

Trump turning US into 'world champion of extreme inequality', UN envoy warns

Special rapporteur Philip Alston, fresh from fact-finding tour, issues devastating critique of US society and condemns 'private wealth and public squalor'

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The United Nations monitor on poverty and human rights has issued a devastating report on the condition of America, accusing Donald Trump and the Republican leadership in Congress of attempting to turn the country into the “world champion of extreme inequality”.

Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has completed a two-week official tour of the US by releasing an excoriating attack on the direction of the nation. Not only does he warn that the tax bill currently being rushed through Congress will hugely increase already large disparities between rich and poor, he accuses Trump and his party of consciously distorting the shape of American society in a “bid to become the most unequal society in the world”.

“American exceptionalism was a constant theme in my conversations,” he writes. “But instead of realizing its founders’ admirable commitments, today’s United States has proved itself to be exceptional in far more problematic ways that are shockingly at odds with its immense wealth and its founding commitment to human rights. As a result, contrasts between private wealth and public squalor abound.”

In his most stark message, Alston warns that the Republicans’ declared intent to slash crucial welfare programs next year in order to pay for some of the \$1.5tn tax cuts could cost American lives. “The consequences for an already overstretched and inadequate system of social protection are likely to be fatal for many programs, and possibly also for those who rely upon them,” he writes.

Alston’s piercing findings present the Trump administration with a challenge. The charge that the US president is actively seeking to harm millions of Americans may be difficult to ignore, given that the report carries the imprimatur of the UN human rights council in Geneva.

Trump has frequently been dismissive of the world body, complaining during the 2016 presidential campaign that “we get nothing out of the United Nations other than good real-estate prices”. But he has also shown himself to have a thin skin when it comes to criticism of him or his administration. At a press conference launching his preliminary report in Washington, Alston quipped about possible Trump reaction: “I’m hoping for a tweet”.

Bernie Sanders, the US senator who has led the debate on inequality, has waded into the fray. He met the UN monitor on Friday and sounded his own alarm about the future of the country.

Sanders said that as the “wealthiest country in the history of the world” the US should be providing a model in how to treat all of its citizens with dignity. “Sadly that is not the case. We are moving into 2018 – we should not be living in a country with 41 million people living in poverty and so many more in extreme poverty, and nobody even talks about it.”

Alston invited Paul Ryan to meet him but was told the Republican speaker of the House was too busy.

In his 15-day fact-finding mission, Alston, an Australian academic and law professor at New York University, visited Los Angeles and San Francisco, Alabama, Georgia, Puerto Rico and West Virginia, talking to low-income families as well as governmental officials. He will produce a final report next May and that in turn will go before the UN human rights council.

Alston takes a strip out of the US for what he suggests are its double standards over human rights. The Trump administration, in line with previous US governments, preaches about human rights to other countries while refusing to be bound itself by international rules.

“The US is alone among developed countries in insisting that while human rights are of fundamental importance, they do not include rights that guard against dying of hunger, dying from a lack of access to affordable healthcare, or growing up in a context of total deprivation. But denial does not eliminate responsibility or negate obligations.”

Alston is also scathing about the attitudes of some of the politicians and officials he met on his tour, who subscribe to what he calls the caricature of rich people as industrious and entrepreneurial and poor people as “wasters, losers and scammers”.

He writes: “Some politicians and political appointees with whom I spoke were completely sold on the narrative of such scammers sitting on comfortable sofas, watching color TVs, while surfing on their smartphones, all paid for by welfare. I wonder how many of these politicians have ever visited poor areas, let alone spoken to those who dwell there.”

At the press conference, Alston said that current US trends were undermining democracy. “Democracy is the foundation stone upon which this country is built, the contribution of which it has been most proud internationally. And yet what we see is the lowest voter turnouts in any developed country.”

He pointed to the disenfranchisement of former prisoners, as well as covert voter suppression efforts such as the imposition of voter ID requirements as examples of the way the political rights of low-income people were being eroded.

Latest figures put the number of Americans living in poverty at 41 million – almost 13% of the population. Of those, almost half (19 million) are living in deep poverty, defined as having a total family income that is below one-half of the poverty threshold.

In a report packed with depressing evidence, the UN rapporteur tries to give a positive spin to his findings, saying that with the wealth that abounds in the US the country is in a position to solve its poverty and inequality crisis. “The persistence of extreme poverty is a political choice made by those in power. With political will, it could readily be eliminated.”

In a phrase that might reverberate around Capitol Hill and the White House, Alston concludes: “The American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion since the US now has the lowest rate of social mobility of any of the rich countries.”