

IPPR



Marc Stears

EVERYDAY
DEMOCRACY

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

TAKING CENTRE-LEFT POLITICS BEYOND
STATE AND MARKET

Marc Stears

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PREFACE

How can a new spirit of mutual responsibility be forged in Britain?

How can we re-energise our democracy?

How can we learn to interact with each other in a more cooperative and less adversarial way?

Since the financial crash of 2008, commentators have agreed that these are the key questions facing British politics today, a view seemingly confirmed by this summer's riots.

The vast majority of efforts to respond to this question have focused on the balance between the duties of the state and the place of the free market. For some, the task of engendering a new spirit of responsibility calls for firm guidance from an authoritative government, imposing norms of behaviour on an unruly society, in combination with a flourishing free market economy. For others, it requires a different kind of state intervention, one focused on state-sponsored economic growth and the reduction of the vast material inequalities that currently blight our society.

In this essay, however, Marc Stears, Visiting Fellow, IPPR, argues that this exclusive focus on state and market is a mistake. Stears contends that neither the state nor the market alone can actually foster a new spirit in Britain.

The state cannot do so because it is too blunt an instrument, well-suited to tasks that need simple, standardised approaches, and less to those that require cultural change. The market cannot do so because it is, at least in part, responsible for the predicament in which we find ourselves. It is an excessive faith in market solutions, he insists, that has led to an increasingly transactional culture that treats citizens as economic objects rather than as human beings.

What is required instead is a thoroughgoing effort to transform our democracy. Drawing on cutting-edge research from political philosophy, sociology, and business studies, Stears outlines the ways in which such a democratic transformation could help us build the new cross-community relationships that are required throughout our society: in the workplace, in our neighbourhoods and communities, and even in our homes. It is only through such open, imaginative and wide-ranging democratic relationships, he argues, that we can truly build a responsible society.

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Marc Stears

INTRODUCTION

One Friday in August of this year, I took the short walk from IPPR's London offices across to the Southbank Centre. On that summer afternoon, the city possessed an astonishingly vibrant, open, and creative air. Throngs of teenagers ran around the concrete walkways of the National Theatre and Haywood Gallery, laughing and joking. Families gently bickered about which of the host of places to eat in. Older visitors, pleasantly exhausted by the frenzy all around them, sat on wooden benches staring across the river at the Houses of Parliament – a view that still retains its capacity to inspire.

One day later, Tottenham exploded. An open, creative, democratic society gave way to the spirit of destruction. Homes were burnt to the ground, businesses destroyed, and a whole community ripped apart by a terror the like of which most of its members had never known. Suddenly, London was characterised not by its generosity and communality, but by the hateful emotion of raw self-interest, built up through years of inequality, social exclusion, and decay.

If the Tottenham riot, and the disorder that followed it across England, taught us anything, it is that we cannot take the spirit of our country for granted. A properly democratic society – one where norms of reciprocity, mutual acceptance, and shared concern govern our daily interactions – never comes about by chance. It is the result

of many interlocking factors, including, perhaps most of all, sustained political effort.

In an earlier generation, the Southbank itself was the location of one of the most spectacular efforts at creating a democratic community. One of the last acts of Clement Attlee's reforming Labour government was to transform an industrial wasteland in the heart of the city into a vast park for public entertainment as the centre of a Festival of Britain. But Attlee's Festival site was not just a super-charged fairground. It was the manifestation of an ideal. The Festival was intended to represent Britain as it should be. It was a practical example of what a free, orderly, generous, compassionate, and, most of all, democratic Britain would look and feel like. It was a place where people could come together, enjoy each other's company away from the strains of the workplace, and celebrate the best their country had to offer.

Sixty years later, Britain sadly lacks a government with the reforming vision of Clement Attlee. But, despite all of our nation's troubles – the debt and the unemployment, the strain on our public services, the persistent inequality – it does not lack the qualities that made such a government possible. The task of any centre-left political movement is properly to identify these qualities, to work out how it can help to enhance them, and allow them to be put to use. Centre-left politics starts, in other words, from the positive characteristics of the people themselves. It asks what politics can do to help us enjoy the very best of the lives we have it within ourselves to lead.

The precise responses to this challenge will differ from generation to generation, inflected by changes in society, economy, technology, culture and popular aspiration. My IPPR colleague, Graeme Cooke, is currently conducting path-breaking work examining the precise nature of our own social and economic context (Cooke 2011). There are, however, certain fundamental components of the question itself that do remain constant. A reforming politics will always have to work out ways to balance the obligations of community with the need for privacy, the possibilities of liberty and the necessity of security, an outward-looking quest for a better global order and a focus on the requirements of home.

Most importantly of all, it will have to take a stand on three core questions of any modern political order:

- What is the proper role of the *state* in our society?
- What is the proper place of the *market* in our society?
- What are the possibilities for *democracy* beyond both state and market?

Historic answers

Both post-1997 New Labour and pre-1997 (so-called) Old Labour had their own responses to these issues and we all have a fairly solid understanding of what those responses were. Labour in the old era was committed to the central state as the agency which could secure fairness and social

justice, charging those in Westminster and Whitehall with the task of managing and controlling the overall direction of the economy in the interest of the public good. In more recent times, Labour celebrated the dynamism of the market economy, and especially of the City of London, arguing that if wealth creation was allowed to expand at its own dramatic pace, the resources it generated could be equitably and effectively redistributed for the benefit of all, and especially those of us who are most vulnerable. The state was still here, on this account, but its role was to provide and manage key public services and to ensure some measure of justice in distribution. It was not to direct, nor even to shape, the economy itself.

There were huge advantages to both of these approaches, and by employing them effectively a number of governments have made enormous contributions to British society. But they were also both subject to the same significant oversight: their insistent focus on the state and the market left the third dimension of our question – the possibilities of democracy – largely overlooked.

There have been moments, of course, when the centre-left in Britain has turned its attention to democracy. The Labour party was a major influence in the campaign for women's suffrage, for the extension of the vote to younger adults, and for the devolution of key powers to Scotland and Wales. There have also been individuals and groups in the past who have campaigned for further democracy still, exemplified by the guild socialists of the early 20th century, under the

guidance of GDH Cole and RH Tawney, some of the critical left intellectuals of the Attlee years, including JB Priestley and Barbara Jones, and those who shaped the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Even during the New Labour years, there were individual initiatives that leant in a democratic direction.

More often than not, though, the attention of the centre-left has been directed to the thorny issue of striking the right balance between state and market and away from democracy. As a result, centre-left forces have rarely grappled effectively enough with the challenge of enabling and empowering the people of Britain to take more control over the decisions that actually shape their lives.

Everyday democracy: a new direction

It is my argument here that we must become far more alert to the possibilities of democracy if we are to respond to the challenges Britain faces today.

By that I do not mean we should learn to celebrate the democracy of old. The democracy of Westminster and Whitehall, of centralised political parties and ritualised election campaigns, no longer possesses the resources to respond to our nation's needs. Many people do not vote, after all, and even fewer join political parties. Nor do I mean, though, that we should engage in the detailed theorising about constitutional change or voting reform. Such theorising might be much beloved by many academic departments of

political science, but the public's rejection of the Alternative Vote in this year's referendum demonstrates the limited enthusiasm for it among the public at large.

