Introduction: Victorian Britain was a society dominated by class distinction. With an elite dedicated to leisure while many in the working class struggled to eat, the gap between rich and poor seemed insurmountable, with Disraeli writing that the two were as different as “inhabitants of different planets.” With class tension growing, Victorian Britain saw significant reform seeking to ameliorate the situation. However, today many of these divides continue to influence policy and class perception.

I. Spatial Inequality
   A. Overcrowding in urban cities created public health issues. As a result, elites chose to move out to suburbs, leaving behind the working class poor in urban cities.
   B. The inequality between the elites and working class thus manifested in the distinct space they each occupied. Ex: East End vs. West End; Old Town vs New Town.
   C. Spatial inequality between the elites and working class was also visible through the contrast between interior and exterior urban domestic dwellings.
   D. Policy Implications:
      1. The cramped and untenable conditions of back-to-back housing gave rise to the Public Health Act of 1875. It effectively outlawed building further back-to-back homes. Other state intervention strategies were undertaken as well.
      2. Issues of spatial inequality in Victorian cities are also found in our cities today, including:
         a) wealth and income inequality, b) geographic stratification of the classes, lack of tenable low-income housing options, and urban renewal and working class displacement.

II. Homes as Status Symbols
   A. Aristocracy at its most powerful in the later half of the 19th century, after which it begins its decline.
   B. Agricultural depression of the late 1870s erodes landed income.
   C. “The Servant Question” — supply of servants decreases as lower class men and women gain other economic opportunities and compulsory education.
   D. Loss of aristocratic monopoly on political, economic, and social power.
   E. Country estates become white elephants for impoverished nobles.
   F. Policy Implications:
      1. Paternalism and deference eroded by the late Victorian period; increasing wealth disparity ensued without sense of responsibility toward the poor. That disparity is prevalent in the United States today.
      2. Taxation to distribute wealth through welfare programs beneficial to society (Death duties introduced in 1894 at 8 percent, by 1939, 60 percent; the 1909 “People’s Budget” proposal).

III. Education
   A. Education in Victorian Britain was a spectrum based on class, ranging from an absolute absence of formal education to an abundance of private tutors and university study.
   B. Reform during this time period improved access to education, but there were significant discrepancies in the quality.
   C. Higher education expanded with the middle class. Oxbridge remained the ideal, but the establishment of the Red Brick Universities challenged pre-existing notions through teaching applicable professional skills and admitting those previous barred from study.
   D. Policy Implications:
      1. Current divides in education perpetuate class distinctions + inhibit social mobility.
      2. There remain significant barriers to entry for lower-income students today. Even when able to enter prestigious universities, they are often at an inherent disadvantage.

IV. Economics and the Workplace
   A. Socialism in Britain was limited compared to other Marxist movements in Europe.
   B. A new wave of unions comprised mainly low-skilled workers. They were more likely to go on strikes even without their leaders’ guidance. These unions generally experienced success as the workers who went on strike could not be easily replaced by rural workers. Ex: 1888 Match Girls Strike, 1889 Great Dock Strike.
   C. Policy Implications:
      1. Class struggle continues in the contemporary context. Research by Piketty and Saez (2013): rising income concentration in U.S.- top percentile income has doubled while the low and middle incomes grows much less than the aggregate GDP suggests.

Conclusion: The debate between individualism and welfare that marked the Victorian Era persists well into today. The successes and limitations of the Victorian Era highlight the need for thoughtful, representative policies. Expectations of social mobility and self-made destiny rely on the equality of opportunity, and further progress must be made in order to make this assumption a reality.