

The Politics of Optimism

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Abstract

The Autumn Statement in November 2011 indicated that standards of living in Britain will remain low and even falling for several years to come. Traditional thinking aligns economic growth with happiness. Conclusion: we're in for a long dose of unhappiness. But the outlook for Britain need not be depressing. If governments, organisations and individuals responded with a new way of thinking, it would boost happiness and well-being

This Research Note examines that new thinking, and shows how the government's stalled Big Society programme can be revived by being erected upon four key principles: optimism, trust, goodness and proactive policy. If it does so, Britain will come through the current economic difficulties a stronger and more cohesive society, as well as a happier and healthier one.

Throughout history, crises have been occasions either for loss of nerve and malaise, or they have been the catalyst for change. The financial and economic crisis, which is likely to be with us for the next ten years, could be exactly what the country has needed to shift towards new paradigms of thought and action. The next few months present the last chance for Cameron and the Coalition government to define its domestic agenda. It needs to build its platform on the four solid legs outlined below.

1. British Governments That Make a Difference

Most governments try to make a difference to the course of history, but only a very few succeed. The fate of most is to make big claims, to indulge in a series of 'relaunches' of ever-diminishing credibility, and to leave office having tinkered piecemeal with policy amidst jeers of 'wasted opportunities'.

Three Transformative Governments

In the 20th century, only three peacetime governments in Britain could be said to have changed the policy agenda. The first was the Liberal government of 1908-14 which set up an embryonic welfare state, principally by the National Insurance Act of 1911. Second, the Labour government under Clement Attlee from 1945-51 built on this work and established the modern welfare state and full employment, and nationalised large swathes of the British economy.

Over the next 13 years, the Conservative governments of 1951-64 broadly continued with the Attlee settlement. They thus consolidated what later came to be known as the 'post-war consensus', which had been foreshadowed by the term 'Butleskillism', an amalgam of the names of Attlee's Chancellor, Hugh Gaitskell, and R A Butler, the Conservative Chancellor who succeeded him after the 1951 election.¹

When Labour returned to power in 1964 under its new leader Harold Wilson, the expectation was that it would take the country in a dramatic new direction. Wilson promised to kick-start the modernisation of Britain through centralised planning, science and technology. Despite having six years in office, he singularly failed. His government made most impact not as expected in the economic and industrial spheres, but in social policy, with a series of liberal policies in tune with the spirit of the decade. Ted Heath came to office at the head of a Tory government in 1970 with a similar determination to galvanise Britain, fast earning a reputation as the 'sick man of Europe', with sluggish growth. He instituted a whole series of dramatic organisational and economic reforms, which again failed to make any enduring impact. Within a few years of the fall of his government in 1974 most of these reforms had been undone, bar one, the most controversial of all for the Conservative Party over the next 40 years: Britain's entry into the European Union.

Margaret Thatcher's government from 1979-90 in contrast was the third and final 20th century government to make an enduring impact. She decisively unpicked the Keynesian social democratic consensus established by Attlee, replacing it with a more free-market economy, privatising many state-owned monopolies, cutting back on union power and abandoning the commitment to full employment. John Major's government from 1990-97, like the predecessor Conservative governments of 1951-64, can best be understood as an addendum to the defining government that had preceded it, contributing some new policies and emphases, but without substantially altering the direction of policy.

Tony Blair came to power in 1997 with a very clear determination to lead "one of the great, agenda-changing governments of British history".² He was blessed with benefits few incoming Prime Ministers have ever enjoyed in Britain: a strong economy, a united party, a landslide victory, and a divided and demoralised opposition. He promised to build a 'new Britain', spearheaded by a new-style 'New Labour' party, which had abandoned Labour's traditional antipathy to free-market capitalism. In its place was a new determination to ensure that economic growth was channelled better into ensuring a more socially just country. His years in office from 1997-2007 saw steady economic growth, but only incremental change to the structure of the economy and to social policy, while the constitution, which he promised to modernise, was left more divided and with less legitimacy and popular assent. His much-vaunted 'third way', a blend of socialism and capitalism, failed to transpire into a coherent policy agenda. Had Blair thought through more clearly before 1997 what he wanted to do with power, and how to use it, he

¹ *The Economist*, February 1954

² Reference to *Blair Effect* – Epilogue

would have achieved more. His failure to deliver the sweeping domestic changes he had promised fed a bitter sense of disappointment.