Instead, I mean that we must find new ways of expanding and enriching our democratic experience throughout our lives. We need to build what I call an 'everyday democracy'.

An everyday democracy is a society in which we continuously forge new, deep, and powerful relationships with those with whom we live. It offers a politics in which we discover shared goals even with those with whom we usually disagree. It builds a nation in which we overcome the deep tensions that always threaten to divide us.

In an everyday democracy, we learn how to work with our neighbours, with our colleagues, and with those we sit with on the bus to work to develop real relationships that cross social boundaries and allow for new forms of action. It is only such relationships, I will contend, that can provide the opportunities that we seek as a nation today. It is these relationships that can help us overcome our hostility to one another and can take the edge off our self-defeating materialism. It is these relationships that can inspire new and more productive patterns of collaboration at work. And it is these relationships that can assist in improving our health and well-being, making us more resilient in the face of the challenges that inevitably face us.

In order to build such relationships, I will argue, we need concrete political change. This is not a plan for a 'Big Society', where relationships are expected to develop in the absence of any assistance and in the presence of grave social and economic inequalities. Instead, as I shall show, everyday democratic relationships require four things, each of which requires sustained political effort. Such relationships need:

- places to be developed
- time to be built
- organisations to protect them
- power to put their results into action.

In order to find such places, time, organisations, and power we will need to make fundamental changes to the way in which we work in our businesses, live in our communities, and conduct our politics. Most of all, we will need more actual democracy in our workplaces, in our public services, in our neighbourhoods and communities, and even in our own homes.

The political challenges that Britain faces are severe. Everyday democracy is key to responding to them effectively. It is, nonetheless, an aspect of our politics that the centre-left has overlooked for too long, partly because it appears to be so difficult to build. What the contrast between the South Bank and Tottenham showed this summer, though, is that now is the time to put that right.

1. WHY NOT JUST STATE AND MARKET?

This summer's riots are the latest instalments in a social, economic, and political drama that began with the financial crisis of 2008.

That crisis taught us – or should have taught us – many things. Most clearly of all, of course, it demonstrated the continuing importance of questions of state and market in our politics. All hopes that we had somehow worked out the balance between the two – that we had reached the ‘end of history’ with regards to this issue – collapsed along with the global banking sector. The subsequent deficit and recession, along with all of the social costs that they have generated, deepen our concerns. It is unsurprising, then, that some now loudly insist that the challenges of identifying the right size of the state and the proper limits of the market should captivate our political attention just as they always have.

There are, however, two problems with this analysis:

- It overlooks the limitations of *both* the state and the market.
- It overlooks the possibilities of a different kind of politics altogether: the politics of *everyday democracy*.

In order to make this case, we need to be clear what it is that a focus solely on the state and the market misses.

In order to do that, we need to know precisely what the limits of the market are and why state action alone can never be enough to compensate for them.

Inequality and the market

Rarely can the limitations of unfettered markets have presented themselves as clearly as they do now. After decades of neo-liberal consensus, we know that effectively unfettered capitalism – what the economist Andrew Glyn memorably called ‘capitalism unleashed’ – is far from the unmitigated force for good that its advocates have claimed (Glyn 2006).

Inequality is the most immediately striking of the untrammelled capitalist market’s limitations. Even without recourse to complex social science, we are all aware that among developed countries, the societies with the fewest restrictions on the capitalist free-market are also the societies that exhibit the greatest inequalities. Vast disparities of wealth and opportunity are easily witnessed by the most casual observer of Britain and the US, in ways that they are not in Sweden or Norway.

With a little research, the story of inequality becomes even more troublesome. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s much-discussed *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* offers both a shocking portrayal of the depth of inequality in societies like Britain and the US and a damning indictment of the devastating consequences

of those inequalities (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Social trust, life expectancy, educational performance, and social mobility are all worse in more unequal societies than they are in more equal ones. Mental illness, obesity, teenage births, homicides, and imprisonment are all highest in the developed societies that exhibit the greatest level of inequality.

It is unsurprising in these circumstances that many on the centre-left believe that material inequality is the greatest of the unregulated market's evils and that efforts to enhance equality should provide the centrepiece of any efforts at political renewal.

Seen from this perspective, the most serious error of the 'Third Way' governments of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton was to take their eyes off this standard social democratic concern with material equality; the concern that once occupied pride of place in the centre-left's political programmes. If a whole host of social indicators are more positive in relatively equal societies than they are in unequal ones, then surely the task of the centre-left is to do all it can to move us back towards equality. As Wilkinson and Pickett have it: 'It is now time egalitarians returned to the public arena ... confident that our institutions have been validated and found to be truer than most of us ever imagined' (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009: 298).

There is much of great value in this call, of course. But there are two elements that are missing:

- Wilkinson and Pickett can tempt us to think that the *only* thing wrong with the unconstrained market is that it generates inequalities.

- Wilkinson and Pickett tell us remarkably little about how we are meant to act politically.

Both of these are serious limitations that are worth examining in some depth.

Beyond inequality: culture and spirit

Towards the end of *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett explain why they think people generally dislike inequality. 'Most people', they say, 'know how much we sacrifice to consumerism and know that there are few things nicer than relaxing with friends ... They also know that it is family, friends and community that matter to happiness and know that our present way of life is ruining the planet' (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009: 300).

The authors are surely right that these are, indeed, reasons why we should resist corporate, consumerist capitalism in its current form. But are they really right to think that these are functions of equality *per se*?

It may well be true that, in a more equal society, the poorest among us would have more material resources and thus more of an opportunity to do the things we want to do. But it is surely also true that the general spirit of a society is shaped by more than the distribution of wealth and income alone. That spirit is a function of the kinds of things that we choose to value, the practical opportunities that are offered to us as well as the material ones, and the culture of which we are a part.

Once we see it this way, we begin to appreciate that unfettered capitalism is not only to be criticised because it generates material inequality, but also because it encourages us to interact with each other in a particular way. Put simply, a society that celebrates the free market above almost anything else is a society that encourages people to see each other as tradable objects rather than as people with feelings, commitments, dependents and dependencies. That is why big corporations are able to talk of ‘human resources’ and why economists sometimes talk of ‘human capital’. People are rendered as items on a spreadsheet, on this view, to be moved around at the whim of the powerful in the cause of economic efficiency or success.

This is an emotionally cold perspective, one that celebrates measurable outcomes and quantifiable metrics rather than the real warmth of proper human relationships. Within the firm, it means that the priority is always profit, investment, or shareholder value, rather than the lived experience of workers, customers, or other stakeholders. Capitalism of this sort does not appreciate ‘time with friends and family’ because the real merits of such time come from an entirely different part of the human experience.

It is not inequality that is the problem here. It is, instead, the outlook. Or, to put it more technically, it is the transactional mindset of a particular kind of unfettered capitalism that is at fault. By trying to turn our fellow citizens into objects to be manipulated rather than human beings to be respected, this mindset undermines our faith in the

possibility of discovering a common purpose. It is difficult, after all, for us to come together and dedicate ourselves to one another unless we have deep sources that inspire that commitment that go way beyond the need for efficiency or economic success.

