

UK's North-South divide and Boris Johnson's "levelling up" fraud

Thomas Scripps
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Centre for Cities research shared with the *Guardian* shows the scale of the economic north-south divide in the UK and the fraud of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's claimed "levelling up" agenda.

England's largest cities outside of London have the lowest life expectancy and productivity in western Europe, according to the think tank. People in Manchester, Newcastle and Birmingham live two years less than the European average. In Liverpool, life expectancy is four years lower.

All major British cities outside of London come bottom of the table in western Europe for productivity. Newcastle, Sheffield and Nottingham have just over half the productivity—measured by Gross Value Added (GVA) per worker—of Brussels and Amsterdam.

Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) puts these finding in the context of a clear economic divide between the north and south of the country. Its latest figures show that the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands and West Midlands all have lower life expectancies than regions in the South. The biggest gap is between the North East and London, at 2.9 years for men.

The North East, Yorkshire and Humber, East and West Midlands also have lower GVA per head than the southern regions, with the North West broadly on par with the South West. The biggest gap is again between the North East (£20,129) and London (£48,857). London is a massive outlier, reflecting its overbearing status in the UK economy, but the next biggest gap, between the North East and the South East (£29,415), is still a 32 percent deficit.

Paul Swinney, director of policy and research at the Centre for Cities, said of Johnson's promises to "level up" the north in light of these figures, "As an indication of the scale of the challenge faced, when a similar challenge was embarked upon in the former East Germany in the 1990s, the cost was estimated to have reached £1.7 trillion—a far larger amount of money than that being offered here in the UK currently."

Swinney's statement puts a sharp point on what is already

widely known. The *Economist* made a similar comparison last year, writing, "North of a line from the Severn estuary to the Wash, and south of Hadrian's wall, lies an area that (measured by purchasing-power parity) is as poor as the American state of Alabama or the former East Germany."

It noted that, unlike the area of former East Germany which is home to just 20 percent of the German population, the northern regions of the UK are home to 47 percent of Britain's population.

The magazine cited research carried out by Professor Philip McCann of the University of Sheffield, published in 2019, comparing the UK's internal geographic inequality to similar countries on 28 different measures. Inter-regional inequality was above average on all measures and top on six.

As statistics on life expectancy demonstrate, regional economic disadvantage translates into serious social deprivation. Workers in the northern regions have fewer qualifications and less gross disposable income than the UK average, although income differences narrow substantially after housing costs are taken into account.

Unemployment rates in the northern regions in February 2020 were higher than all southern regions except London. The same was true of poverty rates in 2019/20. Of the worst ten local authority regions for child poverty in 2018/19, seven were in the North West and the other three in the North East, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

The pandemic has graphically demonstrated the consequences of these conditions. All the northern regions suffered higher age-adjusted levels of COVID-19 mortality than all the southern regions, except London, which had the highest.

The damage to the north of the country has been wrought over the last four decades. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 as the representative of a ruling class determined to solve a mounting social and economic crisis through a crushing defeat of the working class. Her government jettisoned the old policy of maintaining national industry through subsidies, protectionism and nationalisation, seeking new profits in the unfolding process

of economic globalisation by smashing up globally uncompetitive industries, building up the finance sector and encouraging an explosion of social inequality.

This programme required all-out class war, especially in the industrial heartlands in the north of the country. A wave of closures and unemployment, enforced with brutal state violence, shattered communities, which have been starved of resources ever since. Their fate was a particularly sharp expression of an offensive waged against the entire working class.

The decade of austerity after the financial crisis of 2008-9 compounded the damage. Centre for Cities note that day-to-day spending in deprived urban authorities in the north of England has seen the largest spending cuts of any area of government since 2010. Seven of the cities with the largest cuts were in the North East, North West or Yorkshire. On average, northern cities suffered cuts of 20 percent, versus 9 percent for cities in the East, South East and South West (excluding London).

Labour's role in this process was filthy, adopting the Thatcherite policies of the Tories in government and blocking any struggle against them in opposition. Their betrayal was so complete that Johnson was able to win a slew of formerly safe Labour seats in the north in the 2019 general election.

But the Tories can only pour salt on these new political pastures. Johnson's pledge to "level up" the North is risible. The small sums allocated to a "towns fund" (£3.6 billion), a "levelling up fund" (£4.8 billion) and a "city region sustainable transport fund" (£4.2 billion) are a "drop in the ocean", to quote Swinney.

Even this pittance has been allocated in a transparent attempt to boost Tory electoral fortunes, focussed on areas represented by parliamentary seats held narrowly by either the Tories or Labour.

The regionalist politics of figures like Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham, who makes great play of the north-south divide and London-centric government, offers no alternative. They do not speak for the common interest of "the north", or even of their local cities, because no such common interest exists. The whole of the UK is fundamentally divided by class, which produces far sharper disparities than any geographic divisions.

In Yorkshire and The Humber, the top ten percent of earners receive 4.8 times more income than the bottom ten percent after housing costs, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The figure is 4.6 times for the North West and the East Midlands, 4.5 for the West Midlands and 4.3 for the North East. The ratio for the top one percent would be many orders of magnitude higher.

By far the largest disparities are in London (8.7), the

South East (5.9) and the East (5.2), reflecting the fact that most of the South's advantages are enjoyed by a small sliver of the population. The working-class majority are engaged in the same daily struggle to get by as in the rest of the country. In fact, after housing costs, median income in London is just 1 percent higher than the national average.

The likes of Burnham are the advocates of a small affluent layer of the Northern population who want a larger share of the profits clawed out of all workers by British capitalism. They want investment in the North not to improve the lot of the local working class, but to create more opportunities for their exploitation. This is summed up by the planned setting up of freeports in the East Midlands, Humber region, Liverpool City Region (including Port Salford, in Greater Manchester, as a customs site) and Teeside, as part of the Tories' post-Brexit economic agenda.

Freeports are special economic zones in which certain taxes and regulations are suspended. They have become synonymous the world over with corporate parasitism and super-exploitation. Burnham acknowledged these "risks", which "had to be watched", but described the Port Salford plans as "an exciting proposal" and a "boost" to the region's ambitions.

"Levelling" the UK is not a geographic, but a class question. As Swinney's figure of £1.7 trillion indicates, regional inequalities and imbalances can only be solved through a frontal assault by the working class on the super-rich and the major corporations and banks, expropriating their fortunes and using the resources to meet social needs.



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