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# Introduction: Equality and Human Rights in Britain

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The first ten years of the twenty-first century has seen the British Government introduce radical change to its equality policy. These changes have included the creation of a single equalities body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC); the expansion of the equality terrain to include age, sexuality and sexual orientation and faith and belief in addition to gender, race and disability as protected grounds; the decision to coalesce human rights and equality legislation under the direction the EHRC; the development of an Equalities Framework; the promulgation of a new Equality Act (2009) with the aim of creating a single legal framework to cover all equality legislation together with the development of specific Equality Duties for the public sector around the areas of gender, race and disability with the aim of 'mainstreaming' equality. Barbara Roche, the then Minister responsible for equality co-ordination across the UK Government described these changes as 'the most significant review of equality in over a quarter of a century'.[1]

This special issue presents a series of articles that examine these changes with a view to documenting some of the early impacts of these policy shifts. In the first article, we present an overview of equality policy in the UK and reflect on some of the influences that have shaped these developments. In particular, we look at the debates on conceptualisations of equality and on the use of capabilities theory as a tool for driving equality policy in the UK. The article finishes with a brief section on the future prospects for equality and human rights policy in the UK in the light of the recent election of a new Coalition Government, the majority of whom are opposed to the Human Rights Act and who cut the budget of the EHRC by 15 per cent within three weeks of taking power.

The second article, by Sylvia Walby and Jo Armstrong, looks at the development of a framework for assessing equality. They argue that such an assessment is necessary if we are to evaluate how policy changes effect equality and inequality and produce key indicators of fairness. They also point out that if we are to recruit public support for these policy shifts, we need to produce data in a clear and concise format that are accessible to all, and that only by doing this will we be able to generate the sort of support required to ensure that these policies are fully implemented. The equality terrain is, as they point out, very complex and there exists not just competing frameworks for measuring equality, for example measures that seek to assess equality of opportunity verses equality of outcome, but also multiple equality strands and a range of domains including health, education, housing, work and leisure. There are also a wide variety of statistics available. In the article, they identify ten key indicators for fairness, including longevity, security, health, education, standard of living and participation. Whilst both these indicators and the way they are measured lose some of the nuances normally associated with equality research, the authors argue that such loss is compensated for by the benefits of this approach.



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The article by Teresa Rees and Paul Chaney explores the status of equality and human rights in Wales following devolution in 1999. Whilst equality has achieved a much higher profile in policy, law and forms of representation, progress in terms of substantive equality, reflected in the narrowing of differences in outcomes between groups across a range of social policy fields, has been disappointing (as is also the case in Scotland). Reasons for this gap between policy and practice are analysed.

Rowena Arshad and Sheila Riddell then focus on the implementation of the Disability Equality Duty (DED) in Scotland and argue that there have been some benefits for disabled people, although some public bodies have engaged much more seriously than others. The DED draws on the technology of social audit, raising questions about whether such methods have the potential to promote social justice goals. On the upside, audit allows the possibility for institutional reflection and planning and without this there is a danger that equality duties are simply ignored. However, there are inherent problems in the process of audit, with the danger of encouraging minimal compliance and reducing the challenges of equality to a box ticking exercise.

Charlotte Pearson and colleagues report findings from another study into the implementation of the DED in England, with a focus on the issue of mainstreaming. Mainstreaming equality has been the central aim of much of the policy legislation implemented by New Labour since the late 1990s. One of the main benefits claimed for mainstreaming is the possibility it affords for the shifting of equality from the status of an add-on or optional bonus to its inclusion as an integral part of the everyday processes associated with an organisation and its operations. Their findings report some evidence of mainstreaming, including the proactive promotion of disability equality in the workplace and increased involvement of disabled people in the planning of equality activities. However, they also report that there is little positive evidence to support the claim that mainstreaming has infiltrated into the day-to-day working patterns of many of the organisations they surveyed. The authors conclude that there is limited evidence to suggest that the public sector has fully embraced the mainstreaming agenda.

The next article by Cristina Iannelli analyses the extent to which education, identified by New Labour as a central means of promoting social inclusion, has succeeded in promoting social mobility in the second half of the twentieth century. Iannelli argues that the massive expansion of the Scottish education system over this time frame initially benefited middle-class children, but also benefited working-class children at a slightly later point in time. However, top-level occupations continued to be dominated by the middle classes, suggesting that the links between social class, educational attainment and labour market advantage are very resistant to change, highlighting major challenges for future governments wishing to tackle persistent inequality.

This special section finishes with a summary of useful sources which may be used to explore further issues connected with equality and human rights policy in the UK.

## Note

1 Barbara Roche, Minister responsible for equality co-ordination across Government IPPR conference, Equality and Diversity in the 21st Century at the British Bankers Association, Pinners Hall, 105 Broad Street, London EC2, May 2002.



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