The transactional mindset

Although the transactional mindset does not occupy all of our lives – most of us still have friends, family, neighbours and others with whom we interact otherwise – its impact is felt in almost every aspect of our culture and its hold has strengthened over the last few decades. We see it most clearly at the highest levels. The bankers at the heart of the financial crisis displayed it in its rawest form when they moved money around in constant pursuit of greater return without thinking for a moment of the human consequences of their actions. Premier League football players exhibit it when they flit from club to club in search of ever increasing financial reward without any of the constraints of loyalty to club and community.

More worryingly, perhaps, we see the transactional mindset edging into everyday life too. Parents of young children, and children of elderly parents, manifest it when they seek to transform their caring labour into a commodity, either by demanding material recompense for effort that should always be given freely or, worse still, by failing to provide that effort at all. This is not to ignore the rightful

demand of those who need to take time away from the workplace in order to care for others for financial and other forms of support. It is rather to say that we need to recognise that some things are not of that order. I was recently told, for example, of a man who refuses to pick his elderly mum up from the train station when she comes to visit her grandchildren without being paid for the petrol used.

These are among the most obvious illustrations of what some have called the 'me-now' outlook that is at the heart of the transactional mindset. It was this take on the world which was exposed at its most horrific in this summer's riots. Our spirit of mutual responsibility is undermined by the transactional mindset; of that there should be no doubt.

The consequences of our widespread adoption of this mindset, though, actually go far deeper. An excessively transactional outlook not only limits our sense of duty to one another, it detracts from other core human qualities as well. If we see others as objects rather than people, after all, we can easily lose respect for their creativity and independence, for their passions and enthusiasms, as well as for their potential vulnerabilities.

The impact of this process is most strikingly seen in the way that the transactional mindset has contributed to the reshaping of many contemporary workplaces. As the social commentator, Simon Head, has described, the last two decades have witnessed an astonishing increase of technical, managerial mechanisms of monitoring and control at work (Head 2003).

These mechanisms are most pronounced in low-skill, high-tech environments, such as call centres, which Head evocatively describes as the ‘digital assembly line’. But even highly skilled workers who used to enjoy significant levels of personal autonomy and responsibility – doctors, teachers, computer programmers, university lecturers – have become increasingly measured and controlled in recent years, and they have been dramatically restricted in their day-to-day operations as a result.

The workplaces once associated with freedom and creativity – with what was once called vocational virtue – are now characterised by the sort of measurement and control previously only associated with the oppressive time-and-motion studies of the highly industrialised workplaces of the early 20th century. Our new kind of workplace is a world of targets, appraisal, ‘360 degree feedback’, disciplining and insecurity. It is a world where every aspect of the workplace experience can be both observed and restricted by senior management and where increasingly precise methods of working are dictated by external consultants with little or no contact with the workforce themselves. Technology is sometimes employed ruthlessly in this dehumanising experience. As Head puts it:

... the computer rivals the industrial assembly line itself as an agent of surveillance and control. Managers can peer into subordinates’ computers with their own, time an employee’s work to the nearest second, record

and time workers' telephone calls, mark to the nearest second their every movement – to the toilet, the water fountain, or the lunch room. Graphs, statistical tables, pie charts ... all can analyze from every conceivable angle the performance of an employee or group of employees over a period of hours, days, weeks, or years, with up-to-the-minute analysis (Head 2003: 70).

Employers' willingness to use such devices is the not the consequence solely of material inequality, although such inequality is certainly a contributory factor in weakening employees' ability to resist. We must also admit that their willingness is the result of a transactional mindset that strips workers of the status that attends a full human being and instead views them as objects to be manipulated. And the flourishing of that mindset is the direct result of our collective failure fully to grasp the pathologies of unfettered market capitalism.

Can the state respond?

If material inequality were the only problem with unfettered capitalism then the political solution would be straightforward in principle, if a little more difficult in practice. The central state would need to take some form of direct role in shaping the economy and in redistributing its products. What that would mean in the medium term, is that discussion would need to turn once again to the precise balance to be struck

between the state and the market. More immediately, the centre-left would need to do all it could to ensure its triumphant return to Westminster and Whitehall in order to be able to pull the levers of power to secure a greater degree of equality in distribution.

However, if we accept that material inequality is *not* the only problem of unfettered capitalism, then this return to the state/market balance begins to look far less plausible as a single-shot solution. It becomes less plausible still when we appreciate more fully both the strengths and the limitations of state action.

There are, without doubt, certain things that only the centralised state can do. As my Oxford colleague, Desmond King, and I have argued elsewhere, states are crucially the most important instruments of standardisation in the modern world (King and Stears 2011). What that means is that, unlike any other agency, states have the capacity to ensure that certain things are experienced in the same way by everyone: no matter who they are, where they live, or what they aspire to.

States are thus brilliantly well-placed to ensure certain key goals of the centre-left. As we learnt so well in the Blair-Brown years, an effectively directed state can guarantee that patients all over the country are treated within a certain time-period by the NHS. Such a state can also guarantee that certain fundamental human rights – such as the right to have a personal relationship with either a man or a woman irrespective of one's own gender – are not undermined by powerful interests or entrenched opinions. It can also, if it

tries hard enough, ensure that nobody has to live below a certain standard poverty line, by fighting to maintain access to working opportunities and by guaranteeing direct financial assistance where required.

The limits of the state: the New Labour legacy

State action is, therefore, and will remain fundamental. And it is entirely wrong to suggest otherwise, as the current government's Big Society agenda often appears to do. However, once the state is seen as an agent of standardisation, we also begin to realise that, although states are very well-placed to do something about things like material inequality, they are not so straightforwardly well-placed to take on the problems posed by the cultural challenges of capitalism. Putting that another way, if we decide that we need to secure a fundamental change in our nation's spirit, rather than just in its patterns of distribution, then we might quickly realise that state action is not going to be able to do that by itself.

This observation becomes plainer still when we reflect on the legacy of the New Labour years. For, although New Labour secured some enormous economic gains for working people across the country, it also exacerbated, rather than resolved, many of the deeper cultural problems that we face. As Ed Miliband recently put it: New Labour was 'better at rebuilding the fabric of our country than the ethic of our society.'

Nowhere was the most apparent than in the public services. The Labour government's dedication to improving the fundamental public services in Britain was indisputable and much that was desperately needed was achieved. But the methods it chose to employ reinforced the very transactional mindset that is at the centre of our country's difficulties. Labour thus employed centralised targets, oversight and control, in combination with mechanisms derived from the most cut-throat of commercial planning, in its drive to improve 'performance'. Extraordinarily little thought was given to the impact of these devices on the professionalism or vocational virtue of the workforce within key parts of the public sector or of the way in which public services were understood by the public themselves.

