labour market. This raises interesting questions about how aspects of the British political system can explain the content and gaps in the current debate.

1 Introduction

In 2008, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) to explore and analyse political debate about economic inequality in the UK.

This research project forms part of the JRF's programme on public interest in poverty, which aims to build public support for UK measures to eradicate UK poverty. The project complements research conducted by the Fabian Society for JRF, which investigated public attitudes to economic inequality.¹ By exploring the way that politicians communicate about economic inequality, this study builds a picture of the context within which public attitudes are formed.

The aims of this research were to:

- understand the focus of the political debate on economic inequality in both national and local politics;
- understand and contextualise the terms used by the Government and the public in relation to economic inequality.

The methodology

The research consisted of two stages, which enabled exploration of both the public and more private political debate:

1. a political debate audit;
2. interviews and discussion groups with political party members.

A political debate audit

This comprised an analysis of major speeches and articles relating to economic inequality by politicians from the five major political parties.² Sources were taken from 1 July through to the end of the party conference season in October 2008. Articles were included that were authored

by politicians or in which politicians were directly quoted. This was because the scope of the research was to analyse political rather than media debate as far as possible, while recognising that they are closely interrelated.

Using the definition of 'economic inequality' as 'the unequal distribution of financial resources within the population',³ the sample included all sources that included at least one of the following:

- contrasted or juxtaposed one economic group with another;
- referred to a divide or gap in relation to economic or financial terms;
- referred to people moving economic positions in society or being unable to do so;
- referred to socio-economic class;
- referred to financial redistribution or lack of redistribution.

The search for political speeches and articles between July and October 2008 yielded a sample of 64 sources in which issues clearly relating to economic inequality were discussed.

Interviews and discussion groups with political party members

Interviews and discussion groups were held with 44 individuals from across the five major political parties on the topic of economic inequality. These included party members holding a range of different roles, including activists, MPs and an ex-cabinet minister.

The analytic approach

This study adopted a primarily qualitative approach, which mapped the various meanings and contexts associated with political debate

about economic inequality rather than quantifying the frequency with which terms were used (see Appendix 1 for further explanation).

The context of the research

This research analysed political discussions about economic inequality between July and October 2008. The time period of the research was unique within the political calendar, including the summer political recess, the party conference season and a parliamentary by-election in Glenrothes. This time period was selected in order to include key conference speeches in the analysis.

The research took place against a backdrop of extreme, unprecedented turbulence within the UK and global financial systems. The timeline in Figure 1 shows details of major events occurring up to and during the research period.

The unique economic context of the research had a marked impact on the way politicians

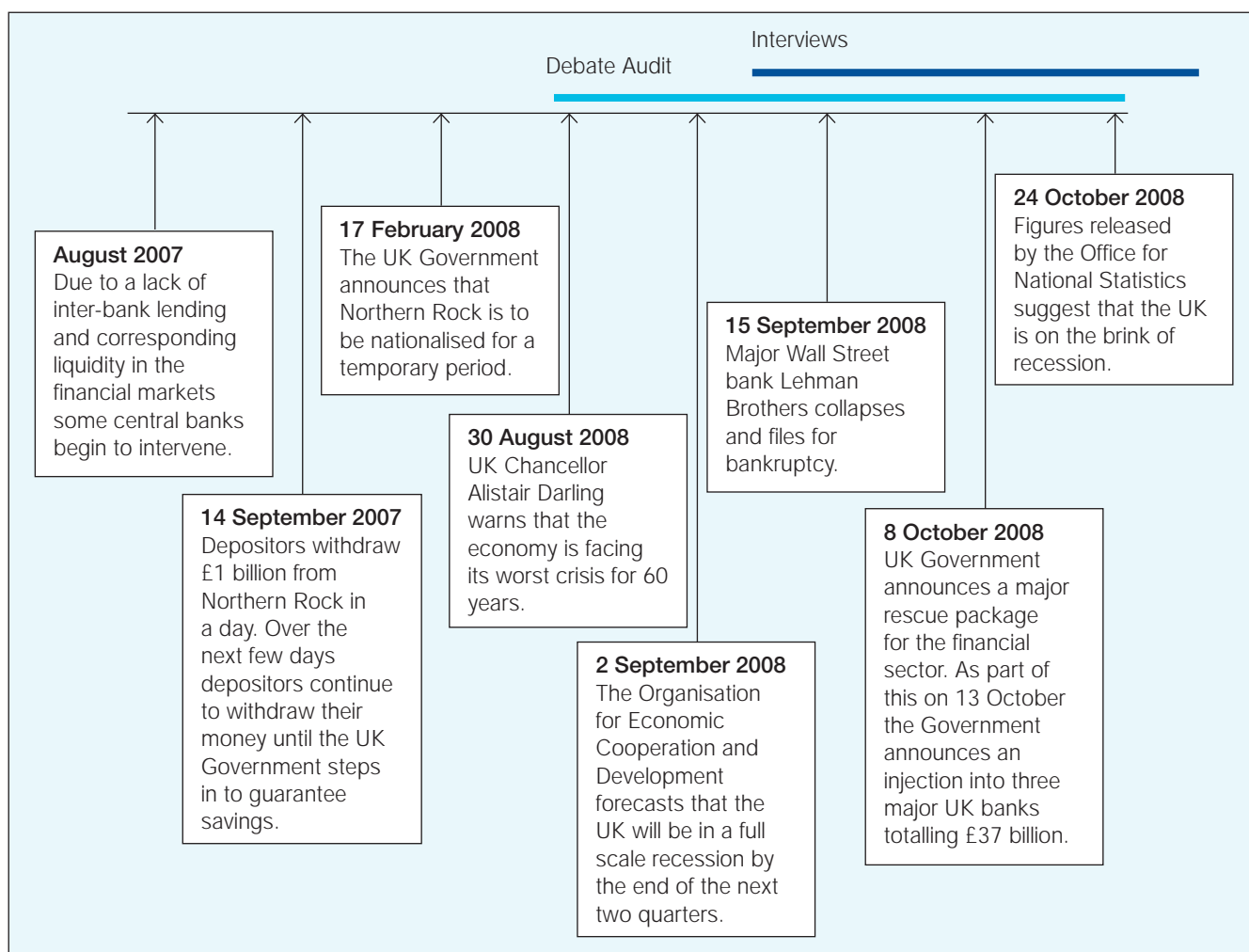
talked about economic inequality, which might have been uncharacteristic of previous debate on these issues. Given that the volatile economic environment is likely to continue for some time to come, these findings provide significant insights into the likely future direction of this debate.

