

To all those who talk about the politics of envy

Published: January 13, 2026, 7:19 pm

My re-posting of [Church Action on Poverty's poster on inequality](#) on Friday gave rise to comment. Seemingly talking about inequality and the need to end it offends some, and discussion of the politics of envy arose.

I always find this extraordinary. I have worked on tax justice and related issues for coming on for a decade now and not once, not ever, have I been motivated by envy. I have no reason to be. Nor have I seen any sign that others working on the issue and related themes concerning poverty have done so either. But I have witnessed enormous courage in the face of adversity from them and I have certainly met the most extraordinarily empathic people. And I encounter genuine concern for others daily.

These characteristics are of course alien to that ultimate straw man - that rational, self interested, self indulgent person whose desire to profit at the expense of all others and without concern for their well being drives capitalism in the wholly mistaken view of those who failed to read Adam Smith's [Theory of Moral Sentiments](#). The characteristics possessed by those I know and work with are condemned by those who are true believers in that straw man. It is my believe that they describe compassion for others as the 'politics of envy'.

I think this says much about them, and remarkably little about the left, or campaigns for economic justice. The envy is I think all theirs: envy of the freedom concern for others brings from pure self interest; envy of being freed from the need to beat others on all occasion; envy of the freedom to act on the basis of true human interest in well being brings.

But let me [re-post a comment from Andrew Dickie](#) on this issue that does, I think deal with it rather well, and with some considerable insight, made in response to someone using the avatar Mactheknife (telling in itself):

I suggest Macthekinfe has a look at this video on the "class warfare" and "I made it alone" topic.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/the-viral-video-of-elizabeth-warren-going-after-gop-on-class-warfare-2011-9>

Then he should take a look at this Paul Krugman piece

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/opinion/krugman-the-social-contract.html?_r=2∓src=ISMR_HP_LO_MST_FB

Most (all?) of the class war in the last 30 years has been waged by the rich (the “new Barons”) against everyone else (the new serfs”) in what I, and several other posts on this blog have characterised as the “Neo-feudal” or New Feudal state.

The exact title doesn't matter; what DOES matter is that the powerful are not only bringing in policies to protect their privileges, they are also stitching up the constitution on both sides of the Atlantic to ensure a permanent Tory hegemony in the UK

- * reducing the number of MPs
- * gerrymandering the constituencies
- * making it near impossible for the government to lose a “No Confidence vote, as a 66% vote is now necessary to dissolve Parliament, instead of a mere loss of a No Confidence vote by 1, as in the case of Jim Callaghan
- * bringing electoral registration changes that may drive as many as 10 million voters — mainly Labour — off the Register, and
- * packing the House of Lords with 147 new Lords in just over 12 months, 75% of them ConDem)

and a permanent Republican hegemony in the US, by

- * bringing in new versions of “Jim Crow” voter registration, designed to drive the blacks, young, students, dissidents, and mobile workers — all of whom will probably vote Democrat (see <http://www.thenorthstarnews.com/issue.aspx?id=2011-09-15#African-Americans-Face-Challenges-Voting-In-Wisconsin-Because-Of-Restrictive-Photo-ID-Law> for an example)
- * seeking to manipulate the scandal of the ludicrous Electoral College system, by aiming to give Republicans a majority of Electoral College votes (see <http://motherjones.com/politics/2011/09/gop-electoral-college-plan-beat-obama-2012> for this)

I really DO advise Mactheknife to stop sitting on his complacent rear-end and get out there campaigning against the most malevolent (a word I use advisedly) administration since that of Lord Liverpool in the early 19th century — a sort of “Thatcherism on smack” administration. Lord Liverpool's administration was content to see a loaf of bread go up to 1/-, when a labourer was lucky to earn that in a month, and to turn guns and cavalry on protesters with lethal effect at Peterloo.

This Con-Dem administration is not so blatant (though look at the astonishingly savage response to the rioters, and even to the UK Uncut people at Fortnum's), but if we're not vigilant, we will wake up to find our schools, hospitals, universities and probably our art galleries and libraries all sold off to philistine “Gradgrinds” and modern day Rachmans, interested only in profit, with everything costing. As Abraham Lincoln said — for evil to triumph, it is enough that good people do nothing. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance. I really DO fear the corrosive impact of this government on our social cohesion, well-being and everything that constitutes real civilisation, by which I mean “the good life” of compassion, concern for one another and also true respect and consideration. We are on a bumpy slope into the beginnings of a “Blade Runner”

society.

Quite so.

That's the politics of envy if there is one.