

Features citizenship

The self-creating society

Tom Bentley

The decline of political authority is becoming the defining issue of our time. Though often masked by the short term contest between parties and personalities, parties and governments are locked in a struggle to re-affirm the legitimacy of state action and win scope to use public power in meaningful ways.

This article argues that reformers are caught between two forces they cannot control: their current reliance on received authority to intervene for progressive ends, and the unravelling of collective identities and deference to large-scale institutions. The only response to this trap is to strengthen the role of the public in choosing and shaping collective outcomes. But a compelling account of democratic citizenship, and the role of citizens, has been largely lacking from any mainstream political narrative over the last decade. In addressing that failure, the left must reconnect with 'aspiration', a concept which was central to New Labour's early success, but with which the British government has lost touch. In the process, it must find ways to deepen and broaden the practical meanings of aspiration. Today's politics cannot offer a credible, separate alternative to consumer capitalism. But it should enable people to question and influence it, and recast the meaning of 'choice' in the process.

Despite the ongoing influence of some foundational neo-liberal ideas, it is striking that nowhere in the industrialised world is the aggressive, anti-government agenda of the 1980s a fully popular electoral option. One achievement of the social democrats' partial resurgence during the 1990s was to help bring a 'public' agenda back to the centre of politics, in the sense that public investment, intervention and fairness are all pivotal to the current competition for power. The recent focus on 'security' has also strengthened this focus; national and citizen security cannot be achieved without the state working well.

But the recovery was incomplete. While New Labour put public service provision at the centre ground of politics, it has not developed a repertoire of intervention that convinces the country it is making enough of a difference to them. The muddying of ideological waters in a post cold war era further undermines the clarity of collective choices to which voters can subscribe. The bitterness, and confusion, of the debate over higher education funding has been a perfect illustration of this problem. The tools and structures of government on which public intervention is based no longer have the same purchase in a pluralised, anti-deferential and socially fluid environment. Paradoxically, while the decline of traditional class and party identities makes media communication and political personality more important, our loss of deference also makes us more suspicious of political promises and more demanding of individual leaders.

Incumbency is therefore a double-edged sword. Competent control of the commanding heights of public policy is still a threshold qualification for office; unless voters believe you can sensibly manage borders, interest rates and state occasions you will not win power. But in the current atmosphere, the growing suspicion that government is out of touch, self-interested and ineffective can have a rapid and corrosive effect. New Labour currently occupies this perilous position, wobbling in the face of strong political opposition, unsure how to renew from within, open to the charge that it cannot connect its own top line rhetoric of ambition with strategies that count for organisations or individual lives that are closer to ground level.

Thus Britain's Labour government is battling against disillusionment, cynicism and indifference as its major enemies. Its struggle is not just to win a third term, but to win acknowledgement that its cumulative effort will amount to an achievement worth the struggle, and the tax investment, of a decade in power. One long-term danger is that manifold short-term attacks on the competence, credibility and integrity of one government accumulate to undermine the possibilities of any government.

But this is not a peculiarly British disease. The most visible example of the crisis of legitimacy is the US. America has a powerful, politically successful president. But the underlying story is not his ideology or its effect, but the deep polarisation and explicit corporatism which has accompanied the second Bush administration. Across Europe, west and east, governments are struggling to plot meaningful paths of transition and reform which relate their citizens to the emerging realities of economic and social transition. In the west, long established governance models now hamper the attempt to renew. In the east, democratic governance and participation remain fragile in the face of nationalism, oligarchism and insecurity. Even the European Union, possibly the world's most successful recent innovation in large-scale governance, still fails comprehensively to offer a meaningful story of membership and participation to EU citizens, as opposed to the jostling, bargaining politicians.

The central problem is that reforming governments must rely on the received authority of office to take the decisions needed to change outcomes more widely in society. But the tenor of the times is anti-institutional and anti-political. The social change driven by economic and technological 'progress' undermines the traditional effectiveness and legitimacy of public authority. Through its actions, government therefore needs to re-equip and re-legitimise itself for further intervention. How to do this goes to the heart of how to rebuild the meaning and culture of active citizenship.