Note on terms used

In the following chapters, we draw on evidence from both aspects of the research. Where there were significant differences between the evidence gathered from the interviews/discussion groups and from the ‘public’ speeches and articles, we make this distinction.

Quotations from interviews and discussion groups have been attributed on an anonymous basis, by participants’ role and party. Quotations taken from publicly available sources are attributed to politicians.

Figure 1: Timeline showing major events of the financial crisis



Source: BBC News ‘Timeline: credit crunch to downturn’, 31 December 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7521250.stm> (accessed 5 January 2009).

2 The extent and location of political debate about economic inequality

This study provides indicative evidence of the extent of debate about economic inequality among politicians during this period.

Discussions about issues relating to economic inequality occurred across all the parties and there appeared to be similar levels of concern about disadvantage. This was evident from the range of politicians quoted in articles or speeches discussing these issues. MPs from all five parties contributed to parliamentary debates on the subject and interviewees from all parties emphasised that economic inequality was an important issue for them.¹

During the time period of this research, no articles or speeches were found in which politicians explicitly used the term 'economic inequality'. Overall, politicians spoke more about 'poverty' and 'social mobility' than about the economic gap between richer and poorer people, organisations or areas. Because politicians were very imprecise in their use of the terms 'poverty', 'social mobility' and 'inequality', it was difficult to further quantify the extent of the debate about economic inequality and a qualitative approach that aimed to understand the meanings of these terms in context was adopted (see Appendix 1 for more detail).

The scope of this study was to examine print media rather than broadcast media. It found that direct quotations from politicians talking about issues relating to economic inequality² occurred in particular newspapers (see Table 1).

Location of sources authored by or citing politicians talking about economic inequality in the national press³

Location of sources	Frequency of sources
The Independent	9
The Guardian	6
The Times	6
The Daily Telegraph	1
Daily Mail	1
Other national newspapers including The Sun, Daily Express, Daily Mirror	0

It was notable that politicians were less likely to be directly quoted discussing economic inequality (or authoring articles on the subject) in red-top or middle-market newspapers than in the broadsheets. They were also more likely to appear in 'left-leaning' broadsheets.

3 Dominant themes

Descriptions of economic difference

Politicians described economic inequality¹ occurring between individuals, social groups, regions and geographical areas, individuals versus companies, and between England, Scotland and Wales.²

Differences between individuals

Overall, political debate relating to economic inequality was very focused on unemployed people, people on low incomes and 'hard-working families', with minimal focus on extremely wealthy people. While politicians referred to people on 'middle incomes', they provided little detail about who was meant by this group. When asked for their views on economic inequality, interviewees from all parties focused on issues relating to poverty and unemployment.

The political rhetoric tended to portray economic inequality in dichotomous terms rather than as a continuum. Where a contrast was made between different economic groups, the set of people doing well economically was often depicted as a minority 'other' group and contrasted with the 'ordinary' individual or taxpayer:

In every time of profound change those with great wealth and privilege have always been able to look after themselves. But our duty, what gives us moral purpose, is serving the people who need us most – Britain's vast majority – people on middle and modest incomes who need to know that they are not on their own amidst this change – we are on their side.

(Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister and Labour Party Leader, speech to Labour Party Conference, 24 September 2008)

Differences between social groups

The social groups who received the greatest emphasis were young people and pensioners. For example, there was a strong emphasis on the gap between children living in poverty and those who are not. Politicians also discussed the gap between educational attainment, upbringing and opportunities for young people from different economic backgrounds. Economic inequality was also related to gender in terms of both wage inequality and financial inequality between men and women in retirement.

Geographical, regional and national differences

A strong theme was that disadvantaged communities were living side by side with wealthy or prosperous communities, particularly within inner cities. Conservative politicians linked this to their notion of 'the broken society'. Interviewees from different parties gave examples of economic inequality between communities within the ward or constituency that they represented. Differences in housing costs were often drawn on as evidence for different levels of wealth and quality of life within localities.

Politicians also talked about economic disparities between regions in relation to the North–South divide and the decline of traditional manufacturing industries in specific areas.

Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru politicians argued that there are large inequalities at a national level, and that the Scottish and Welsh economies suffered from policy that was too focused on the UK as a whole and the South East in particular:

Our [Scottish] economy is subject to the overarching economic needs of the United Kingdom and if you consider that 50 per cent of the voting population of the UK lives within 50 miles of London you can understand that

the majority of economic policies are very much geared towards that.

(Councillor, Scottish National Party)

Descriptions of the forms of economic inequality

Some politicians described economic inequality directly as differences in levels of income and wealth between people. There was more discussion of income inequality than wealth inequality, particularly in the public speeches and articles.³

There were differing views between parties about whether inequality is growing. While Gordon Brown claimed that the rise in inequality has been halted in the UK, Conservative politicians claimed that the financial gap between rich and poor is at its highest since comparable records began and the Liberal Democrats claimed that wealth inequality is growing. Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians drew on different types of statistics to support their views; for example, the Liberal Democrats made comparisons between the amount paid in tax by the poorest 20 per cent and the richest 20 per cent⁴ while the Conservatives emphasised the numbers of people 'at the bottom' living in severe poverty.⁵ In public speeches, politicians tended not to state the specific source of the statistics they cited. They most commonly used 1997 or 'the past ten years' as the benchmark dates for making comparisons.

Politicians described economic inequality manifesting as differences in a number of different areas:

- life expectancies between rich and poor;
- infant mortality rates;
- educational opportunities among children;
- housing quality;
- employment opportunities;
- quality of parenting and early childhood experiences.

There was a strong emphasis on links between economic, health and educational inequalities, although little clarity about the causal relationship between these. Some Labour and Conservative politicians suggested that different forms of inequality are interconnected in a circular way.