Beyond mainland Britain, Blair worked tirelessly to bring peace to Northern Ireland, building on the work of Major. Emboldened by the success of his first term interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and buoyed by a doctrine of 'humanitarian intervention' which he had articulated first in Chicago in April 1999, he committed Britain to wars in Afghanistan from 2001 and Iraq from 2003, which proved resistant to the solutions of his earlier military commitments.

Only in Blair's last four years in power, from 2003-07, did he manage to define his own distinctive 'choice and diversity' agenda. But he discovered it too late to enact it fully. Combined with the apparently insoluble wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his premiership failed to achieve the success and coherence which it once offered. Gordon Brown's three-year premiership after 2007 meanwhile, was but a chaotic coda at the end of Blair's premiership. This was another premiership which again promised so much. Indeed, the prospect of a Labour government with far greater consistency and authenticity than Blair's had been a principal justification for Brown's pressure on Blair throughout his premiership. But Brown's was to prove another unfulfilled premiership, full of bright ideas which came to fruition too late, his principal achievement being his forthright response to the global economic crisis of 2008-09. We should not be surprised that this was not a pre-planned policy success, but a reactive one, in response, in part, to circumstances of his own making.

The Coalition Government

What of David Cameron? Britain was certainly ripe for an agenda-changing government in 2010. These opportunities seem to occur once only every 30-40 years: i.e. after 1908, 1945 and 1979. His Big Society programme offered just the portmanteau programme across domestic policy that these successful governments had. But 18 months into the premiership, it is the lack of coherence of the government's agenda which is its most striking feature to date. The primacy given to addressing the financial crisis, and the cuts attendant upon it, militated against any policy platform which required expenditure – as aspects of the Big Society programme most certainly did. Cameron's failure to win an outright majority in the 2010 general election, and the formation of the Coalition government that followed it, acted as further constraints on the delivery of the programme. The programme also lacked the intellectual coherence enjoyed by the domestic agendas of the three successful governments: in critical respects, deep thinking on the Big Society had not taken place. Personality difficulties contributed further to its problematic execution. Within Number 10, key figures were sceptical, while Chancellor George Osborne has remained lukewarm towards it, as have others around the Cabinet table. It remains to be seen over the next three years, before the next general election, whether Cameron is able to give his domestic policy the coherence it so transparently lacks at present. By the end of 2011, even sympathetic commentators like Matthew D'Ancona and Martin Ivens were concluding that Cameron had still to find

his underlying theme and purpose.³

How Do Governments Succeed?

What is required then for a government to shift the agenda of policy and why do so many fail to fulfil their aspirations? The first requirement for success is to arrive in power with a clear and detailed plan for power. It can be introduced either speedily, as was Labour's after 1945, or more incrementally, as was Thatcher's after 1979. But without a detailed and costed plan, underpinned by a clear set of principles or ideology, enduring change will not occur. Blair failed because the 'third way' lacked intellectual depth and detailed planning, and because he contracted out much of his early thinking on policy to Gordon Brown, who had a personal agenda very different to his own. But detailed policy work of itself is not enough. Heath came to power in 1970 with the most thorough blueprint for power in postwar history, yet failed spectacularly. Clearly more is required, namely resolute leadership. The agenda needs to be driven by a very determined Prime Minister: H H Asquith and David Lloyd George provided that authority after 1908, as later did Attlee and Thatcher. Most other leaders since 1945 have failed to provide this quality of leadership. Harold Macmillan (1957-63) proved unable to dominate his Cabinet colleagues; nor could Major or Blair. Thirdly, leaders must be capable of capitalising on, not succumbing to, adverse circumstances. The Liberal governments before the First World War had to contend with the loss of their parliamentary majority after 1910 and a severe constitutional crisis: Attlee came to power when Britain was financially broken by the Second World War, and immediately faced a new enemy in the Soviet Union, every bit as threatening as the dictators in the 1930s. Thatcher had to contend with the aftermath of the second oil shock of 1979 and economic recession, the seizing of the Falkland Islands by General Galtieri and miners' strikes in 1981 and 1984-85. Yet in each case, these Prime Ministers did not allow themselves to be deflected by these events, but turned them to their political advantage. Cameron played a good hand over Libya. It is yet to be seen whether the financial crisis, now compounded by the crisis in the Euro zone, can be turned to advantage by Cameron and his team.

