

## Lexington writing in the Economist

“THE Adventures of Robin Hood”, a 1950s Anglo-American TV series, overcame hurdles to become a hit on both sides of the Atlantic. Budgets were so puny that Sherwood Forest was played by just two trees, filmed from many different angles. Several writers were left-wingers blacklisted in Hollywood, using false names. Their hero was also, in theory, bent on redistribution from the rich to the poor, a perilous theme in those red-hunting days. This was solved by making Robin less an overt class warrior than a battler against villainy (“feared by the bad, loved by the good”, as the theme song put it). The producers had cause to be prudent. As other Western countries built cradle-to-grave welfare states, America was a sceptical outlier.

Now excited Democrats think a once-in-a-generation political shift is under way, driven by anger at growing inequality and social immobility. There is talk of the electoral rewards that await, if their party has the nerve to use the state’s powers to right economic wrongs. January 8th marked the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty”, involving public health, education and welfare programmes. Conservatives say that war was lost, citing the huge rise in welfare dependency and the sharp fall (from 95% to barely 83%) in the proportion of peak-working-age men who work. Democrats retort that without the safety net, poverty would be even worse. Many want to take the fight beyond the poor of Johnson’s oratory, in their “sharecropper shacks”, and start helping the middle class as well. Months ahead of tough mid-term elections, Democrats yearn to use inequality as a wedge issue, capturing the “energy” they sense on the left while painting Republicans as heartless.

The year began with rows over extending benefits for the long-term unemployed, after Congress let them lapse for 1.3m Americans. The Democrat-controlled Senate agreed on January 7th to consider restarting payments. Appearing in the White House with Americans whose benefits are in peril, Mr Obama scolded conservatives for suggesting that welfare hurts the jobless by reducing incentives to work. He said he could not recall ever meeting an American “who would rather have an unemployment cheque than the pride of having a job”. But the Republican-controlled House of Representatives is reluctant to extend benefits without offsetting spending cuts or policy concessions.

Many in Mr Obama’s party want him to build his state-of-the-union message, on January 28th, around such policies as a rise in the federal minimum wage. They point to polls showing two-thirds of Americans backing higher wage floors, as

well as to local victories on the issue, including a November referendum in SeaTac, a small Seattle suburb with a large airport in it. The same voices cheered when New York's new Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, took office vowing to raise taxes on those earning more than \$500,000 a year, to expand education for the youngest New Yorkers. They claimed Pope Francis as an ally after he questioned whether free markets really allow wealth to "trickle down".

Gleeful Democrats think all this puts Republicans on the defensive. It is true that ambitious Senate Republicans, such as Marco Rubio of Florida and Rand Paul of Kentucky, marked the LBJ anniversary by outlining conservative responses to inequality, focusing on economic growth. Paul Ryan, a congressman from Wisconsin (and devout Catholic) who was Mitt Romney's 2012 running-mate, ventured that Pope Francis had not seen proper free markets at work, because "the guy is from Argentina".

Yet Democrats should be cautious. Policies can be popular but not win elections. As a centre-left party in a conservative country, Democrats win nationwide only by turning out as many of their own as possible, while also persuading millions of swing voters into their camp. A new study of election data from 1972 to 2008 by two political scientists, Jan Leighley of American University and Jonathan Nagler of New York University, unearthed two striking findings about Americans and redistribution. First, those who turn out to vote are consistently more hostile to redistribution than those who do not—largely because voters earn more and are better educated, on average, than non-voters. Second, the same low-income Americans who favour government safety-nets and interventions often fail to vote because they see no real differences between the parties. The study is mixed news for Democrats. It suggests that populist appeals for more redistribution may boost turnout among the poor, by highlighting party differences. But it also found that views of government intervention are strongly held. On many issues, "you can't tell voters and non-voters apart," notes Mr Nagler. Not so with redistribution. The risk is that, as an issue, it is catnip to partisans, but too divisive to use for the equally vital task of wooing moderate swing-voters.

### **Do lean times call for Men in Tights?**

All in all, the evidence is not iron-clad that unhappy Americans are turning left. New York and Seattle are deeply Democratic, for one thing, and hardly representative. Nor are all forms of redistribution equal. For most voters, plans to raise the minimum wage or to tax millionaires involve taking money from far-off rich people or companies. Put another way, they are Robin Hood policies. Other forms of intervention are much less popular, starting with Obamacare. That health law—broadly—transfers money and benefits from the young and healthy to the old and sick, and from the better-off to the poor. Democrats predict that Americans will soon embrace the law, concluding that it creates more winners than losers. Perhaps. But for now, its transfers are widely seen as statist

coercion worthy of the Sheriff of Nottingham.

The left appears blind to the risks. Mr Obama seems more cautious. His White House appearance with jobseekers presented unemployment insurance as an aid for those eager to work, rather than as a cure for inequality. Caution is wise. America is not ready for a president in green tights.