Even less consideration was given to the impact of these managerial and commercialised reforms on the 'ethos of public service' that had long underpinned the British welfare system. Indeed, in many New Labour circles it appeared all but heretical to talk of such an 'ethos' at all. Too often, improvement was reduced to technical planning, with economic incentives and disincentives replacing any discussion of the value of what was delivered or the way in which it was to be produced.

The limits of the state: beyond New Labour

Even if New Labour had not overlooked these issues, however, problems would still have remained. The difficulties

of relying on state action alone go deeper than any one administration's oversights.

Whenever a political movement relies on the state as the primary instrument of social, economic, and political reform, that movement invites this kind of danger. Although they can do wonderful things, states are also fantastically inhumane instruments. As the anthropologist, James Scott, puts it, people who work within states always see the world in a very distinctive way, and always seem to end up striving for a more easily managed, controlled, and centrally directed society as a result. He explains:

... the modern state, through its officials, attempts with varying success to create a terrain and a population with precisely those standardized characteristics that will be easiest to monitor, count, assess and manage. The ... continually frustrated goal of the modern state is to reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it to something more closely resembling the administrative grid of its observation (Scott 1998: 81-2).

Although Scott's rhetoric may seem over-blown in the British context (his book is generally focused on the developing world), the essence of his observation is nonetheless a compelling one. States make things the same. They work best when a problem has a technical, mechanical solution which can be employed everywhere within a single

country. They are at their worst when they need flexibly to respond to local particularities, when they need to act nimbly or with nuance, and, most importantly of all, when they delve into problems of the nation's spirit or of the human heart. It is not that state action might be unable to assist with those problems in some way; it is just that the state will never be able to resolve the problems by itself.

Where next?

The unfettered capitalism of the last few decades – the years of capitalism unleashed – has had at least two horrific sets of consequences for Britain. First, it has ushered in a new era of inequality, deepening the divisions between rich and poor and exacerbating a host of social problems as a result. Second, it has reinforced a transactional mindset across British society, encouraging us to look on our fellow citizens more as objects than as people, dividing us not materially but spiritually from one another. Such a mindset does not captivate all of us all of the time, of course, but its creeping influence has become increasingly widespread, almost without notice.

State action is an appropriate and important response to the first of these problems. But it is not – or, rather, not straightforwardly – appropriate for the second.

A different kind of action is required to tackle the influence of a transactional mindset. That action would enable us to acknowledge our responsibilities towards one another

far more fully than we do now. It would encourage us to be proud to live among others who have distinctive characteristics as human beings, people who not only work, but think, act, and feel differently from ourselves. It would celebrate the capacity we have to come together and work for common causes, despite all of the things that might keep us apart.

The question that the centre-left must ask, then, is: what does such action consist of and how could it be taken if not through reliance on the state? The answer, I believe, lies in the power of *everyday democracy*. It is only democratic politics in the sense of a real, deep commitment to generate new common action on an everyday basis that can help us address the problems that beset us. It is to this answer that I now turn.

2. THE POSSIBILITIES OF EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

There is enormous pessimism about the possibilities of democracy on the centre-left today. Ever since the Thatcher years there has been an engrained scepticism about the willingness of large sections of the electorate to engage in the common endeavour that is at the heart of all properly functioning democracies. This depressing picture has been cemented still further by commentators in recent years.

In his bleak but moving book, *Ill Fares the Land*, the left-wing social critic, Tony Judt, explained the perceived difficulties perfectly. The radical expansion of material inequality and the propagation of a transactional mindset over the last few decades, Judt argued, have all but demolished the possibilities of democratic politics. People are too divided, both by their economic circumstances and by their attitudes, to be able to see their fellow citizens as potential partners in some shared political project any more. And as a result, democracy cannot mean very much.

As Judt decried, 'we no longer have political movements. While thousands of us may come together for a rally or a march, we are bound together on such occasions by a single, shared interest. Any effort to convert such interests into collective goals is usually undermined by the fragmented individualism of our concerns' (Judt 2010: 134-5).

This is a familiar complaint. Anyone who has been to a political party branch meeting will have heard a version of it. 'It is impossible to get anyone interested anymore in anything other than their own income,' they will say. Anyone who has taught in a school or a university will have heard a similar version too. 'The students will come together to campaign against increases in their tuition fees but not about anything else,' my colleagues are often telling me. Indeed the necessary limitation of democracy in our day and age is now close to becoming a conventional wisdom.

The suggestion that I want to make here, then – that an empowered, extended, everyday democracy is the best way we can respond to the difficulties we face as a society – might well be received with incredulity. It will appear to some as utopian and to others as nostalgic. But it is an argument I want to make nonetheless, for I believe that the pathologies of the transactional mindset can be countered through a dramatic expansion of everyday democratic opportunities.

In order to make that argument as effectively as possible, I will answer the most telling questions:

- What is everyday democracy?
- What are the advantages of an everyday democracy?
- How can an everyday democracy be built?
- What criticisms might an everyday democracy face?

What is everyday democracy?

When people think of democracy they often think of the grand political institutions. Their minds go to Westminster or Whitehall, to general elections or constitutional conventions. But the essence of democracy is really much more simple than this. It is found in the relationships – both face-to-face and virtual – that bring individual human beings with different backgrounds, experiences and understandings of their interests, together and transforms them into a collective unit, one capable of common action.

Relationships *per se*, of course, are simply the connections that exist between different human beings, connections grounded in emotion, reason, or just enlightened self-interest. What makes a relationship specifically democratic is when it takes place between people who might otherwise be in tension with each other, who through that relationship learn to respect each other in ways that they otherwise would not. This is especially so when the relationship enables differences to be resolved in a way that could actually lead to a common interest.

Core to this experience is the ability to speak and, more importantly, to *listen* to diverse others. Relationships which are simply ‘taken as given’ are not democratic. To be democratic, they must be forged out of a constant give-and-take, an attentiveness to the concerns of others, and a conscious effort to reach new, mutual understandings that had previously not existed. Put more bluntly, democratic relationships are relationships which enable

us to appreciate a common good that goes beyond our individual interests.

These democratic relationships are partly the product of grand, historic movements. In the public imagination, they are probably most associated with mass trade unions and political parties, the kind of movements that Tony Judt feels may have had their day.

Social historians, for example, tell us about the ways in which different kinds of working people – with different experiences of labour, different religions, different economic interests – were able to come together in effective and sustainable relationships grounded in common interest through the mass trade unions in the early 20th century. The British Labour Party played a similar role in cementing connections between people of different religions and different parts of the country who came together because of a shared belief in the Party's causes and a shared identity with its structures, practices and rituals (Glasman 2011).

But democratic relationships also take place in far more everyday settings. They are of the essence in the business world. Democratic relationships enable common action to take place in workplaces across the country every day. They are seen when different grades of workers or practitioners of different expertise decide to contribute effectively to a shared endeavour, despite their initial scepticism of each other or the project. They emerge, too, between neighbours in their communities when they find ways of living together that put aside potential issues of dispute, ranging from the right place

for someone's garden fence to the right of an incoming group to continue practising their religions as they choose.