The relationship between debate about economic inequality and the economic context

Politicians related their discussions of economic inequality to the economic context in the following ways:

- concern for whether the recession will impact disproportionately on those who are worst off while wealthy people will be able to protect themselves;
- concern about how the Government's response to the crisis will impact on future generations and whether this will be inequitable;
- an emphasis on rising prices and living costs as a reason for helping those worst off – some politicians referred to the gap between the large profits that had been made by multinational energy companies and the difficulties facing consumers;
- discussions about fairness in relation to financiers, bankers and chief executives – the extent to which the taxpayer should have to pay for their mistakes and discussions about the fairness of bonuses.

These themes were raised by politicians from across the parties, all of whom emphasised the need to support those on low and middle incomes through the recession. Parties also criticised each other for having sided with the interests of very rich people in the past and emphasised that the economic context provided an imperative for this to change.

Key themes and areas of divergence within the debate

Below we map the shared rhetoric and cleavages between and within parties. In some cases, politicians did not elaborate on the meanings of abstract concepts such as 'opportunity' and 'outcome'. Clearly their common rhetoric might have disguised differences in meaning. However, this study focuses solely on differences that were made explicit by politicians themselves.

Equality of opportunity, social mobility and fair reward for hard work

Politicians from all parties said that they were committed to the principle of equality of opportunity and increased social mobility. Cross-party rhetoric was that a fair society should provide opportunity regardless of background and that people's life chances should not be determined by their background.

Another common argument was that individuals should have both the opportunity and the responsibility for improving their own personal circumstances. For example, politicians from all parties focused on individuals' personal responsibility to work if they could and the need for a shift in cultural attitudes and aspirations in order to achieve this.

The values of hard work and enterprise were emphasised by all parties. In their conference speeches, Brown and Cameron both stressed that encouraging business and entrepreneurship is important but that Government must also play an active role in relation to the economy.

The role of Government

A cross-party theme was that Government had the responsibility to help people improve their lives but that dependency on the State was undesirable. However, there were some differences between and within parties about what the role of the State should be in helping the worst off. Conservative politicians argued that public services are too highly centralised and wasteful. They also argued that an over-centralised national government has created a dependency culture, and that individuals and communities must take personal responsibility to improve their circumstances:

When times are tough, it's not a bigger state we need: it's better, more efficient government. But even more than that we need a stronger society. That means trusting people. And sharing responsibility.

(David Cameron MP, Leader of the Conservative Party, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 1 October 2008)

Politicians from the Liberal Democrats were also critical of the public sector and argued that greater decentralisation of power is needed in order for public spending to be usefully spent. Politicians from the SNP and Plaid Cymru have argued that devolved governments need greater economic powers in order to impact on inequality.

Some politicians in the Labour Party argued that the necessary intervention of the Government in the market due to the economic crisis demonstrates the important role that Government must play in supporting ordinary families and in redistributing wealth.

The relationship between social mobility and economic equality

Politicians had mixed views about the relationship between social mobility and economic equality. The analysis found that the conceptual relationship between these issues was often unclear.

Some suggested that the two objectives were compatible. However, others argued that social mobility depends on a certain level of inequality.

Conservative politicians argued explicitly that inequality of outcomes is necessary in order to ensure people are fairly rewarded and have the opportunity to improve their position in society. They argued for a key distinction between inequality due to reward for effort, which is fair, and inequality due to differences in opportunity, which is unfair:

It is only possible to guarantee equal outcomes if you abandon the principle of due reward for effort. In other words, if you abandon the first characteristic of a fair society.

(George Osborne MP, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Speech to Demos, 21 August 2008)

Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians also argued that inequality is necessary in order to raise the aspirations of those who are worse off:

There is potential tension between wanting to make sure that we still encourage people to be aspirational and us making sure that there's not huge gaps between the rich and the poor. I don't think those things need to be in a lot of tension if ... you have the right mechanisms in place but on the face of it they can be seen to perhaps be counter-productive, working against one another.

(MP, Liberal Democrat)

However, a Labour interviewee suggested that there was a general tendency among politicians to highlight the upward trajectories of people who are socially mobile, without acknowledging the implications of this in terms of overall equity:

Obviously social mobility means you have to be able to go down as well as up.

(MP, Labour)

Some politicians from across the parties said explicitly that they felt the gap between rich and poor matters in itself, and having a more economically equal society is of intrinsic value. The argument was also made that a society with greater economic equality would be more peaceful and socially cohesive. Labour and Liberal Democrat interviewees argued that 'the gap' is damaging because it exacerbates people's experience of poverty and it produces social pressures to consume:

I think the inequality really puts pressure on people when you can see so much wealth around you and that particularly places real stress on families, on marriages.

(Councillor, Liberal Democrat)

However, when these politicians advocated for a more equal society, they tended not to discuss how equal society should be:

The second issue is the gap between rich and poor in society and how equal a society we want to be and how inequality begets more inequality.

(Harriet Harman MP, Minister for Women and Equalities and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, quoted in *The Guardian*, 19 September 2008)

The relationship between economic inequality and economic prosperity

Politicians expressed different views about the relationship between economic inequality and overall wealth creation. Some argued that greater equality and improved overall prosperity were compatible; others suggested that this position was flawed. Politicians from Plaid Cymru and the SNP debated whether the parties' focus should be on wealth creation or redistribution, with the implication that one objective must take priority over the other. The Conservatives explicitly argued that redistributive income tax could damage wealth creation and prosperity.

Publicly, senior politicians from the Labour Party emphasised that both objectives were compatible, although, in the more private interviews, some members and councillors within the Labour Party suggested that the Government's priorities had been misplaced:

I think it's [tackling economic inequality] a priority issue for the membership, absolutely and I think ... there's certainly grave realisation in higher levels that this is something that we've been in government for ten years now, this is not something we can just put on the fact of a legacy of the last Tory Government.

(Member, Labour)

Politicians from the SNP said that there are differences within the party over whether the focus should be on overall economic growth for Scotland or reducing inequality. Plaid Cymru politicians emphasised that tackling inequality was fundamental for the party but that the priority was both tackling inequality at a national level and encouraging small investment and growth within Wales.