Let's acknowledge too that it was easier for the three 20th century governments which instituted step changes. The first, from 1908-11, expanded, to a limited degree, the reach of the state. The Attlee government gave a very decisive push in that same direction. Thatcher provided an equally strong pull back in the opposite direction. Agenda change is easier, as David Marquand and I noted in *The Ideas That Shaped Postwar Britain* (1996)⁴ if it is in a clearly defined ideological direction, either socialism or free enterprise. The 'third way' under New Labour tried and failed to provide a credible synthesis of capitalism and socialism. The challenge for Cameron is equally not straightforward. Economic and political constraints rule out a decisive drive in either a more free enterprise or statist direction. But an agenda is available to Cameron, and he is running out of time to seize it.

³ Martin Ivens, *The Sunday Times*, 18.12.11; Matthew D'Ancona, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 18.12.11

⁴ David Marquand and Anthony Seldon, ed. *The Ideas That Shaped Postwar Britain*, Fontana, 1996. See in particular Seldon's chapter 'Ideas are Not Enough'.

2. The Traditional and Optimistic Model of Government Policy

With the advent of mass democracy in the 20th century, government policies in Britain were characterised by three over-riding factors. None form a satisfactory basis for government in the 21st century.

1. **Reactive.** Policy was determined far more in reaction to events that occurred, rather than being informed by a clear vision of the world the government wanted to see. Conservative governments were particularly prone to this failing, with their preference for pragmatism and incremental change, and their suspicion of ideology. It is ironic therefore that the policy of the most impressive 20th century peacetime Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was predicated upon an ideology, albeit more liberal than conservative. Gordon Brown's government from 2007-10 can be seen as the case study in reactive government. To the surprise of many in the political world, he failed to articulate his own centre-left vision on coming to power in June 2007. He was rapidly forced onto the back foot in his first weeks in response to foot and mouth, flooding and terrorist crises, and for the remainder of his premiership was reacting to the economic and financial crises.

We should not be overly surprised by Brown's government: it was merely a more extreme instance of the general pattern. To an extent, reactive governance is an inevitable consequence of a democratic system, with a polarised press whose sense of proportion it does not see as its highest calling. A tragedy occurs – a dog savaging a child to death or a carer murdering children, and government responds with ill thought out legislation, as happened with Home Secretary Kenneth Baker's Dangerous Dogs Act of 1991. Similar knee-jerk responses followed the Soham murders in 2002, and the killing of 'Baby P' in 2007. The policies are often hastily implemented and devilled by unintended consequences. The underlying problems are rarely addressed in governments' frantic rush to show the public and the media that it is in control of events. Governments can of course, go equally wrong by being inflexible and overly doctrinaire. But if they are merely 'muddling along', then it is unlikely to be thinking ahead and addressing the issues which are most pressing for the nation in a fast changing world.

Government has often proved equally reactive in managing its own affairs. Successive departmental reorganisations and reshuffles have failed to inspire a sense of either confidence or even competence. From the Northcote Trevelyan Report of 1853 to the Fulton Report of 1968, the search was on for a rational model for organising government. Once elected, Prime Ministers are rarely troubled by rational organisational logic. Expensive departmental reorganisations follow each other, like trains in a rush hour. The train drivers are the Prime Ministers and their advisors, motivated by ephemeral factors such as the pressure to allocate departments to placate ministers and satisfy egos, as occurred with John Prescott in 1997 with the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and Ed Balls with the

Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2007. The advice and long experience of the established Civil Service has often been ignored by incoming administrations. The election of Blair in 1997 marked a decisive shift away from listening to the advice of Civil Service, with one head after another – Robin Butler, Richard Wilson and Andrew Turnbull – successively marginalised. Reshuffles under Blair were almost always chaotic, poorly conceived and hurriedly executed, a reaction to a latest crisis rather than a thoughtful restructuring of government ministers to remove weaknesses and reward strengths. Turnbull’s successor, Gus O’Donnell, spoke out against reactive reshuffles on his retirement in December 2011: “The average tenure for a minister was one year three months and that was a problem”, he said.⁵