What I call everyday democracy, then, is best understood as the process whereby relationships between potentially adversarial individuals (or groups) enable us to overcome differences so as to generate common action in a range of everyday settings. Such relationships are not entirely inimical to self-interest – we might initially come together because we understand that it is good for us both financially, for example – but they can never be exhausted by it. A proper democratic relationship is never simply a transaction or a deal. It must go deeper than that. Nor is it ever compulsory or entirely unchosen. It must emerge from conscious commitments of the people themselves.

For a relationship to count as truly democratic, people must come together in ways that enable some form of common action that would not otherwise have occurred, in pursuit of common goals that otherwise could not have been achieved. As such, the relationship will require a certain degree of compromise, self-sacrifice and self-discipline on the part of all of the involved parties. It will also be dependent on the parties possessing a rich recognition of the strengths, vulnerabilities, identities and commitments of all of those involved. Such recognition will have to emerge from an attentiveness to the voices and concerns of others, especially those others that we are tempted at present to ignore. As the American political philosopher, Romand Coles, has it, when individuals enter into democratic relationships they develop

‘a more textured and durable sense of each other as human beings worthy of deep respect’ (Coles 2005: 260).

The benefits of everyday democracy

The benefits of these relationships are manifold. At a personal level, there is increasing evidence from social psychology that individuals who possess a wider and deeper range of collaborative, democratic relationships with others gain in self-esteem, personal satisfaction and general effectiveness. Such relationships appear to enhance what psychologists call the ‘resilience’ of individuals, enabling them to stave off the mental distress that besets so many people in our increasingly stressful environments.

More straightforwardly, these relationships also enable us to access much-needed sources of direct support in the moments of life that are most difficult. Even in the most generous of welfare states, after all, it is still the personal actions of individuals to whom we relate that provides the most welcome relief.

This was driven home to me very powerfully when my dad was recently in hospital. Although the formal processes of medical treatment and the quality of the hospital fabric all mattered enormously, of course, it was the actions of individuals who went beyond the call of duty as a result of a relationship that they had developed with my dad that really made the difference. The incredible medical machines may have saved his life, but it was the generosity and care of

individual human beings – doctors, nurses, administrators and cleaners – that made his experience in the hospital an overwhelmingly positive one, aiding his sense of well-being and encouraging his recovery. As the philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, explains, we all need ‘relationships of uncalculated giving and receiving’ for us to flourish, or even simply to survive (MacIntyre 1999: 117).

The benefits extend to a social level, too, and sometimes in the most surprising of ways. There is a similarly growing body of evidence from business studies and organisational psychology, for example, that shows that groups of people who work self-consciously collaboratively towards a shared goal are far more likely to flourish than those who are riven by internal competition or alienation. This is true, both of large-scale businesses and small-scale neighbourhood organisations, and it appears to be the result of both direct and indirect benefits.

One of those indirect benefits, paradoxically, relates to the capacity of organisations with deep democratic relationships to flourish in the competitive marketplace. As the business theorist, Paul Adler, and colleagues have recently argued, the commercial organisations ‘that will become the household names of this century will be renowned for sustained, large-scale, efficient innovation’ and the key to developing that capacity is ‘not free-agent autonomy but, rather, a strong collaborative community’ (Adler et al. 2011: 101)

Most importantly of all, democratic relationships of the sort I have described are the best defence we have against

the transactional mindset that has accompanied the social and economic developments of the last few decades with such devastating consequences.

A society that stands in deeper need of a spirit of mutual responsibility will not fulfil that need with people who are estranged from each other or who only see each other as means to their own selfish ends. If, in contrast, we were capable of fostering a greater number of everyday democratic relationships in Britain today – bonding people together so that they can learn to value each other and take action together – then we might be able to foster the required spirit. The question, then, is whether it might be possible.

Is everyday democracy possible?

The advantages of democratic relationships might have escaped the attention of many of our politicians, but a number of important political philosophers and social scientists, especially in the US, have spent considerable effort in recent years trying to identify effective means of bringing them about.

The challenge they have all faced is a deep one. Democratic relationships require that we deepen the psychological disposition that enables us to loosen ‘the bonds of my identity in encounters with others’ in order to find new and possibly surprising ways of relating to them (White 2010: 106). It demands that we encounter others

and avoid the temptations of a 'me-now' mentality. In such encounters, we must be able to explore possibilities of common interest, even in the most unlikely of circumstances, and develop what the American political philosopher, Danielle Allen, has called 'political friendship' across the deepest of social divides (Allen 2009).

Trying to work out how best to do this is difficult, primarily because the issue is at heart one of 'ethos' or 'mindset' and our academic understanding of the ways in which such mindsets develop is still very much in its infancy. A host of approaches have been developed, all of which share the same goal. These include genetic studies into the human disposition to cooperate; neuroscientific studies of reward circuits in the brain that trigger when we cooperate effectively; analysis in social geography that concentrates on the way the built environment shapes our deepest thought processes; political science that explores the decision-making structures most likely to produce sustainable common purposes and abstract political philosophy that draws on descriptions of the fundamentally social nature of human beings, as passed down from Aristotle to the present (Benkler 2011).

All of this research is worthy of deeper investigation, and each provides potentially contrasting recommendations for action. Despite the differences, though, *four* preconditions for effective democratic relationship-building do appear time and again in different bodies of research, and it is they that seem most likely to provide an effective starting point.

Those four preconditions are:

- Places: locations to shape our identities
- Time: opportunities to reflect and connect
- Organisations: frameworks to sustain our relationships
- Power: chances to run our own lives

1. Everyday democracy and place

People's connection to a physical location has an enormous impact on their ability to relate. At its most straightforward, a shared identification with a particular place can generate powerful bonds of mutual loyalty. We are, in other words, far more likely to develop effective relationships with people with whom we share a physical location, and especially when we mutually care for that location and invest it with meaning and value. Such locations can, of course, be workplaces, neighbourhoods, parts of the countryside, or even whole regions of the country. We all know them from our everyday lives. For me, it is the streets that I walk to work, the playing fields where I watched rugby in South Wales as a kid, and the classrooms where I have met and talked with generations of intellectually passionate students.

Although it might seem surprising, these relationships through place do not seem to have been undermined by our increasingly mobile world nor by the creation of virtual environments where people seek to relate in a sort of quasi-space. Indeed, quite to the contrary, the fact that we are

now less likely than we once were to be based always with a single physical environment appears to have enhanced many of our senses of the importance of that environment. As the socialist cultural critic, Raymond Williams, once put it, 'place has been shown to be a crucial element in the bonding process ... by the explosion of the international economy and the destructive effects of deindustrialization upon old communities. When capital has moved on, the importance of place is more clearly revealed' (Williams 1989: 242). This is true even after the explosion of new forms of social media. When our Facebook friends tell us that they are waiting for a train in a distant railway station, we do not usually have the same feeling as we do when we sit there alongside them.