Desert-based principles should apply to both rich and poor

A strong theme was that people from across society should abide by the rules and meet their responsibilities if they were to receive something back. While most of these discussions related to individuals receiving benefits, some politicians from different parties claimed that the same rules should apply to both rich and poor. Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians argued that, in the context of an economic recession, wealthy people must contribute their fair share. For example, bankers were described as having behaved irresponsibly and therefore did not deserve help or rewards:

We have always said that there are no rights without responsibilities. No help without conditions. That is what we have said to the poorest people in our society. I am not going to say anything different to the richest.

(George Osborne MP, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, speech to the Conservative Party Conference, 29 September 2008)

Historical legacies of parties shape their current debate

This research suggested that the historical legacies of different parties shape their current debate about economic inequality. Parties used each others' political legacies as a tool to attack each other. For example, the Conservatives were perceived to have shifted their focus under David Cameron towards greater compassion for the poorer people in society. Sceptics of this move emphasised the legacy of Thatcher in order to argue that the Conservatives cannot be trusted in this political territory.

Conservative politicians emphasised that previous Labour Party politicians believed in equality of outcome while politicians from Plaid Cymru and the SNP suggested that Labour has shifted its focus away from these issues. Speeches from the Labour leadership simultaneously distanced themselves from some past values (such as past opposition to privatisation) and argued that fighting for equality has always been fundamental to the Labour tradition.

The presentation of responses relating to economic inequality

In the section above we highlighted divergences between politicians' views on the responsibilities of Government, communities and individuals. These were reflected in politicians' presentation of responses to economic inequality.

Reducing taxes for people on low incomes

Politicians from all political parties agreed that they were opposed to tax policies that burden 'ordinary' people. Politicians from the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties said that they wanted to see tax cuts for people on low incomes and Labour party politicians proposed tax rebates and credits. A number of reasons were given for this including that: it is socially just to help people who are struggling during an economic crisis; it is morally right to be compassionate; and tax cuts for people on low incomes will help stimulate the economy. There was a tendency to use very emotive language when making these arguments:

When the bailiffs are at the door, you are not sitting there thinking isn't it great that we've got a progressive government that is raising taxes to fight poverty and reduce the Gini coefficient of income inequality. I am asking you to give us freedom of scope – don't bind our hands – to set out an agenda which is genuinely progressive, committed to public services but involves significant tax cuts.

(Vincent Cable MP, Deputy Leader and Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Liberal Democrats, quoted in The Guardian, 16 September 2008)

Redistribution and wealth creation

Politicians tended to criticise other parties' tax policies for advantaging the rich or for disadvantaging the worse off. For example, Labour and the Liberal Democrats criticised the Conservatives for their inheritance policies, which they said would benefit super-rich people. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats criticised Labour over the 10p tax rate, arguing that people on middle incomes felt it was unfair

that they benefited at the expense of people on low incomes. The Labour Party leadership also apologised for this policy on the same basis. However, the parties were less clear about whether they would like their own tax policies to be more redistributive.

Overall, the Liberal Democrats most explicitly framed their tax policies as redistributive and said that the poorest people currently pay too high a proportion of their income in tax compared to the richest. In his conference speech Nick Clegg described their tax proposals as 'the most redistributive yet'.⁶ However, there was debate within the party about whether its tax-cutting policies would reduce inequality:

We think that if the priority is tackling poverty, most poor people do not pay tax. There are better ways of tackling poverty than cutting the overall tax burden.

(Evan Harris MP, Shadow Science Minister, Liberal Democrats, quoted in *The Independent*, 15 September 2008)

In contrast, Conservative politicians argued that financial redistribution is 'not enough' to solve the societal problems as they define them. Instead, Conservative politicians focused on the social causes and manifestations of poverty and deprivation, such as intergenerational unemployment and family breakdown, and on tackling these at a social or cultural level. They argued that the causes of 'the broken society' are fundamentally moral and about the decline of responsibility:

The central task I have set myself and this party is to be as radical in social reform as Margaret Thatcher was in economic reform. That's how we plan to repair our broken society.

(David Cameron MP, Leader of the Conservative Party, speech to Conservative Party Conference, 1 October 2008)

There were differences in opinion between Labour politicians, with some explicitly advocating redistribution of income, while others argued this was an ineffective instrument and that targeted public service provision offers a better solution.

Politicians from the SNP were focused particularly on increasing economic growth and reducing living costs for ordinary people. Interviewees suggested that this was an area of debate within the party, with some advocating a greater focus on reducing economic inequality:

When a new measure is brought to this house by whatever Government in the coming years, that is the measure against which I will judge them. I will ask myself, 'Does this measure narrow or widen the gap between the rich and poor?'

(John Mason MP, maiden speech to Parliament, 13 October 2008)

Interviewees from Plaid Cymru and the SNP said that greater autonomy of national taxation policy would increase their ability to reduce inequality.

A cross-party theme was that a strong and healthy economy is essential for any positive social change. A strong theme among Plaid Cymru politicians was the need to create wealth and find investment, specifically in the large areas of deprivation within Wales. Interviewees from the Liberal Democrats, Conservative Party and Plaid Cymru talked about the need for an emphasis on local wealth creation, particularly in rural areas or declining industrial areas. They suggested that the priority should be supporting small businesses:

We've always believed in a fairer system of taxation, which for us would entail taking more people out of tax and having probably a higher rate of tax for high earners. That isn't particularly important because we don't have a lot of high earners in many parts of Wales. What might be more important I think is altering other aspects of the tax regime – for example, by encouraging small businesses of which we have a large number.

(MP, Plaid Cymru)

Public services

Improving education was a significant theme. Educational disadvantage was seen to relate strongly to economic inequality and good quality educational provision was seen as the best

solution to it. All the parties made proposals in terms of directing educational resources towards the most disadvantaged. Labour politicians emphasised Sure Start and Children's Centres. Conservative politicians emphasised academy schools and selection. Liberal Democrat politicians talked about directing financial support to children from deprived backgrounds.

There were also debates between the parties about what kinds of public spending would most benefit those who are worst off. However, these tended not to be framed as redistributive policies or to be linked to explicit discussions of reducing the gap between richer and poorer people.

Responsibilities of wealthy people and poorer people

A strong theme across parties was that people should not take advantage of the tax and benefits system, and that there should be some level of conditionality for benefits. While there was less focus on the responsibilities of wealthy people, discussions about the recession referred to bankers' responsibility not to take self-interested risks that would damage the interests of the majority.