Government policy in the 20th century in short could be characterised as not only reactive but also short-term. The horizon was typically the next general election, a maximum of seven years away at the beginning of the century, falling to just five after the 1911 Parliament Act. By the end of the century, the horizon of government policy had all too often shortened to the next local elections or by-election, and at its very worst, the headlines in the following day’s newspapers. This move was accentuated by the chief communications directors at Number 10, such as Alastair Campbell, becoming political appointees, as opposed to officials less obsessed by the headlines in the press the following day.

2. **Calcified.** Too many government policies in the 20th century were overseen unthinkingly by civil servants at both central and local level for government after government. Policies were insufficiently probed by each new administration – because they lacked the time, the motivation or even the technical knowledge to examine the policies afresh. Time and again, department ministers failed to ask the fundamental question: *to what problem is this policy an answer to?* The rapid turnover of Secretaries of State prevented them getting a grip on policy across broad swathes of their department’s work. A nadir came after the 2001 general election: Blair convened a meeting of four Secretaries of State – Education, Health, Transport and Home Office. He told them they would be the key figures in his new administration and he would keep them in post throughout. Within two years, all had departed. A very different reading of his government appears in Blair’s own memoirs: *A Journey* (2010). It is worrying that so much attention has been given by Coalition ministers to Blair’s re-writing of the history of his government.
3. **Pessimism.** Government policy has traditionally been based upon a pessimistic reading of human nature, one informed by the thinking of the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who famously wrote in his *Leviathan* that life in the “state of nature” was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”, justifying strong government and the use of coercive power to ensure that order was kept amongst the populace. Conservative ideology added a new layer of

⁵ *The Times*, 17th December 2011

pessimism. It initially emerged in the 18th century in part in opposition to the Enlightenment, which offered an optimistic view of the world, with human knowledge, the application of reason and the scientific method resulting in new levels of progress and possibilities of happiness for human beings. The Enlightenment was fundamentally reformist, humanitarian and optimistic, believing that human nature was essentially good, and its thinking flowered in the American Wars of Independence and French Revolution at the end of the 18th century. Conservative thinkers, notably Edmund Burke, castigated such thinking for unleashing forces of unreason that led to the anarchy that characterised the latter stages of the French Revolution. These Conservative thinkers had an essentially pessimistic view of human nature, which they saw as flawed, imperfect and corruptible. They saw human beings as driven not by enlightened reason but by raw impulses, emotions and self-interest, all of which required careful watching and management by government. Grand schemes to improve the human condition, as envisaged by socialist and liberal thinkers from the 19th century onwards, were viewed with great suspicion by such thinkers. Throughout the 20th century, this fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature continued to govern Conservative thinking, and led it to doubt whether any sweeping social reforms initiated by government would ever yield enduring benefits.

By the early 21st century, government in Britain was in crisis. Many factors were in play, but three stand out.

1. **Breakdown of trust.** Under traditional Conservative thinking, the masses have rarely merited the unqualified confidence of the elites. Equally, the elites have periodically lost the confidence of the masses. Breakdowns of trust in leaders have been the norm, not exception, throughout history. But by the early 21st century, a crisis of trust seemed to have hit unprecedented levels, as survey after survey showed that trust had reached altogether new lows, in depth and breadth.⁶ A series of scandals in the early 1960s, such as the Profumo affair of 1963, had chipped away at public confidence in politicians. But it was the MPs' expenses crisis of 2008 which caused disillusionment to become widespread. At the same time, bankers were widely blamed for precipitating the banking crisis by their greed and recklessness, which saw small investors suffer, while the bankers emerged largely unscathed and even continued to award themselves big bonuses. Print media has never enjoyed the high levels of trust in broadcasters, but trust reached an all-time low from the summer 2011 with accusations of bribes and phone hacking by the tabloid press.