For modern government to work, it has to reach further into the realms of private and local activity; to influence the quality of people's lives as they live them, by helping them to earn a living, find the right housing, sustain the family and social

relationships that matter to them and make good choices for themselves. For the left, this ability to achieve 'efficacy' on a collective scale is pivotal to any hope of a credible project. Without showing that government can be effective, it has no hope of persuading people to commit themselves to 'public' solutions or to explicit investments in equality or social fairness.

But the starting point for these interventions is too often taken as given; the modern construction of individual citizens and their rights and interests implicitly assumes each of us is separate, bounded, and engaging with government as a separate edifice with which we make a contract in return for protection and support.

The reality, though, is that, even from before birth, our lives are strongly interdependent. We depend not only on others for our own sense of wellbeing and fulfilment, but also on the public realm; shared spaces, services, norms and mass behaviours in order to live our own lives well. Thus our life-goals, behaviours and perceptions are subject to strong social influences, and our basic security rests on the existence of a civic infrastructure of institutions, rules and shared expectations without which complex modern societies could not function at all. The challenge is somehow to make this interdependence extend in two directions simultaneously. First, towards a construction of citizenship which values membership in a larger whole without sacrificing individuality or choice. Second, towards governance which is able to make credible public claims on individual behaviour because it is responsive, representative and transparent in its relationships with them.

As the struggle to make government count progresses, recognition has grown that imposing coercive authority on complex social problems is self-defeating (Bentley, 2002). This shared insight has been a prime mover of the debate about a 'new localism', as well as the search for models of public service delivery characterised more by choice and responsiveness.

The implication of the shift is that 'active citizenship' must become central to our vision of governance. If governance must somehow move closer to people, then people need a more active and powerful role in shaping collective life. Recreating 'community' in viable forms is becoming a holy grail for mainstream politics, a source of sanctuary from exposure to the global market, and a potential source of belonging and authentic relationships in an increasingly impersonal world. Citizenship is assumed to be vital to this task.

As Alan Finlayson skilfully shows in this issue, this shift is gathering ground in Britain (Finlayson, 2004). Citizenship is emerging in several key policy areas and a new generation of proposals is appearing, designed to create more direct opportunities for people to participate in localised public decision-making (Blunkett, 2001, 2003). A closer connection between people and some key institutions is

welcome. But we would be optimistic in the extreme to think that simply applying time-honoured methods of formal representation and voting to a wider spread of institutions is likely to engage a critical mass of the population. The logic is that police forces, schools, councils and so on could become more visibly responsive, and that more direct participation in deliberating over the complexities and dilemmas of public decisions would spread a new found enthusiasm among a currently disengaged public. As a sole basis for political renewal, this is a slender hope.

The ongoing debate about social capital is closely related. Informal bonds of trust and co-operation are now recognised as a personal, economic and public asset. But social capital is still treated as a kind of magic fairy dust which can somehow be sprinkled deftly across the areas which need it most. The connections between collective choice, public leadership, the allocation of resources and the existence of trust and co-operation are not yet strong enough to count in clarifying policy decisions.

The more basic problem, however, is that these efforts will always be marginal and piecemeal if they do not connect to a more central strand in the narrative of progress offered by politics. It is indeed true that our civic fabric needs to be strengthened, and that participation in a shared public culture should be a reasonable expectation for society on any individual. But all too often such expectations fall on outsiders; hence the persistent critique that a 'rights and responsibilities' agenda falls disproportionately on the vulnerable or disadvantaged. This charge applies to the extension of conditionality to welfare payments, to the enforcement of parental responsibilities on wayward or truanting children, and to compulsory language and loyalty conditions for new immigrants.

I do not believe this is a deliberate conspiracy by leading politicians to hammer the poor. It is more likely that this emphasis is the result of an imbalance in the way we treat the issues. There is growing acceptance that society needs ways to define and maintain minimum expectations of people's behaviour and contribution as part of their status as citizens. But there is a chasm at the core of the debate; while politicians are becoming more confident in addressing the edges of acceptable behaviour, we do not have a public vocabulary for addressing fully the nature of the good lives which people are trying to create for themselves.