4 The future of political debate about economic inequality

Perceptions of public attitudes

The evidence suggests that politicians' personal views about public attitudes to economic inequality differed from what was said publicly. In the more private interview context, politicians from across the parties suggested that public attitudes are rooted in a self-interested mentality and that the public lack interest and understanding in the complexity of issues relating to social deprivation. Interviewees said that, while the public do not like to see significant poverty, this does not translate into support for increased taxation or redistribution. One interviewee suggested that poverty reduction is not a politically expedient issue for the main parties because many of those living in poverty do not vote.

However, in the articles and speeches, politicians from all parties noted that the public had made an altruistic judgement about the 10p tax rate. They said that people on middle incomes had felt it was unfair for them to benefit at the expense of people on low incomes.

Perceptions of the media

Interviewees from across the parties referred to tabloid media debate being focused on attention-grabbing headlines about 'scroungers'. They also said that there was a lack of in-depth analysis of issues relating to poverty and inequality.

Perceptions of party political priorities

Politicians from all parties suggested that issues relating to poverty and social justice were the new political battleground. Interviewees said that all parties are now interested in reducing poverty. All parties used rhetoric that described themselves as being on the side of 'ordinary families'.

Politicians had different views about what their party priorities were. Interviewees from each party also questioned whether other parties' stated priorities were genuine and highlighted their inconsistency with previously held ideologies or values.

Views on where the debate will go in the future

When asked where they thought the debate would go in the future, interviewees related this to the economic crisis and also suggested the debate would be shaped by the run-up to the election. It was argued that economic issues in general would be much higher on the political agenda compared with previous years. However, there were differing views on how the unfolding economic circumstances could affect the debate.

- Some interviewees felt that political debate would be increasingly focused on the overall health of the economy at the expense of issues of inequality, which would be sidelined.
- Many interviewees felt that public attitudes would harden, in the sense that people would become more self-interested as the recession progressed.
- Some interviewees felt that the rise in unemployment might mean an increased public focus on issues relating to poverty and deprivation, which would in turn lead to greater political focus on poorer people. They suggested that, with more people out of work, there might be greater understanding of the reasons for unemployment among the public.
- Some interviewees felt that the economic crisis was already resulting in a greater focus on inequality and extreme wealth.

- All parties felt that proposing tax increases would be politically damaging for them:

There is deep-seated antagonism to cash transfer in this country from those who are struggling very hard to make ends meet.

(MP, Labour)

Discussions about the responsibilities of very wealthy people were consistently linked to the economic context. One implication is that the recession may create greater space for politicians to make arguments about wealth and privilege.

5 Conclusion

This study found that issues relating to economic inequality arose in a broad range of speeches, articles and debates, including the key conference speeches of all five political parties. However, much of the debate about economic inequality was not made explicit, the language of 'economic inequality' was not used and assumptions of how different processes and concepts are linked – such as economic growth, social mobility and economic inequality – were not elaborated. Privately, some politicians suggested that there was a lack of coherence across the parties on these issues:

I can't think of a politician in Government, or for that matter in the Shadow Cabinet, who really has developed a narrative that is about economic inequality.

(Councillor, Labour)

When politicians did talk explicitly about the gap between richer and poorer people in society, they tended to frame this as a dichotomy. They presented themselves as being on the side of the vast majority, who were their perceived audience. Policy responses were presented as benefiting this vast majority, while an 'other' group would need to change or act more responsibly.

Gaps in the debate

In the course of the research, it was noted that the following areas received relatively little or no coverage.¹

- In describing economic differences between social groups, politicians focused on young people, gender and pensioners. There was little discussion of differences between different ethnic groups or in relation to migrants.
- In proposing responses to economic inequality, there was relatively little discussion about wage

disparities, low-paid jobs or changes to the structure of the labour market beyond some general references to the minimum wage, which was generally portrayed as a positive policy development.

- There was little discussion of the circumstances, role and responsibility of people on upper-middle incomes in relation to economic inequality.
- Those politicians who did advocate a more equal society did not specify the level of equality that they would like to see.

Possible drivers of the debate

This study described the political debate on economic inequality during a particular time period. Clearly, this debate was driven by a wide range of historical, political, economic and cultural factors that can go some way to explaining it. While it was beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed explanation of the drivers of this debate, the research has raised a number of questions.

- How do politicians' descriptions of their policies relate to the potential or actual impact of those policies on economic inequality?
- Politicians tended to use rhetoric that put them 'on the side' of the vast majority. How is this dynamic shaped by the majoritarian political system and first-past-the-post electoral system?
- Politicians perceive that people from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to vote. How did this affect the audience that they were appealing to in their public debate?

- The research highlighted a number of gaps in the political debate. For example, there was an absence of discussion about inequalities between people from different ethnic backgrounds. How does this omission relate to current political debates about ethnicity and identity?
- The analysis of publicly available speeches and articles suggested that debate about economic inequality is likely to appear in particular types of printed media. Are readers of some newspapers less likely to be exposed to direct reporting of politicians' arguments about economic inequality and how does this affect their views?
- This analysis found that there was very little public debate about the relationship between economic inequality and structural factors such as the labour market or the role of business. How does this relate to the role of political interest groups such as unions and business in the British political system?

Alongside the rise in the extent of political debate on these issues, a number of high-profile research publications have presented more detailed discussions about the causes, impacts and responses to economic inequality in UK society. It remains to be seen how these wider discussions about economic inequality among the academic and policy community impact on political debate.⁴

This report has highlighted the lack of a coherent political narrative on economic inequality, particularly in politicians' conceptualisations of the relationship between economic prosperity, social mobility and inequality. This, together with a recession and upcoming election, makes it extremely difficult to predict the direction of future policy in this area. It also suggests that the policy choices that need to be made are not clearly formulated or communicated by politicians. Looking to the future, it may be that a clearer political narrative is a prerequisite for greater political action to address economic inequality.