But as identity with place can generate strong bonds, it can also be part of the problem that everyday democracy is meant to overcome: the problem of social isolation. If places are reserved for single groups, such as the wealthy, or members of a particular religion, then the chances are that those members will relate effectively to the exclusions of those who are not present. The traditional loyalty of English public school children to their school and to its former students is, of course, a historic case in point. But as the geography of our streets threatens to become increasingly segregated along class, ethnic, or religious lines, this dynamic may become a much more widespread difficulty. As the political philosopher, Bonnie Honig, explains, the restriction of specific groups of people to specific physical locations – crudely the rich to fancy neighbourhoods, the

rest to others – means that, too often, the self-understood ‘masters’ of our societies ‘now live with relatively little direct exposure to the labour on which their mastery depends’ even though the ‘poverty, labour, and exposure that global capitalism invites us to imagine is far away is, for most of us, also only minutes away’ (Honig 2011: 427).

Such observations do not undermine the importance of place *per se*. But they do remind us that, if we wish to develop truly democratic relationships, we will need to ensure that our loyalties to place actually enable us to meet with others with whom we might not otherwise relate in order to discover the potential of common goals that we currently overlook. It is not good enough simply to communicate with those with whom we already agree. We need to be exposed to others and to feel the need to forge new communalities. That is what the real world of our communities is like, even if we do not admit it. We need to talk to the owner of the newsagents we buy our paper from, to the cleaners who keep our streets attractive, to the police who keep them safe, and learn how our common space can create new connections between us.

2. Everyday democracy and time

Effective relationships between people who might initially disagree with each other cannot come quickly. They cannot be crudely planned, either by bureaucrats or psychologists, and expected to emerge in short periods. Nor will they occur

if everyone involved is rushed by the need to move on to some other pressing concern. Instead, effective relationships emerge only when people are able to explore possibilities slowly and deliberately together.

We can probably all reflect on this from our own life experience. If we think of our friends or our family, sometimes the deepest of connections come from just sitting with others, switching from silence to conversation as the mood takes us and as the moment demands. This sense of an openness of time is especially essential for the attentive listening to others that is a core component of all properly democratic relationships; the listening that opens up new possibilities of understanding. As Romand Coles says, we can only ever appreciate the '*gravitas* of what we hear' when we take the time fully to experience it (Coles 2007: 47). And it is only through that *gravitas* that a proper identification with another can develop.

If we wish to secure deeper democratic relationships across our country, therefore, we will have to find the occasions where people can find the time to do it. At an abstract level, this means adapting our schedules as a society to ensure that it can occur. It means not falling foul of a mentality which suggests that the fastest solution and a quickened tempo is always the best, that we should always be aiming to move out of someone's company and on to the next task as quickly as possible. Put more simply, eating our sandwiches at our desk on our own so that we can move on swiftly to our next task is not the way to deepen and enrich our relationships.

Architects for some of our major companies know this already. They ensure that their buildings contain common spaces where people can comfortably take the time to mingle informally with each other, without always feeling a push to move on. We could begin to think about that at a public policy level too. It would involve committing ourselves to the notion that people need to have places within which to work on their relationships with each other and that they must be guaranteed the time to do it. It would mean keeping our eye out always for the ‘time poor’, for those, that is, who either lack the income to be able to spend time with their friends and family or whose pressures of employment drive them continuously into a self-centred universe, one that separates them always from the possibilities that come from connecting with others.

3. Everyday democracy and organisation

Beyond close friendships and family membership, individuals are unlikely to be able to maintain their relationships unless they are institutionalised in some form. Democratic relationships depend on a certain degree of predictability, on rituals or routines, which enable people to come together with a fair degree of certainty. Such institutions can be highly informal – such as when a group gathers in the park on a Sunday morning to play football – or highly formal – such as in clubs and societies with long histories and established practices. But what matters most of all is that there is

a structure that persists across time that is not entirely dependent on the whim of any individual at any particular moment. Organisation of this sort is what distinguishes the euphoric moments of communality that accompany one-off group events, such as political rallies or music festivals, from the sustainable relationships that are needed to challenge the transactional mindset at a deeper and more persistent level.

As with place, we need always to be conscious that organisations can foster either inclusive or an exclusive patterns of relationships. Deep bonds through organisation manifest in socially unhealthy ways in street gangs, elite social clubs, or secret societies. So the challenge facing those committed to developing deeper cross-community democratic relationships is to develop organisational arrangements that involve people who would otherwise not take the time to work together.

Historically, the labour movement did this for the practitioners of different trades and for working class people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds. In more recent times, community organisations such as London Citizens have attempted to do the same, by establishing long-lasting links between different religious, educational, and trades union groupings and helping them to identify causes that they could share. When we turn to think about the public policy implications of a commitment to every democracy, we will need to consider what potential additional organisations could achieve similar purposes. We might need to be particularly attentive to the benefits and the disadvantages

of some well-established organisations, including standard political parties and parts of the public sector. There are, no doubt, great opportunities there, but there are also limitations, including those of petty partisanship and a potential hostility to innovation. The future is most likely to be made up of a combination of the new and the old.

4. Everyday democracy and power

The final, and possibly most important, condition is *power*. This condition begins with the simple observation that, however much we might wish it to be otherwise, our political, social, and economic world is primarily shaped by differentials in power. Some people manage to get things done at the expense of others. In so doing, they deploy resources of many different kinds – money, prestige, organisational advantage – in order to secure their interest over the interests of others. It is vital to any plausible theory of everyday democracy that it recognises that this is not going to change. Democratic relationships are always best understood, therefore, as *part* of an ongoing power struggle, rather than as an alternative to it. Relationships cannot supersede power politics; they find their place within it. They help people in their struggles against the power of others. They also help to build bridges between those with contrasting perspectives in order to stem the most hostile antagonisms that frequently accompany inevitable battles for power.

What this means is that, as we think of how democratic relationships can be built, we should always remember that what people want – and need – most of all is some kind of power of their own and, especially, some kind of protection from the domination of the ‘power elites’ that shape so much of their social experience. Democratic relationships will flourish, in other words, if they are seen positively to enhance the power of people, either to run their own lives or, at the very least, to escape from the potential dominance of overbearing others. It is at least partly for this reason, after all, that people still join trades unions, protest groups, political parties, and pressure groups, even in these individualised times.

Many political thinkers, especially those on the left, are embarrassed by the facts of power. They would prefer to think of a politics based always on consensus and mutual agreement. But, paradoxical though it may sound, we must not shy away from the inevitable centrality of power to all of our lives if we are to assist in the development of democratic relationships. To put it bluntly, it is necessary to be grown-up about power. That means we must recognise its continual place in our life together and its potential to inspire people to forge bonds that would not otherwise develop. As Alasdair MacIntyre says, ‘here as elsewhere in our lives we have to learn how to live both with and against the realities of power’ (MacIntyre 1999: 102). Danielle Allen puts the same point with more finesse when she reminds us that, ‘nascent interpersonal trust will never mature into full-blown political friendship unless it is given serious work to do’ (Allen 2004: 174).

Critics of everyday democracy

A belief in everyday democracy is grounded in the possibilities of broad, cross-community relationships. If the problems we face as a society today are, at least in part, caused by an overly transactional mindset – encouraging us to look at each other as objects to be manipulated rather than human beings to be related too – then the solutions must, in part, lie in developing deeper connections between us. Although this will be an undeniably difficult task, we know more now than ever about the conditions that are required to realise it. People must have shared places in which to relate, the time in which to do it, the organisation to sustain it, and appreciate the connection between their relationships and the broader power structures of which they are inevitably a part.