When we turn to core aspirations on which politics might draw in crafting their own narratives of progress, the available range can seem pitifully constrained. Individual, family, community and nation are all invoked, but usually in non-specific terms. Both explicit ideology and religion are carefully avoided in public language, as are spiritual or 'non-mainstream' values. One result is that 'choice' assumes a rhetorical supremacy. Another is that political contest is increasingly cloaked in a bland sludge of indistinguishable language. The most important source of explanation for this is

that today's politicians are unable to address fully the nature and impact of contemporary capitalism on the quality of our lives.

It is true, as many critics have argued, that the Third Way of the late 1990s refused to offer a full-blooded structural account of markets and their outcomes. It is unlikely that this is because its proponents saw no tensions within the overlapping objectives of their project, but that there was little available in the way of grand synthesis that was not self-defeating because it argued the prospects of meaningful reform to a standstill. Many of the most trenchant critics failed to engage with the pragmatic compromises involved in doing anything in such an environment. The dismissal of Blair, Clinton, Schroeder and the rest as having sold the pass to global capitalism in the pursuit of power did as much to help define a position for the 'radical' left critique as to shed light on the dilemmas of governance and decision-making in today's world.

But despite the overblown critique, it is also true that the fight to capture the centre ground by connecting with the 'aspirational' voter left progressive politics hedged in on narrow ground. By accepting the premise that 'getting on' in today's consumer society is the main criterion by which citizens will assess how well government is helping them, politics has reduced its own capacity to question and influence the ways in which aspirations themselves are formed and shaped.

In his cogent new attack on growth economics, the Australian economist Clive Hamilton lambasts Third Way politicians and thinkers for the vagueness of their promises to reconcile capitalism and community, social justice and market prosperity (Hamilton, 2003). The real source of misery and unsustainability, he argues, is our unthinking adherence to the belief that endless economic growth is a pre-requisite for any other kind of progress. Instead, he argues, we must rediscover a politics of wellbeing which evaluates the impact of rival policies on the basis of their contribution to human fulfilment and the health of the planet.

This is all well and good. Hamilton synthesises a growing mass of evidence which shows that, beyond a certain threshold, people's happiness does not continue to grow with their incomes, and that the hidden costs in environmental damage, depression and crime weigh increasingly heavily on the surpluses of economic growth. But he is too sweeping in his dismissal of consumerism as offering an essentially hollow promise to people searching for ways to make their own lives enjoyable and meaningful.

The mistake lies in refusing to recognise that consumerism does harness people's underlying desire to shape their own lives for the better, not just in having endlessly more to consume, but in taking active authorship of their own identities. From a distance it might be tempting to sneer at the value of being able to choose between

the endless variation of clothes, home furnishings, cars, holidays and other experiences which fuel the lifestyle industries; Hamilton refers to it as 'the flim-flam of marketing'. There is no doubt that the vitality of market economies depends on marketing's success in stoking demand for innovation in products and services. Surely, though, the underlying drive comes from the democratisation not just of taste, but of the opportunity to author one's own life narrative.

It may well be right that focusing too much on consuming the fashionable, or on too narrow a range of goods and services as the focus of one's aspiration, is unlikely to lead to deeper forms of fulfilment and achievement. But the depth of appetite for personal fulfilment and autonomy goes far further than this participation in consumer markets superficially suggests. Consumerism, in that sense, is one expression of past successes in the left's efforts to 'liberate' the majority from constraints of class, gender and poverty. It takes forward the desire for autonomy which is also at the root of ideas of democratic self-government.

The dominance of consumerism in modern social life points in part to collapse of other narratives of progress; religious, ideological and other traditional community values no longer occupy such a central place in the public interpretation of who is achieving what, of whether life is actually getting better. In their absence, it can seem that the only markers of progress are the relentless accumulation of market-based assets; stock market indices, property prices, disposable income, even qualifications, are now subject to obsessional interest as clues to how we are getting on. For all the emphasis on sudden change and novelty, the underlying framework of progress rests heavily on a form of linear incrementalism, heading in small steps towards a nirvana which never arrives. This model of change fits neatly with the forms of intervention and managed improvement with which modern government is most comfortable.

