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Indictment that so many fail standard of living test

FOUR hundred thousand adults in Scotland going without essential clothing. Some 200,000 children living in damp homes. One quarter of adults skimping on food so others can eat. A more damning litany of failure it is hard to imagine.

There are no more important tasks for a government in peacetime than to work towards ensuring that its citizens meet a basic standard of living, but the percentage of households that do not meet that standard now rests at one third, double the rate of 30 years ago, in spite of the economy doubling in size. This is not the fault of just one government or of just Westminster or Holyrood: successive UK and Scottish administrations share the responsibility, and do so alongside wider society, some sections of which show alarming complacency in the face of these stark inequalities.

The Poverty and Exclusion in the UK project shows that Scotland has slightly less poverty than the UK as a whole, but that is no cause for self-congratulation, with nearly one fifth of Scottish children and adults classed as poor. It provides further evidence that the gap between rich and poor is widening. Earlier this week, it was revealed that Britain's top FTSE 100 executives are paid more than 140 times the wages of their average employees. In spite of public fury at the excessive executive pay following the credit crunch, there has been a singular failure by big businesses to distribute pay more fairly.

The notion that living standards

will bounce back effortlessly as the economy strengthens is badly mistaken. The recovery, and rising numbers of people classed as being in work, masks a widespread reliance by millions on low grade, poorly paid employment. The report makes no bones about it, echoing a great deal of other research showing that work is no longer a route out of poverty and that almost half of all working-age adults in poverty are in work.

Better education, especially of those from deprived backgrounds, is critically important. Each year, Scotland's most prestigious seats of learning must defend themselves against accusations of elitism for failing to offer places to enough students from poor backgrounds. Ongoing efforts are required to put that right. Scotland's colleges too have experienced an assault on their finances and the most hard-to-reach individuals have suffered.

Taxation is a blunt instrument for tackling poverty but there is much to be said for the Liberal Democrats' plan to further raise the threshold at which people start to pay tax.

The SNP argues independence would be an opportunity to tackle inequality but independence alone, or indeed greater devolution, cannot achieve that aim. Whatever happens on September 18, there will be no manna from heaven. Politicians and voters who truly wish to make Scotland more equal will have to consider their willingness to pay more tax to fund public services, and take steps to distribute organisational and corporate wealth more fairly.

Otherwise the numbers shivering through winter may increase.