Whenever suggestions of this sort are made in British politics, they are often dismissed as either nostalgic or utopian. They are said to be nostalgic because they long for a by-gone age of ‘community values’ when everyone knew their neighbour and felt an inherited obligation either to their class or to their nation; utopian because they recommend something impractical, something which could not be achieved in our prevailing social, economic and political order.

I hope it is already clear that the first of these critiques severely misses the mark. The everyday democracy I have described here is a million miles away from the caricature of some conservative communitarianism. I have no interest in developing a ‘tensionless, lifeless, unedifying solidarity’ that

celebrates the past, is scared of the future, and blasé about inequalities and exclusions (Coles 2007: 47). No serious political position could emerge from such a blinkered and backward-looking perspective.

The second critique, though, needs more work to be put to rest. For if everyday democracy is to be anything more than a general aspiration, it needs to provide the basis for a serious conversation about what could actually be done in our politics in the here and now. It is, therefore, to the task of thinking about the practical political implications of an everyday democracy that I finally turn.

3. POLICIES FOR AN EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

An everyday democracy might be very difficult to build. On the one hand, the culture of relational engagement that is required has to come from the British people, ourselves. Neither the state nor the market can do it for us. Only we can spend the time required to talk with others, commit to new common goods, and overcome the obstacles that unresponsive power elites place in our way. On the other hand, the whole reason why we need to build an everyday democracy is that we are currently not as good at doing this as we need to be. We have given too much power to a transactional mindset for more than two political generations now. Too many of us rush from task to task, prioritising individual success over relationship development, short-term gain over long-term sustainable connections.

Everyday democracy demands that we do something for ourselves, yet presently we seem to lack the capacity to do it properly.

We need to do something to resolve this problem if an everyday democracy is ever going to become a reality. Such resolution must essentially lie in the discovery of the right combination of actions. The state, the market, and the people must all play a complementary role, each reinforcing the best aspects of the other and minimising the worst, in order to initiate a kind of virtuous circle. There is,

in other words, a role for all three in bringing an everyday democracy about.

The challenge of identifying the precise nature of these roles is one that should captivate the attention of centre-left thinktanks, political parties, independent thinkers and correspondents over the coming few years. There will be no easy answers here and the research required will have to be far-reaching and multi-disciplinary. There are, however, at least three areas of action that immediately suggest themselves. We might build an everyday democracy by focusing on:

- Expanding our common space
- Reforming our workplace experience
- Transforming our welfare system and public services.

My final task here is to introduce each of those in turn.

Everyday democracy and common space

As we saw, democratic relationships require the space to be developed. They will not come about through the internet alone. They come about when people actually interact, when they have places that they can identify with, where they meet others with whom they do not instantly agree or whom they do not even initially understand. Reflection on the most mundane of our personal experiences bears this out straightforwardly. We develop our closest relationships with

the people with whom we share spaces: people from work, other parents outside the school gates, fellow commuters on the train or bus, those we mingle with in the waiting room at the doctor's surgery, people we see on our regular walk to the shops or in the local pub.

If we are going to deepen and expand our democratic relationships, therefore, we need actual spaces where people can meet and where they will be encouraged and enabled to begin to spend time together.

Back in the 1940s, the Labour Party of Clement Attlee was well aware of this requirement. Its government built the South Bank as part of the Festival of Britain precisely to enable people who had been divided by class, region, and educational experience to come together and to celebrate their shared national story. The early welfare state pioneers knew it, which is why they designed shared spaces in all of their public buildings, including their hospitals and health centres. Educational reformers of the 1950s and 1960s were conscious of the need too. The idea of spending time together in a shared, cross-community space was one of the key motivations of the movement for comprehensive schooling.

For some reason that we do not yet fully understand, however, recent generations of centre-left reformers have taken their eye off this fundamental requirement. Their focus has been on modernising public services, on improving measurable achievements in core citizen capabilities, on enabling social mobility, but not on providing spaces where

people come together from different backgrounds to forge a new common good. There have been some exceptions, of course. In the early years of the New Labour government Sure Start centres were developed in a way that enabled parents to come together, across social boundaries, to spend time with each other, to forge new friendships and to help resolve shared problems.

In general, though, the transactional attitude has prevailed in recent years. A comparison of the Festival of Britain and the Millennium Dome is enough to demonstrate this key point. The first was a commercial-free, public space, with a focus on our shared national story, and attracted mass public support. The second was driven by private sponsorship, offered an abstract and disconnected view of the future which said nothing about our country as we know it, achieved little to overcome social divisions, and attracted derision.

The first thing any political movement that is serious about everyday democracy must do, therefore, is to concentrate great energy on the construction of spaces where people can live in common and which might be the places where they overcome their distrust of each other. We have an idea of what these spaces might consist of. They include parks, libraries, city farms, leisure centres, schools, skate parks, hospitals, town squares. The real task is to ensure that those existing spaces are maintained as safe, common areas, that new places are properly constructed, and serve their democratic purpose as fully as they possibly can. This might

sound like a straightforward ambition, but if it was pursued thoroughly rather than just half-heartedly it would have profound implications for our democracy.

More demanding, public policy will also need to face the problem of geographical divisions much more directly than it has done of late. Everyday democratic relationships will be hard to create when the rich live in 'gated communities', when those dependent on the welfare state are turned out of our inner cities by housing benefit restrictions, or when ethnic and religious divisions transform into strictly segregated neighbourhoods. Knowing how directly to respond to these challenges will be a difficult task. Sometimes state action will be required, in the form of benefit changes and planning restrictions. At other times, we must learn to come together and overcome these problems ourselves, through the kind of collective action that only people on the ground can take. What matters most of all, though, is that we remain constantly alert to the dangers and maintain our commitment to overcome them.

Everyday democracy and the workplace

For many of us at present, work is the place where we learn the worst of cultural lessons. In far too many workplaces, unresponsive managerial hierarchy combines with intense job and wage insecurity and individualised competition for career advancement to generate a socially divisive and deeply dispiriting experience.

Such trends have been sharply exacerbated in recent decades. The steep decline in trade unionism, especially in the private sector, has undermined one possible source of solidarity. The withdrawal of effective restrictions on capital mobility has encouraged a short-termist approach to investment that has detached many firms from any sense of obligation to the communities in which they operate. And, in Britain especially, the failure to develop any alternative models of corporate governance has ensured that multiple groups – workers, customers, local communities – have continuously been denied any effective control over business decision-making. All of this will have to stop if an everyday democracy is to be built.

There are, however, some reasons to be optimistic. Stung by public criticism of corporate avarice and alerted to the potential benefits of a more collaborative ethos by researchers, senior business leaders have become increasingly alert to the dysfunctional nature of the prevailing workplace experience and have begun to lobby for change. Efforts have thus begun to develop a more engaged, relational experience within the workplace, and to deepen the connections that obtain between businesses (especially large businesses) and the communities in which they operate.