Almost no institution in Britain escapes suspicion. The Catholic church, long-suspected of concealing the extent of paedophilia amongst its priests, was lashed in 2011 for the historic conduct of priests at St Benedict's School, Ealing, in west London. A series of episodes called into question the trustworthiness of the police, exacerbated by its obfuscation of the truth in

⁶ See Anthony Seldon, *Trust, Biteback*, 2nd Ed, 2010

high-profile cases such as the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 or the killing of terror suspect Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell underground station in 2005. The British Army in marked contrast has managed for the greatest part to maintain confidence and to avoid its reputation being tarnished as has the US Army, notably its treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib from 2004. Lack of trust has afflicted most sports, from drug taking in athletics to match fixing in cricket, which reports suggest has been endemic in the English game since the 1980s. Most recently, the behaviour of the English rugby team in New Zealand during the 2011 World Cup, and the failure of the Rugby Football Union to exercise effective leadership or to be candid about conduct of its players, contributed to a widespread cynicism about a sport traditionally seen, unlike football, to be principled. By early 2012, it is hard to find an aspect of British life which has been untainted by a lack of trust. A conspicuous exception to the rule has been Queen Elizabeth II, who enjoyed a notably good year in 2011, boosted by successful state visits to Ireland and Australia, and the Royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton.

2. **Declining political participation.** Not only trust in politicians, but also the unwillingness of the electorate to vote in elections, at national, European and local levels, was a worrying feature in late 20th century life, and has continued into the 21st century. In 1950, turnout at a general election peaked at 83.9%. By 1983, the year Thatcher was re-elected, it had fallen to 72.7%. By 2001, it had declined to 61.4%. In 2010, buoyed by the first televised debates between the principal party leaders, the turnout had risen to 65.1% across the United Kingdom. But this still constitutes less than two-thirds of those entitled to vote. Turnout at subsidiary elections is even lower. The decline in voter participation is steepest amongst younger voters and, equally worryingly, among ethnic minorities. Blair promised to modernise the British constitution, and to re-engage the electorate with it, but he was unable to counter the prevailing trend, and there is little sign that the Coalition government will have any more success in the short-term. It would be hard for anyone to describe the quality of democracy in Britain today as 'healthy'.
3. **Declining levels of material wealth.** Unemployment amongst the 18-25 year old age group rose at the end of 2011 to over 1 million. As a school teacher, I have never known so much concern and anxiety about future job prospects amongst the young. This is the first generation since the advent of mass democracy whose hopes of a better standard of living than their parents is unlikely to be fulfilled. In the early 1950s, Chancellor of the Exchequer R A Butler promised to "double standards of living within 25 years". In 1957, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said that "most of our people had never had it so good", offering the prospect of enhanced consumer goods and rise in standards of living continuing into the distant future. But excessive spending in the late 20th and early 21st century, population increases and dwindling natural resources, have combined to make it unlikely that material affluence will continue to rise this century. For many in Britain, it may well fall. Because politicians and the media have preached that ever-increasing material affluence is essential to a good and happy life, the result is likely to be

widespread anxiety and despair. It need not be so. It is perfectly possible to be happy, indeed happier, with the current or even reduced levels of affluence. It merely requires an adjustment in thinking.

Government policy in the 21st century needs to be based on four principles if it is to have enduring success, and address the needs of the electorate and the nation at large. All four could be subsumed under a regalanised Big Society theme.

1. **Goodness.** Conservative governments have been wary of moral crusades, with the ever-watchful media ready to pounce on anything that smacks of hypocrisy. John Major's 'back to basics' campaign, launched at the 1993 Tory party conference, was rendered a laughing stock by the media. Yet government is nothing if it is not asserting moral imperatives and if it is not trying to act in a moral way – even if some of its lieutenants will fall short of the standards that it advocates. Policy needs to be grounded upon an uplifting and positive conception of human nature, which stresses the 'goodness' of man, and which attempts to bring about outcomes that improve the quality of human experience and communal life.