Concluding thoughts

This analysis was based on evidence gathered between July and December 2008. Debates about economic inequality are rapidly developing in light of the economic environment and build-up to the next general election.² In the time that has passed since the evidence was collected and analysed, it is clear that the debate has been changing in response to the economic downturn. For example, there have been heightened debates among senior politicians about the pay of senior bankers and financiers.³ While it appears that the extent of debate about wealth is increasing, there also appears to be continuity in the nature of these debates. In particular, the political debate still frames economic inequality in dichotomous terms; for example, bankers are often negatively portrayed as the group of people whose behaviour needs to change in contrast with the ordinary majority. As demonstrated in this study, this form of dichotomous thinking can constrain and simplify the debate around economic inequality.

Notes

Executive summary

- 1 From the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru.

Chapter 1

- 1 Attitudes to Inequality and Intuitive Conceptions of Justice (Bamfield and Horton, 2009, forthcoming).
- 2 From the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru.
- 3 Taken from 'Public attitudes to economic inequality', JRF Findings (July 2007, Ref: 2097, p. 1).

Chapter 2

- 1 Politicians from Plaid Cymru were slightly less represented in public speeches and articles that discussed economic inequality. However, this might have been a reflection of the extent to which statements by that party were reported in the national media (see Appendix 1 for more detail).
- 2 The debate audit included only articles that were authored by politicians or directly quoted them.
- 3 The sampling strategy included a search of all the major national newspapers.

Chapter 3

- 1 Because politicians did not explicitly use the term 'economic inequality', we define discussions about economic inequality

according to the criteria outlined in the methodology section (Appendix 1).

- 2 This study focused on political debate in England, Scotland and Wales.
- 3 Defined as instances when politicians talked explicitly about differences in 'income' as opposed to 'wealth' or 'assets'.
- 4 Nick Clegg, The Independent, 13 September 2008.
- 5 For example, George Osborne, Speech to Demos, 21 August 2008: 'There are 900,000 more people living in severe poverty than there were in 1997'.
- 6 Nick Clegg MP, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, speech to Liberal Democrat Party Conference, 17 September 2008.

Chapter 5

- 1 A detailed assessment of the gaps in the political debate was beyond the scope of this study but would be an interesting area for further research. It would entail analysis of the issues that could be included, perhaps through comparative analysis of political, public, media or academic debate about economic inequality.
- 2 For example, in January 2009, the Government published the Social Mobility White Paper, New Opportunities, which resulted in widespread discussions about economic inequality and related issues.
- 3 For example, Harriet Harman's public intervention regarding the pension paid to Sir Fred Goodwin, former RBS Chief Executive, and subsequent debate among senior cabinet ministers and political commentators, March 2009.
- 4 For example, Hills *et al.* (2009); Lawton (2009); Wilkinson and Pickett (2009).

References

Bamfield, L. and Horton, T. (2009, forthcoming) *Attitudes to Inequality and Intuitive Conceptions of Justice*. York: JRF

Hills, J., Sefton, T. and Stewart, S. (2009) *Towards a More Equal Society*. Bristol: The Policy Press

Lawton, K. (2009) *Nice Work if You Can Get it*. London: ippr

Wilkinson, G. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Allen Lane

Appendix 1: Methodology

Research design

The research was designed in two stages to include an audit of 'public' discussions about economic inequality and to provide a more 'private' space for politicians and party members to express their views. This design enabled comparison between public and more private debate. Conducting interviews enabled a diverse range of views to be captured from people involved in political parties at all levels.

The qualitative approach

This study adopted a primarily qualitative approach, which involved mapping the various meanings and contexts associated with political debate about economic inequality rather than attempting to quantify the extent to which specific terms were used.

An early finding of the research was that political rhetoric relating to economic inequality tended to conflate concepts such as poverty, social mobility and inequality without being overt about how the relationship between these issues was conceived. It was also the case that the rhetoric of political speeches moved from discussions of issues relating to economic inequality to other subjects in a fluid way. This meant that there was no definitive way of measuring the 'explicit' debate on economic inequality.

As a result, it was decided that quantifying the number of times that particular terms were used would not be meaningful, and could potentially misrepresent the nature of the debate because those terms would be taken out of context. Instead an analytic approach was adopted, which analysed the terms in relation to their original context.

Stage 1: content analysis

Sampling

The time period of the content analysis was 1 July to 17 October 2008. This included the build-up to party conference season and the party conferences of all five political parties. Speeches, articles and statements were monitored through party websites, LexisNexis, Hansard and government department websites. The newspapers that were monitored included all national newspapers in the UK.

A broad range of political speeches and articles covering issues linked to economic inequality was collected. This included the party conference speeches of all party leaders and key spokespeople from all political parties, where these had been made publicly available. Articles by journalists were included only where politicians were directly quoted. This was in order to avoid the inclusion of media interpretation of political debate in the analysis as far as possible.

The definition of 'economic inequality' as 'the unequal distribution of financial resources within the population' ('Public attitudes to economic inequality', JRF Findings, July 2007, Ref: 2097, p. 1) was used to generate criteria for selecting the final content analysis sample. This final sample was selected in order to include all sources that:

- contrasted or juxtaposed one economic group with another;
- referred to a divide or gap in relation to economic or financial terms;
- referred to people moving economic positions in society or being unable to do so;
- referred to socio-economic class;
- referred to financial redistribution or lack of redistribution.

The final sample included 64 sources. These are listed in Appendix 2. The final sample did not contain an equal distribution of sources from each political party. This might have been a reflection of the extent to which each political party was publicly discussing issues relating to economic inequality. However, it might also have been a reflection of the extent to which statements by those parties were publicly available.

Analysis

The sources were coded thematically and run through reliability tests with project researchers. A manual analysis of the content, which identified key concepts and themes emerging from the data was then carried out.

Stage 2: Interviews and discussion groups with party members

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were contacted via fliers distributed at party conferences and by email, and invited to take part in a research project about political views on economic inequality. There was therefore an element of self-selection in the final sample, as all the participants who took part did so because they had an interest in this subject.

The participants were purposively sampled in order to include people holding a range of positions within their respective parties, ranging from MPs to party members (see Appendix 3 for more detail). This enabled a broad range of views, which were indicative of the range of views within the parties as a whole to be included.

In total, 44 participants took part in the interviews and discussion groups; interviews were conducted with 27 individuals and discussion groups were held with 17 individuals. The research was conducted with individuals from the Labour Party, Conservative Party, Liberal Democrat Party, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru.