Andrew Witty, CEO of GlaxoSmithKline, put the case for the second of these particularly fiercely in a recent interview with the Observer. ‘Call me old-fashioned, but I think you have to be something,’ he said. ‘I don’t buy that you can be this mid-Atlantic floating entity with no allegiance to anybody

except the lowest tax rate. You're British, you're Swiss, you're American or you're Japanese. Whatever you are, you're something. And this company is a British company.'¹

Efforts at empowering the workforce, developing cultures of inclusion and reaching out to non-traditional stakeholders are beginning in some major corporations. They should be welcomed. It is unclear, though, whether solely business-led efforts to reform the ways in which the workplace is experienced within and outside the firm can ever be profoundly transformational. This is because such efforts often appear to be fully aware of only three of the four preconditions of democratic relationships described above. They are aware, that is, that people need to have places with which to identify, the time to develop relationships, and the organisational apparatus with which to sustain them. But they often miss the problems of *power*.

This is a crucial oversight. In the absence of a strong union movement or greater security of tenure at work, worker participation in corporate initiatives always runs the risk of insincerity. Clashes of interest are inevitable in the workplace – even in a more relational workplace – so some kind of structures have to be put in place to ensure that the vast inequalities of power do not destroy the possibility of generating fully democratic relationships in employment.

What this means is that centre-left political movements need to work out what could be done to deepen the series of positive experiments that are just beginning in the workplace. Compulsory Works Councils might offer one avenue for

legislative-led reform, although there is likely to be severe resistance from the private sector to that initiative. Trade union renewal could be another direction in which to head, although the social and economic obstacles to promoting trade unionism within the private sector should not be underestimated in a modern economy like Britain's.

Most promising of all, perhaps, are the efforts of existing citizen organisations like London Citizens to entice businesses in to direct and public conversation with both their employees and their local communities through sustained local action and political pressure. The Living Wage campaigns run successfully by London Citizens in the last few years have employed a wide range of tactics to draw businesses into public discussions, ranging from mild direct action to questions at shareholder meetings, and their success may indicate that initial moves in the reforming workplace experience will come from sustained pressure of this sort.

Everyday democracy, welfare and public services

Little is as controversial in British politics than efforts at reform of welfare and public services, especially on the left. Anything which even mildly resembles commercialisation or retrenchment in this regard is met with fierce opposition. Such is the legacy of both Thatcher and Blair. And yet, it is far from clear that the ways our welfare system and public

services are currently run does anything very much to help overcome the transactional culture in which we live and to replace it with a more democratically relational one. The status quo, indeed, is often statist in exactly the wrong way. People who *rely* on public services have a direct experience that is alienating, bureaucratic and excessively standardised. People who *work* in public services, equally, frequently complain of an environment that is elitist, managerial and often simply patronising.

No group has made this case more forcefully than those who campaign for disability rights. People with disabilities are frequently heavily reliant both on cash benefits from the welfare system and from a wide range of public services, including health care, transport, and special education. There have been severe and justified criticisms from advocates for the disabled about the current government's attacks on those benefits and services, of course. But there has also been a much deeper critique of the culture in which public services are developed from within disabled communities themselves. People with disabilities, that is, often feel excluded from decision-making regarding their services and sometimes report the experience of the receipt of those services as demeaning and even dehumanising. The growing refrain of the disabled movement, therefore, has been a demand for inclusion, not only in material terms through direct resources provided by the state, but also in terms of an ability to work with others in determining the nature of the provision itself (Pellicano and Stears 2011).

This demand is part of a series of calls for what has become known as ‘relational welfare’. Relational welfare operates on the principle that welfare contributes most to our society when it combines the provision of material resources to those who need them with a method of doing so that enables a broader and deeper set of relational engagements to emerge. Things are at their best, in other words, when everyone feels part of the process, shaping the nature and delivery of services and not just being passive recipients or directive providers.

Reform in this area will be deeply controversial. It will involve taking power away from Whitehall bureaucrats and technical experts. It would mean finding ways of empowering patients in hospitals, teachers, parents and children in schools, and welfare claimants in job centres. It would also mean increased expectations and responsibilities both for those who rely on services and provide them. Fully relational services would need to be conducted on a principle of reciprocity, one where responsibilities to others were always combined with the rights claimed.

The potential controversies in this regard should not put us off. There are many years before the next election. The task for the centre-left is to think long and hard, and to talk to as many people as possible, before identifying the kind of welfare and public service reform that could play the most vital role in reshaping the relational dynamics of British society.

CONCLUSION

Everyday democracy is not a new idea. Over the last century or so, politicians and activists from all of Britain's leading ideological traditions have aspired to build proper, non-transactional, cross-community relationships in Britain.

The Conservative tradition, especially in its 'One Nation' variant, has celebrated the organic bonds that draw the British people together across time. The Liberal tradition has generated theories such as those of Leonard Hobhouse and JA Hobson in the early part of the 20th century which demanded the radical expansion of the redistributive welfare state in the name of social harmony. And the Labour tradition has possessed many rich examples, including the guild socialism of the early 20th century which lobbied for effective democracy in the workplace and the New Left of the 1960s which pioneered the idea of 'participatory democracy'.

Despite the apparent ubiquity of the ideal, though, real efforts to build an everyday democracy in Britain have been few and far between. Perhaps practising politicians have been put off, partly by the pursuit of petty partisan advantage and partly by just how hard it might be to actually make a difference.

Time and time again Labour, Conservative, and Liberal politicians have made impressive rhetorical commitments to democratic projects. But in recent years, at least, they have almost always fallen back on standard state or market choices in the end. The failure of David Cameron's Big

Society is only the latest version of this story. With the Big Society, a potentially impressive aspiration to reinvigorate the voluntary sector almost instantly gave way to the crudest of market-driven privatisations as soon as the government hit difficulties. What is left is at best an idle aspiration. The Big Society claims to care about relationship building, but it simply abandons people to do it all themselves. We need not only to recognise that relationships matter but to acknowledge that they have been made more difficult by both markets and the state in recent years and that something has to be done to put that right.

It often seems, then, that everyday democracy 'is a notion at once too obvious and too impossible' (Coles 2007: 113). Yet we must not be put off, especially now. When Britain witnesses unpunished selfishness in our biggest banks, unashamed illegality from our press, deepening social divisions between the generations, and riots in our cities, then it is time to address the deepest problems in our culture. When teachers do not have enough time to work individually with their pupils, when families do not have enough time for each other, when bosses do not have time to listen to their workers, then we have to accept that something must be done.

However controversial, then, my argument in this essay has been straightforward:

- The transactional – 'me-now' – mindset that has shaped our society for the past few political generations cannot be allowed to continue

- We need, instead, a spirit of mutual responsibility, a spirit where people work with each other to cross the social boundaries that currently separate them and forge new relationships with each other
- Neither the state nor the market can deliver that for us entirely by themselves
- An everyday democracy can help engender it.

If each of the steps in this argument is right, then there can be only one conclusion. It is time for us to do all we can to try to build an everyday democracy in Britain.

Endnotes

1. Reported in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/mar/20/andrew-witty-glaxosmithkline-big-firms-detached-society>

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