The novelist and philosopher, Iris Murdoch articulated this case persuasively in a little known book *The Sovereignty of Good*, published in 1970. This slim volume collected together three related essays: 'The Idea of Perfection', 'On "God" and "Good"' and 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts' that she had originally published separately in the 1960s. Plato and Aristotle are the main influences on her thesis, which was written in reaction to much of contemporary moral and political philosophy. She argues that good habits will produce good actions across society, and she advocates the value of stressing 'goodness' throughout society, not only for children when being educated, but equally by adults when taking decisions which affect all of us. Her argument bemused many traditional philosophers schooled in arid linguistic and analytic traditions, because she draws on the thinking of spiritual philosophers like Simone Weil (1909-43) and on the transcendental traditions of eastern philosophy. Murdoch advocates the supremacy of love, and paying attention in the present moment: this thinking is finding a contemporary resonance in the popularity of 'mindfulness', a technique that forms part of 'well-being' teaching in schools.

Harvard Professor Howard Gardiner makes a similar case in his *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed* (2011). He champions the three virtues as the necessary foundations for government and society in the 21st century. The test for mankind in the 21st century, he says, is to benefit not just "numero uno, or your neighbours, but a wider public". As Jeffrey Sachs puts it in his new book, *The Price of Civilisation*: "We need to reconceive the idea of a good society in the early 21st century and find a creative path towards it. Most important, we need to be ready to

pay the price of civilisation through multiple acts of good citizenship".⁷ Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, perhaps the most penetrating analyst of contemporary Britain, writes similarly about the need to ground government and society in ethical practice.⁸ Writers such as Murdoch, Gardiner and Sacks should be read more in government: they are more profound than some of the whimsical authors who have breezed in and out of the doors of Number 10. From the village school to Downing Street, the importance of goodness should be stressed as a core quality to guide human action. The actions of Silvio Berlusconi which led to his downfall in November 2011 reveal how a morally degraded inner life can produce failed, if popular, policies. 'Goodness' is not of course the only quality required by politicians and governments: but it is an essential start.

2. **Trust.** Government needs to act not only in a way that is seen to be trustworthy, by being candid when errors occur, but also needs to exhibit a 'presumption of trust' towards the population at large. In my book *Trust: How We Lost It and How To Get It Back* (2009), I examined governments, institutions and corporations which throughout history had established high levels of trust, and looked for their common characteristics. Typically, these bodies were grounded on ethical values and principles: they exhibited pride, loyalty and a sense of ownership; displayed a wider responsibility beyond the maximisation of their own narrow advantage; offered employees responsibilities and duties rather than just rights; operated in an atmosphere largely free of fear; were wisely led by those who were neither greedy, closed, nor exploitative; communicated openly with those in and beyond the community; respected the family as the core unit within society; and had a human scale, where individuals were known and valued. These are the trust-building qualities. Governments should take note. The Big Society embodies many of these qualities, above all in the trust it wants to give communities. It should have the courage of its convictions.
3. **Optimism.** Pessimism may have coloured Conservative thinking, and government policy, for the best part of the last 200 years. It should not continue to be a dominant influence. Optimism is not the same as wishful thinking, and neither does it entail a disregard of long-term consequences, which so characterised the greed and lack of wisdom of banks, mortgage lenders and governments in the last two decades. Rather, optimism speaks of an approach which is determined to see the best in human nature, and which values rather than denigrates all that is best about human life: love, relationships, aesthetic appreciation and good health. The science of 'positive psychology' formally arrived with Professor Martin Seligman's inaugural address as President of the American Psychological Association in 1998, when he announced that he wanted to see psychology change from being a science that examined just 'disease' to

⁷ Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilisation: Economics and Ethics After the Fall*, Bodley Head, 2011.

⁸ See Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World – the Ethics and Responsibility* (2005) and *The Home We Build Together – Recreating Society* (2007).

one which tried to understand and promote mental 'health'. Along with associates, principally Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Ray Fowler, he developed this new branch of thinking into an increasing solid corpus of knowledge. For many years, Seligman had been one of America's leading authorities on depression, and had developed the notion of 'learnt helplessness' where a human being or animal has learnt to behave helplessly, even when it has the power to change its circumstances. He argued that those with clinical depression and related mental illnesses often suffer from the perception of a lack of control over their own destiny. His book *Helplessness: On Depression, Development and Death* (1975) was followed by his seminal work *Learnt Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (1991) and *The Optimistic Child* (1996). Optimism can indeed be learnt.