The data collection process

Two discussion groups were held at Plaid Cymru and Liberal Democrat party conferences. Some additional one-to-one interviews were also conducted with politicians from Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats in order to ensure

that evidence was gathered using comparable methods across all parties.

Interviews were conducted by phone and discussion groups were conducted face to face. The interviews were semi-structured and took approximately 20 minutes. Discussion groups were held at party conferences and took one hour and 15 minutes. Participants agreed to take part in the research on the basis that quotations would be attributed by party but not by individual. Creating a more 'private' space for individuals to air their views provided a contrasting arena from the public declarations of opinion and policy under examination in the content analysis. These participants may have felt freer to share personally held views, which might diverge from their party's line.

Analysis

A manual analysis of the interviews and discussion groups, which identified key concepts and themes emerging from the data, was carried out using a comparable analytic framework to that used in the content analysis.

Overall analysis

The analysis of the interviews/focus groups and the content analysis were carried out separately but using a comparable analytic framework. Further analysis, which included investigation of similarities and differences between the 'public' and 'private' evidence bases, was carried out.

Appendix 2: Content analysis sources

Source	Date	Politician	Party
<i>Labour</i>			
<i>The Times</i>	05/07/08	James Purnell MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions	Labour
<i>The Guardian</i>	24/07/08	Roy Hattersley, Peer	Labour
<i>The Times</i>	09/09/08	Alistair Darling MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer Response: George Osborne MP, Shadow Chancellor	Labour Conservative (response)
<i>The Independent</i>	10/09/08	Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister and Party Leader	Labour
<i>The Guardian</i>	19/09/08	Harriet Harman MP, Minister for Women and Equalities and Deputy Leader	Labour
<i>The Independent</i>	20/09/08	Ed Miliband MP, Cabinet Office Minister	Labour
Party conference speech	21/09/08	James Purnell MP	Labour
Party conference speech	22/09/08	David Miliband MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	Labour
Party conference speech	22/09/08	Alistair Darling MP	Labour
Party conference speech	24/09/08	Harriet Harman MP	Labour
Party conference speech	24/09/08	Gordon Brown MP	Labour
Party conference speech	24/09/08	Ed Balls MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families	Labour
<i>Conservative</i>			
<i>The Times</i>	03/07/08	David Cameron MP, Party Leader	Conservative
Speech (Glasgow East by-election)	07/07/08	David Cameron MP	Conservative
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	09/07/08	Lord Maurice Saatchi	Conservative
<i>The Guardian</i>	24/07/08	Chris Grayling MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions	Conservative
Speech (on party website)	29/07/08	Chris Grayling MP	Conservative
<i>Birmingham Post</i>	31/07/08	Chris Grayling MP	Conservative
<i>The Independent</i>	04/08/08	Oliver Letwin MP, Chairman of the Policy Review and of the Conservative Research Department	Conservative
<i>The Guardian</i>	20/08/08	George Osborne MP, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer	Conservative
Speech to Demos	21/08/08	George Osborne MP	Conservative
<i>Birmingham Post</i>	23/08/08	George Osborne MP	Conservative
Party conference speech	28/09/08	Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, Shadow Minister for Community Cohesion and Social Action	Conservative
Party conference speech	29/09/08	George Osborne MP	Conservative
<i>The Independent</i>	30/09/08	George Osborne MP Response: Yvette Cooper MP, Chief Treasury Secretary	Conservative Labour (response)
Party conference speech	30/09/08	Chris Grayling MP	Conservative
Party conference speech	31/09/08	Michael Gove MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families	Conservative
Party conference speech	01/10/08	David Cameron MP	Conservative

Source	Date	Politician	Party
<i>The Times</i>	04/10/08	Terry Rooney	Labour
<i>The Times</i>	16/10/08	Michael Gove MP	Conservative
Liberal Democrat			
<i>The Guardian</i>	01/07/08	Nick Clegg MP, Party Leader	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Independent</i>	31/07/08	Vincent Cable MP, Deputy Leader and Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Observer</i>	10/08/08	Vincent Cable MP	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Independent</i>	13/09/08	Nick Clegg MP	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Times</i>	13/09/08	Nick Clegg MP	Liberal Democrat
Party conference speech	13/09/08	Jenny Willot MP, Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary	Liberal Democrat
Party conference speech	14/09/08	Susan Kramer MP, Families Spokesperson	Liberal Democrat
Party conference speech	15/09/08	Vincent Cable MP	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Independent</i>	15/09/08	Nick Clegg MP and Evan Harris MP, Shadow Science Minister	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Guardian</i>	16/09/08	Vincent Cable MP	Liberal Democrat
<i>The Independent</i>	16/08/08	Vincent Cable MP	Liberal Democrat
Party conference speech	17/09/08	Nick Clegg MP	Liberal Democrat
SNP			
Mike Weir	02/10/08	Mike Weir MP, Work and Pensions, Trade and Industry and Energy spokesman in Westminster	SNP
<i>The Independent</i>	04/09/08	Alex Salmond MP/SMP, First Minister and Party Leader Response: Cathy Jamieson MSP, Scottish Labour Leader Response: Tavish Scott MSP, Scottish Liberal Democrat Leader	SNP Labour Party (response) Liberal Democrat (response)
Glenthrothes by-election, SNP website	15/10/08	Alex Salmond MP/MSP and Peter Grant Cllr	SNP
SNP website	16/09/08	Angus Robertson MP/MSP, Scottish Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs	SNP
SNP website	16/09/08	John Mason MP and Peter Grant Cllr	SNP
Glenthrothes by-election, SNP website	16/10/08	Peter Grant Cllr	SNP
<i>Daily Mail</i>	17/10/08	Alex Salmond MP/MSP	SNP
Party conference speech	17/10/08	John Swinney MSP	SNP
Party conference speech	17/10/08	Kenny MacAskill, MSP	SNP
Party conference speech	18/10/08	Nicola Sturgeon MSP, Deputy First Minister and Deputy Leader	SNP
Party conference speech	19/10/08	Alex Salmond MP/MSP	SNP
SNP website	Accessed 10/08	Unnamed Party Spokesman	SNP
Plaid Cymru			
Janet Ryder website	01/09/08	Janet Ryder AM	Plaid Cymru
Party conference speech	13/09/08	Jill Evans MEP	Plaid Cymru
Party conference speech	12/09/08	Ieuan Wyn Jones, Leader MP/AM, Deputy First Minister and Party Leader	Plaid Cymru