But the growth of market freedom has not only produced mass participation in ever more frenetic shopping; it has also fuelled the birth of new moral energies and social movements, from environmentalism to anti-sweatshop campaigns, the new global protest movements to Adbusters' satirical subversion of the advertising industry. A growing proportion of us would like to participate in 'ethical' consumption choices. A new report by Datamonitor (a consumer research organisation) shows that more than 3 million British adults have now made the choice to trade off extra income for a better quality of life. The point is not that a consumer society can regulate itself spontaneously, but that this social change is constantly creating political conflict and shaping issues in which politics could be sharing a lead. But beyond a handful of examples, such as the alliance between the UK government and a swathe of global campaigning groups on third world debt relief, there is little in mainstream politics which engages creatively with this new environment.

There is a potential synthesis here, offering the possibility of constructing political programmes which carry far greater resonance with most people's experience of everyday life, while enabling forms of participation and collective choice which themselves strengthen the effectiveness and responsiveness of governance.

The route to this synthesis lies in re-appraising the basis of the self, and the practical meaning of 'choice' in the many different settings where the modern individual now has to exercise it. Up to now, the debate on the left has sought to make a distinction of principle between 'consumers' and 'citizens' in order to show either that consumerism is compatible with fair outcomes, or that there is a 'citizenship' alternative to the market model which can provide excellent services fairly, depending on your position.

But this distinction, though not meaningless, is never borne out in practice. People and markets are embedded in social and civic contexts (Kay, 2003). As a result, our everyday consumption decisions have myriad ripple effects, not just on the price and availability of what we are consuming, but also on the public context in which we consume it. Critics of neo-liberal economics have often used this insight to attack the idea that free market competition can account for the common resources and contexts on which market exchange depends.

But a reverse critique also applies; while we as citizens might often be aware of the wider impacts of our choices, we cannot separate their social or political significance out from the practical expression of who we are. Our selves are literally invested in the food we eat, the clothes we buy, the places we live in and the cultures we access and share. The vast majority of us cannot somehow back out of these choices and adopt a different view of life simply because we choose to adopt a different political position. The personal is political, as feminism taught us a generation ago. However, the interface between the personal and the political is never uncomplicated. Our agency as citizens is conditioned by the way our personal identity is embedded in our market position.

The point, for now, is that the dominant models of choice and progress currently do not allow us to evaluate individual acts of consumption for their wider contribution to the social, public or environmental context. Choice is taken as an expression of private freedom and fixed preferences, not as an act of participation amid imperfect information in a socially contingent setting. Likewise, the collective models of progress in which we are schooled tend either to evaluate it as an aggregate of millions of individual preferences, where more wealth must somehow mean more choices, or as something to be evaluated from the fixed, external perspective of a traditional value or belief system. Neither of these helps very much the citizen who is determined to shape their own life, but aware of her potential contribution to the wider systems on which she depends.

For the individual citizen, it is impossible to segment our lives neatly between public and private compartments. It is more accurate, and more productive, to see individual choices and activities as carrying different dimensions simultaneously. We may choose a place to live, to shop, a school, a mode of transport, a political party on grounds of personal preference; but we will often be aware at the same time of the way in which such micro-decisions might contribute to cumulative social outcomes as well. Our informal social relationships are often chosen or developed for personal, private or economic reasons, but they will also reflect and in turn shape our view of the civic world, the horizons of our understanding of public issues, and so on.

Not only do these choices have consequences for others, but the influences on most of the choices are also intensely social; the only way in which most of us know how to evaluate such goods is in comparison to those consumed or accessed by others; this is as true of educational outcomes (at least as they are currently measured) as it is of the trainers we wear.

The challenge, then, is for politics to offer citizens ways in which their own personal choices can deepen the forms of achievement and satisfaction they are able to achieve, and in the process contribute to the vitality, fairness or sustainability of the wider context we all inhabit. In other words, politics must enable people to become better citizens while becoming more active shapers of their own personal stories.

This bridge between the personal and the political remains one of the greatest weaknesses in the offerings of the current government. Despite the persistent rhetorical emphasis on rights and responsibilities, New Labour's current approach to public service reform fails to make clear what role people at the front line – whether user or provider – play in creating better outcomes.

So while many people recognise the priority of better schools and healthcare, safer neighbourhoods, better support for children and young people and so on, it remains unclear exactly how they can contribute apart from waiting for the politicians 'to deliver'. Reinforcing this expectation encourages both the tendency to be disappointed by the modesty of the results, and the distinction which has grown up between 'politics' and the rest of life.