Positive psychology is a way of looking at what is healthy and successful within an individual, relationship, and organisation, and concerns itself with building on inherent strengths to ensure better outcomes. Seligman's influence has extended beyond the United States: from 2008, his approach has been adopted by Australian schools, starting with Geelong Grammar near Melbourne, and since 2009 he has been training the US Army in optimism. In the UK, the Pennsylvania team began training some 90 teachers from the local authorities of Manchester, Hertfordshire and South Tyneside in 2007. A series of tests have shown that the 'positive psychology' approach can not only improve children's ability to ward off depression, but can also boost efficiency in organisations and enhance personal health and life expectancy.

4. **Active and Forward-Thinking.** The pace of change – economic, technological and social – will be greater in the 21st century than ever before. It is no longer tenable for government to be prominently reactive. In his departing interview, Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell spoke of the need for a more forward-thinking government machine. Policy has been shifting more in favour of pre-emption, but too slowly. A decisive push is required.

Governments should adopt the optimism and active approach. They should be thinking longer-term in their decisions, anticipating future problems and producing policies which minimise the damage before it becomes chronic. In short, we need to rediscover the entire purpose of government in the 21st century.

3. The Big Society Programme: The Record and the Opportunity

The Big Society remains the closest that the Coalition government has to an organising theme. It was the brainchild of Cameron's right hand man, Steve Hilton, the flagship of the Conservative party's election manifesto in 2010, and it formed a core part of the legislative programme of the 'Coalition agreement' of May 2010. The new government set out as its aim "to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a Big Society that will 'take away power from politicians and give it to the people'". The stated priorities of the Big Society include giving powers back to communities from central

government by enhancing localism and encouraging devolution, stimulating people to take a more activist role in their local communities by volunteering, supporting co-operatives, mutuals, charities and social enterprises, and publishing more data in line with government's commitment towards more openness and transparency.

A Difficult Birth

The Big Society programme ran into difficulties from the very beginning. The Liberal Democrats proved far from enthusiastic in government, despite aspects of the programme, notably the emphasis on communities and localism, chiming with core Liberal thinking. Nick Clegg has been a reluctant champion especially when the programme acquired a reputation for being a device to mask cuts, replacing government-funded services by voluntary activity. Within Number 10, the Big Society had its detractors, and it "was touch and go", insiders say, whether its sceptics would turn up for its launch. The focus of George Osborne has been resolutely on the financial crisis rather than the Big Society. The cause has suffered from finding government ministers capable of inspiring those in government, still more the electorate at large, with a vision of what exactly the Big Society means in practice. The press at best has been lukewarm. The Daily Mail has been cynical about the emphasis on 'quality of life', notably when the Office of National Statistics announced in the autumn of 2011 that "well-being would become a factor when assessing the success of government policy." The Telegraph titles have been equally reserved about the idea, sensing in it 'fadism' and fuzzy thinking, and seeing in its advocacy of power being shifted downwards into society a rejection of the strong leadership offered by the leader that it most admires, Margaret Thatcher. The Left, notably The New Statesman and The Guardian, have been consistently negative. It characterises the Big Society as an attempt to privatise the welfare state, and to replace the network of local government and government-funded bodies by the vagaries of voluntarism, or by a private sector intent on making a personal profit at the expense of the most vulnerable.

The urban riots in August 2011 provided a refocus on the agenda of the Big Society. A Downing Street policy review has been in train since the early autumn of 2011 reviewing policy in many areas, including communities, families, education, behaviour, volunteering and culture. Now a group of Cameron's four senior lieutenants – Steve Hilton, Deputy Chief of Staff Kate Fall, Communications Director Craig Oliver and senior advisor Andrew Cooper – are meeting to try to refashion the domestic agenda before its critical mid-term point is reached. They will produce a raft of policies which may yet give the Big Society programme the impetus it needs before it is too late.