Source	Date	Politician	Party
<i>Hansard</i>			
Debate: child poverty	07/07/08	David Gauke MP (Con), Shadow Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury Andrew Gwynne MP (Lab) James Purnell MP (Lab) Alistair Burt MP (Con) Frank Field MP (Lab) Jenny Willott MP (LD) Andrew Selous MP (Con), Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions	Conservative Labour Liberal Democrat
Debate: financial crisis and impact on unemployment	07/10/08	Graham Stuart MP (Con) Yvette Cooper MP (Lab), Chief Secretary to the Treasury Kenneth Clarke MP (Con) Oliver Heald MP (Con) Bernard Jenkin MP (Con) Kelvin Hopkins MP (Lab) Phillip Hammond MP (Con), Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury Adam Price MP (PC) William Cash MP (Con) Vincent Cable MP (LD) Peter Viggers MP (Con)	Conservative Labour Liberal Democrat Plaid Cymru
Debate: employment and poverty	07/10/08	Jonathan Shaw MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Lab)	Labour
Debate: unemployment and poverty	07/10/08	Jenny Willott MP (LD) Ian Davidson MP (Lab) Paul Rowen MP (LD), Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions Rob Marris MP (Lab) Robert Ffello MP (Lab)	Liberal Democrat Labour
Debate: financial crisis	09/10/08	Adam Price MP (PC) Jeremy Browne MP (LD), Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury Mark Hoban MP (Con) Diane Abbott MP (Lab)	Plaid Cymru Liberal Democrat Conservative Labour
Maiden speech	13/10/08	John Mason MP (SNP)	SNP
Debate: Impact of financial crisis	15/10/08	Graham Stuart MP (Con) Charles Walker MP (Con) David Heath MP (LD), Leader of the House of Commons	Conservative Liberal Democrat

Appendix 3:

Interview and discussion group participants

Position	Party	Interview type
MP	Conservative	One to one
Councillor	Conservative	One to one
Member	Conservative	One to one
MP	Conservative	One to one
Prospective parliamentary candidate	Conservative	One to one
Member	Conservative	One to one
Member (adviser to a shadow cabinet member)	Conservative	One to one
Councillor	Labour	One to one
MP	Labour	One to one
MP	Labour	One to one
Member	Labour	One to one
MP	Labour	One to one
MP	Labour	One to one
Member	Labour	One to one
London Assembly member	Liberal Democrats	One to one
Councillor	Liberal Democrats	One to one
Prospective parliamentary candidate	Liberal Democrats	One to one
MP	Liberal Democrats	One to one
Member	Liberal Democrats	Discussion group
Member	Liberal Democrats	Discussion group
MSP	Liberal Democrats	Discussion group
MP	Plaid Cymru	One to one
Member of the Welsh Assembly	Plaid Cymru	One to one
Delegate	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Delegate	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Policy unit	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Policy officer	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Branch representative	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Branch representative	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Executive observer	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Member	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Staff	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Staff	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Delegate	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Member	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Executive observer	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Member	Plaid Cymru	Discussion group
Councillor	Scottish National Party	One to one
Councillor	Scottish National Party	One to one
MSP	Scottish National Party	One to one
Councillor	Scottish National Party	One to one
Councillor	Scottish National Party	One to one
MP	Scottish National Party	One to one
Councillor	Scottish National Party	One to one

Appendix 4:

Interview discussion guide

This document was used to guide interviewers' questioning. Questions in bold were asked consistently to interviewees.

Introduction

- Introduce yourself – I work for the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) and we're doing some research on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation looking at inequality and specifically economic inequality.
- We're interviewing members of all the major political parties to get their views on inequality.
- The interview should last no more than 30 minutes.
- With your permission I'd like to record the interview so that I can write it up accurately. We'd also like permission to quote you but on a non-attributable basis. When we quote participants we won't name them, we'll simply say which political party they're a member of.
- How does that sound? *If the participant has any queries or is unhappy with this make sure you make a **detailed note** of the basis on which they agree to do the interview.*

Background on interviewee

- To begin could you tell me a bit about your role in the party/how long you've been a member.

Views on inequality

- Do you think that there is economic inequality in the UK and if so what are the key ways that it manifests?
- What do you consider to be the key causes of inequality?
 - Why?

Current political debate

- Have you noticed any political debates around economic inequality in recent months?
 - Which party(ies)/commentators has this been coming from?
- How has (your party) been discussing economic inequality in recent months?
- And how do you think that this compares to the debate within other political parties?
- Is economic inequality a priority issue for (your party)?
- Do you think that economic inequality should be a priority for (your party)?
- From your experiences, what would you say current public attitudes are towards economic inequality?
- What influence do you think that the media has on the debate?

Changing inequality

- What need do you think there is for reducing economic inequality in the UK? *May be unnecessary based on previous answers.*
- What are the best routes for tackling economic inequality?
 - Should the focus be on redistribution or wealth creation? Why?
- What approaches would you like to see put in place to tackle economic inequality?

Final thoughts

- Where do you think this debate will go next?
- To what extent do you think that economic inequality will be a priority for (your party) in the future?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Thank you and next steps

Thank you for participating. It has been really interesting talking with you.

This interview will be written up along with other interviews with party members from five of the major parties. This will then be fed into a major piece of research looking at public and political attitudes to economic inequality. This will be published by the JRF.

Any questions?

Close

Acknowledgements

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The report represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of ippr's directors or trustees.

About ippr

The Institute for Public Policy Research is the UK's leading progressive think tank, producing cutting-edge research and innovative policy ideas for a just, democratic and sustainable world. Since 1988, we have been at the forefront of progressive debate and policy-making in the UK. Through our independent research and analysis we define new agendas for change and provide practical solutions to challenges across the full range of public policy issues.

With offices in both London and Newcastle, we ensure our outlook is as broad-based as possible, while our international and migration teams and climate change programme extend our partnerships and influence beyond the UK, giving us a truly world-class reputation for high quality research.

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