Much of Labour's social policy so far has rested on the argument that in a more open, competitive society, investing in the capabilities of the individual to participate is the best way to equip citizens to thrive. This explains the emphasis on paid work, on education and lifelong learning, and on forms of social inclusion which go beyond the straightforward relief of poverty. To enrich the possibilities of citizenship, this account now needs to go beyond investing in the individual and address more fully the social and institutional influences on wellbeing. In other words, we need to

strengthen our understanding of the conditions under which active citizenship can be exercised and the ways in which a stronger public realm enriches life satisfaction.

Better health, better learning, better employability, better parenting, more responsible saving, more time and energy to participate in culture and look out for our neighbours should all be positively correlated. The question is whether politics can create an overlay between the satisfaction of individual aspirations and the renewal of collective resources and capabilities. In other words, the process of shaping the self has to be intertwined with the recreation of common resources and institutions which make society fair and sustainable, and where people can share in taking responsibility for solving public problems by adapting their own behaviour. Given that it means engaging with people's core beliefs and identity-shaping decisions, the legitimacy of intervention in people's everyday culture is also a major issue.

This needs a very ambitious approach to building the systems of organisation used to co-ordinate services and regulate public behaviour. It requires radical innovation in governance, but also in thinking – the mental models used to conceptualise the relationship between service users and providers, citizens and institutions, in order to understand how complex, large scale institutions can adapt through decentralised decision-making and learning (Bentley and Wilsdon, 2003).

Even more important, it needs concrete political expression. The reform and evolution of institutions must be motivated by goals and values which are visible and tangible to citizens, provide urgency and impetus to the process, and create frames of reference within which to evaluate progress. These issues lie in the contested domain between state and citizen, market and civil society; they are the places where individual behaviour, private markets, public provision and social influence intersect. Because they revolve around the bread and butter of life experience, they are also the stuff of aspiration. They are issues where free individual choice is not enough to create lasting solutions, but where government cannot control all the variables, and must instead find ways to orchestrate collective action. If political leadership can give definition to these issues in ways which resonate widely and deeply, it could create the preconditions for responses which could enhance the practical meaning of citizenship.

A different kind of politics

Below I suggest a series of areas where politics could take a different kind of lead in tapping and challenging people's privatised sense of personal aspiration.

Children – positive parenting and child-friendly communities

Despite the existing emphasis on improving schooling and tackling child poverty, there is enormous potential for an agenda which tackles the wider influences on children's wellbeing and life chances, from air quality and road traffic to public

spaces, access to culture and physical exercise. Rebuilding the civic infrastructure around the potential of children to thrive from the earliest years on offers a focus which could tap both parental aspiration and the widespread sense that shared expectations and mutual support for child-rearing are the foundation of a decent society.

Asking how we assemble the full range of resources needed for children to achieve their potential is another way of defining the meaning of citizenship in the twenty-first century. It cannot be achieved without adults making a collective choice to give time, effort and care alongside services and financial support. Policy applications range from a dramatic rise in the profile of public parks and local recreation, linking parental involvement more directly with primary schools and local community decision-making, for example by creating local time-banks managed from children's centres and schools, to giving children proxy votes (see Thomas, 2003) and further strengthening support for parents' flexibility at work. Tax relief for time spent on active parenting is another radical but intriguing option.

Good work

Work is the primary basis of identity for tens of millions, yet the quality of everyday work has not yet become the subject of mainstream political debate, despite its profile in lifestyle media features and popular culture. While public policy still revolves around encouraging work and regulating minimum standards, the experience of working life is increasingly dominated by issues of time, stress and lack of autonomy. While politicians talk the language of flexibility and lifelong learning, the existing debate about time pressure, stress, work-family balance and the insecurities of flexible low-wage work nowhere near reflects the extent to which it influences our everyday experience. The next generation of work issues should reflect the demand for work to provide the basis of fulfilment as well as income, and the extent to which this can become a reasonable expectation for all.

Play

In parallel to the changing nature of working life, the politics of play – from sport to computer games, club culture to recreation for older people – offers a pathway to public debate about the role of fun and enjoyment in social relationships and personal wellbeing.

