

Democracy and the Common Good Roundtable Summary

19 March 2018

This roundtable was held as part of our 19 March launch of St Paul's Institute **Democracy and the Common Good** programme. It was chaired by Dr Adrian Pabst and looked at how we can refine and promulgate a common good approach to economic and social policy including the free movement of people and the free movement of capital. Specifically, participants were asked for thoughts on the analysis and policy recommendations contained in Dr Pabst's recent publication for the St Paul's Institute *A Common Good Approach to the Free Movement of People and Capital* and if these proposals have merit, how they can best be shared and disseminated.

1. The first part of the discussion focussed on the analysis of the paper. There was much praise and some constructive criticism. Cited for particular praise was its combination of philosophical analysis and practical proposals, the critique of individualism, the emphasis of common good as being in tune with how people live their lives and the inclusion of mutual obligation on immigration. Constructive criticism included:

- The need to take the critique of libertarian individualism further and making the point that the other is often seen as a limit at best and a threat at worst.
- A common good approach can also be contrasted with a 'rights based' universalism which can assume a sameness of rights and obligations and risks giving insufficient attention to actual relationships; a common good approach can be a helpful corrective.
- The critique of individual 'Enlightenment' freedoms risks giving insufficient recognition to how these are essential in realising the common good. Evidence-based decisions and tolerance emerged from this thinking and was a pre-condition for a pluralist definition of the common good. A populist attack on these can therefore also undermine the common good.
- There was significant support for the importance of developing virtue (the project of cultivating virtue as 'an essential but largely eclipsed dimension of public life').
- Regarding economics:
 - It was suggested that the sharpness of market capitalism was overstated in the paper and that neoclassical economics is not as far away from the principles in the paper as argued. Among other things, mainstream economics now understands that the single utility maximiser function needs to include 'group utility maximisation' so it becomes a two part function; and that the assumption that there is perfect information is incorrect. This leads to the following three conclusions:
 - Gradualism makes sense,
 - A greater role for learning and education is vital, and
 - National institutions, such as sovereign wealth funds, work and make more sense than originally perceived in economic theory in light of short-term thinking.

- It might be helpful to revisit Adam Smith and his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to the extent that it sees virtue growing out of an exchange of mutual regard, not just market exchange. It also considers the reciprocal obligation in exchange from which common good emerges.
- Government has damaged the perception of both citizenship, where the unwritten contract has been abandoned, and the value of localism to the extent austerity-driven public service cuts have broken the local economy which feeds xenophobia.
- There is a need to recognise this ‘crisis of citizenship.’ A citizen is not merely the passive receiver of rights in the sense of entitlements but also bears the active responsibility to use his or her voice (deliberation).
- The paper could also say more about different types of virtue (moral, social, civic) and about who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’; for example, talk about citizenship risks leaving out long-term residents who are not citizens.
- There is a risk of sentimentality about some disrupted communities that in fact were often misogynist, intolerant, closed and possibly brutish. Liberalism has helped to address this.
- People are perhaps more tribal than we often assume and they are part of groups (for better or for worse) that will vote against their own economic interest in an expression of:
 - Belonging
 - Disenfranchisement
 - Loneliness, and
 - Powerlessness.

2. The discussion then considered the policy proposes in the paper; how to refine and realise them.

- There was broad support for the idea of re-establishing a covenant at many levels in the sense of a partnership across the generations. Also much spoken of was a concept of reciprocity and a reminder that with rights come obligations.
- There is a preliminary issue that needs to be addressed before moving into policy given the various dichotomies involved of young/old, North/South etc: how do we bring people together to begin to know and understand each other?
 - Concern was expressed about the hollowing out of places where this can happen - high streets, pubs, job centres and anywhere people congregate, and digitalisation of public services (once physical ‘places of encounter’) resulting in the further atomisation of society.
 - The common good emphasis on the importance of intermediate institutions as places where people can come together is helpful here; the common good is both a destination but also a practice of working things through together in these contexts.
- It was felt that people have given up on a nation state that could do better but has failed to do so. This was perceived as particularly true in education, housing and transport where conscious choices were made for reasons of austerity, that leave the United Kingdom much worse off in terms of education and social mobility than our European neighbours who made different choices. We need a civic/civil debate on whether these choices need rethinking.
- We have seen the de-legitimisation of the political centre over the past 30 years or so:

- Real wages for bottom third stopped growing in 2003
- No discussion of commercial society since Thatcherism did its work
- Financial crash
- Beginning of counter narratives: Occupy and Piketty
- There was a brief discussion of the reasons for the collapse of mainstream social democracies in Europe. They were left culpable for the financial crisis and the advance of neoliberalism. Moreover, the centre-right has repeatedly retreated from ideas it briefly champions around the common good, virtue and civic action.
- The generalized loss of trust means that peoples are suspicious that free movement of people and capital is only good for business and the privileged/wealthy, but not the man on the street.
- Mainstream politics has failed to value the normal and the parochial in the sense of the places where people live and their sense of belonging to communities and to their workplace. The common good is to be found in the lived experience of people and that might be a better place to start from than utility or freedom as the absence of constraints.
- With no centre counter-narrative, there was a void that has been filled by the extremes on the far left and the radical right. In addition to 9/11 and the financial crash, it is crucial not to underestimate the impact of 7/7 where British citizens killed British citizens.

Key Conclusions and next steps:

- Common Good makes common sense!
- Re-establishing the covenant between parts of society is critical. Fostering places of encounter/working and deliberating together in intermediate institutions is important.
- Where is the political constituency that can bring the idea of the common good to life? There is a need for a new public conversation. Self-awareness is missing.
- Are there certain moral obligations that leaders are not fulfilling to their constituencies?
- Need to acknowledge own culpability in process. Need to reimagine role and purpose and government.
- Call out challenge to tolerance and worse.
- If we are not careful, tyrants will fill the void.