

POVERTY

The Rowntree Foundation has just produced a well- researched report on poverty in the UK. We are now the third from bottom of all the 25 EU countries. What has gone wrong?

Perhaps this is one factor: In 1980 the top Directors of the largest companies were paid about 10 times what their lowest-paid employee earned. By 1990 this difference had risen to over 30 times and today it is over 75 times. 75 times the earnings of the lowest paid member of staff.

I retired in 1990 as a fairly senior Civil Servant. My replacement was appointed on more than twice the salary I was getting - for the same job - and there was no increase for the junior staff. I thought that was a bit unfair, but even in my wildest dreams (or nightmares?) I did not expect what we have today in this country, the obscenely rich and the desperately poor.

The Government has the noble aim of eliminating child poverty by 2020. We will probably never abolish all poverty - after all we have been told on the best authority that the poor are always with us - but I am sure we should try to help as many as we can out of this grinding trap.

In the Southwest we have lots of advantages, some very good schools, lovely countryside but many who work here can never dream of owning even a very small house. This housing gap is in fact worse for the lower paid than in any other part of the UK. This is not because of greed but is a consequence of market forces. I am not trying to suggest a solution, but this is a problem which needs to be addressed but it is one that politicians are afraid to tackle because they fear we may not like the answer, and they are probably quite right.

Perhaps we should start by recognising that we are all in the same boat, in a sort of huge extended family, brothers and sisters of one another. We need to help build an attitude of mind that recognises that everyone should have access to a home of their own. Children without a home have difficulty in getting an education and then a job. We need to encourage our MPs and Councillors - *encourage*, give them the courage to do what is needful, because the people they will help are our brothers and sisters, our children and our parents. Let us remember that for those of us who will be paying more tax or receiving a smaller pension or a reduction in the value of their house, that sharing is part of the price - and the reward - for being in a family.