Health and wellbeing

Lifestyle issues now dominate much of the non-news media, but politics still stumbles when it tries to address the ways in which we keep ourselves well. This is despite the extent to which obesity, substance misuse and stress create massive drains on public finance and the billions poured by consumers into healthy living products and diets. A national debate about wellness and the ways in which it can be enhanced

should come to rival the prominence we continue to give to the availability and cost of health services.

Shopping

Shopping dominates a growing proportion of our waking hours. Yet public policy concerned with shopping, from consumer rights to personal credit, ethical purchasing to supermarket planning to food safety, remains scattered obscurely across the structures and language of government. What place should shopping occupy in our national consciousness? What can public intervention do to secure better rights and expectations for consumers? How can public policy encourage a wider range of ethical choices in making purchasing decisions? What responsibilities do we carry for what we buy and consume as individuals? What debate is needed about the use of our personal financial information?

Learning for life

While citizenship has entered the formal school curriculum, we are still some way from the debate we really need about the need for a fully rounded public education, the influence of role models and mentors, the development of social skills and emotional intelligence, and the practical experience of community and informal learning which every young person needs to thrive. Are these wider goods effectively privatised and subject to parental awareness and resources? What can schools, employers, universities, voluntary organisations and civic leadership do to redefine the meaning of educational opportunity and attainment in a world obsessed with the value of human capital?

Open governance

What characteristics do our governance institutions need to be responsive and legitimate in a world of data-sharing, international security risks, personalised service provision and generalised distrust? Can reform help to revalidate public institutions by making them radically more open and transparent, on everything from public appointments to disclosure of personal data? How far can the agenda for direct public involvement in decision-making and risk assessment be taken? What role does media behaviour and transparency play in strengthening public deliberation and expectations of institutional behaviour?

In all these areas specific policies are already being proposed, debated and implemented. But examining their relative merits in the current context misses the point. The issue underpinning these themes is the extent to which solutions rest not just on devising new state interventions, but achieving change in the culture and behaviour of the public at large, and of many different non-state institutions.

In every case, the chances of positive outcomes seem much higher when the individual is seen as a demanding, informed agent of their own solution. Active

citizens are the 'co-producers' of their own outcomes, acting in concert with the public resources made available to them and the social contexts of which they are a part (Goss, 2001). This kind of citizenship is not brought about by creating more opportunities for formal deliberation, although that might help. It arises from stimulating and harnessing the universal desire to shape our own surroundings and to have sovereignty over our selves. Only if politics can make the public a meaningful part of our creation of self, and not an imposition from beyond, will it unlock the potential for our collective action to shape the boundaries of economic competition.

The next generation of domestic politics is likely to revolve partly around a politics of public behaviour. Behind the traditional issues of macroeconomic management, public service improvement and law and order, we can now see clearly emerging a new set of political issues which have a huge and direct influence on quality of life for millions of people, but which are not susceptible to the traditional forms of public investment and intervention. They range from obesity and smoking to antisocial behaviour and parenting, pensions saving to lifelong learning, household recycling to public transport use. The effectiveness of government, and therefore the credibility of politics, rests on finding ways to make the 'free' individual behaviour of tens of millions of people combine to produce cumulative outcomes.

If the tools used to effect behavioural change rely only on an extension of the state's existing powers to coerce and regulate, under the banner of responsible citizenship, it is unlikely that the proponents of the policies will enjoy much legitimacy from their recipients. But the only way to solve the political problems ranged ahead of us is to find a way of activating and channelling widespread public responsibility and initiative.

A political vision capable of engaging wider society more fully must also be able to offer more substantive visions of good living. In a setting where traditional forms of authority continue to wane, traditional definitions of what makes a good life are also in dramatic decline. The political opportunity is to connect the ideal of shaping one's own life as a project with the self-renewing capacity of the wider systems – social, economic, institutional, reproductive, ecological – on which we each depend.

Such an investment in active citizenship will not solve the problems thrown up by a complex world or the tensions and injustices created by capitalist economies. But it has a better chance of creating shared capabilities and forms of political engagement which can respond to them. If government can strengthen its own contribution to these shared capacities through the way it handles its everyday interactions with citizens, and the way it understands what they are trying to get out of life, it has a far better chance of persuading them to give their time and attention back to revitalising the frayed processes of political decision-making.

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