Number 10 Needs to Embrace Active Government

The Big Society still offers the organising idea that could unite the Conservative and Liberal Democrat elements within the Coalition, and produce precisely the set of policies that the government needs in the current economic climate. A core problem that must be faced is Number 10's insistence that actions should be autonomous, taken by individuals, organisations and communities, rather than being

government-led. The vital factor missing here is that central government has to play a more activist role to redress the damage done by government over the last 50 and more years. This creates the ironic position that government action is needed to help ensure that the role of government is reduced in the future. Since the advent of the welfare state, government policy has eroded the capacity of individuals, families and communities to look after themselves. It has degraded individual autonomy by its intrusion into the lives of individuals and families, and by reducing personal responsibility. It has nurtured the belief that others are to blame for difficulties and misfortune and that others will solve the problems, rather than the individuals and families themselves. It has corroded autonomous bodies and actions within communities, often for the very best of motives, but with a diminution of individual and community agency.

Unless Number 10 realises that it needs to issue strong commands to restore the balance and repair the harm of years of government erosion of individual and community responsibility, the Big Society will never work, and the country will be denied the policy agenda which it needs so badly to meet the current challenges.

4. Revitalising the Big Society: An Active Agenda

The Big Society needs to expand in breadth by the government shifting policy decisively in the direction of pre-emption and being proactive, rather than reactive. This shift is already taking place – the government is displaying courage in facing up to Treasury resistance to expenditure for long-term and uncertain gains, at the expense of short-term and known benefits. Funds for a shift in NHS expenditure towards preventative medicine must come, the Treasury argues, from traditional areas such as care for the chronically ill. Further Treasury caution about encouraging healthier lives stems from its concern it will mean longer lives, which will require spending further government money.

[The Coalition government and Proactive Policy](#)

The Coalition government has nevertheless championed pre-emptive policies in some areas. Before the 2010 election, Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin advocated the ‘neighbourly society’ with an emphasis on neighbourhoods policing their own communities to reduce crime, and on rehabilitation centres for persistent offenders to deter re-offending. This thinking found its way into policy under Theresa May, the Home Secretary. Early interventions have been another key strand of the ‘proactive’ thinking. In January and July 2011, Labour MP Graham Allen produced two government-commissioned reports into early interventions, the first laying out the case and the second examining in more detail how the programmes could be funded within existing frameworks. Costly and damaging social problems for individuals and society could be reduced, the reports said, by giving children and parents support during the child’s earliest years. A core recommendation was that government should help ensure that all young children be provided with social and emotional ‘bedrock’ to help ensure their future development as secure and law-abiding young people. The philosophy is based on an increasing

understanding of the fact that a poor upbringing is far more likely to lead to delinquent children and law-breaking adults. The work originated at the Centre for Social Justice, and in the thinking of former Conservative leader, Iain Duncan Smith. In September 2008, he and Allen warned of “worsening violent crime and social disorder unless radical steps are taken early on in the lives of young children to halt the slide to delinquency”.

The government’s ‘welfare to work’ scheme, launched in June 2011, is motivated by a similar impulse. Under the scheme, approved providers, mostly in the private sector, try to find work for the 2.4 million unemployed in the country. While this is not a measure to prevent unemployment, it is nevertheless designed to deter the damaging effects of unemployment on individuals and families.

Taking the Proactive Agenda Much Further

The government needs now to go much further in this direction, including in the following areas:

1. **Schools.** Under the Coalition government, policy has increased school autonomy via the expansion of the academies programme and the beginning of Free Schools. But at the same time the grip of government has become even more tightly regimented on ‘academic attainment’, by which it means exam passes. The policy is justified as a way of ensuring young people secure a good quality of education, and that none have their opportunities damaged by sub-standard schools. But focussing on exam passes alone is utterly inadequate for developing young minds and character, for nourishing the spirit of enterprise and enquiry, for scholarship and for the developing of thinking. It further does little or nothing to prepare people for the world of work, or nurture good, law-abiding citizens that contribute to society, or encourage responsible and caring members of families. Education Secretary Michael Gove, and still more his Department for Education have locked themselves into a view of schools: either they promote ‘educational standards’ or all-round or ‘holistic’ education. Trying to do the second will be at the expense of the first. In fact, as the evidence of successful schools in Britain clearly shows, it is those schools that focus firmly on values and breadth of educational experience which secure the best results and educate their young people to the full. David Brooks, author of *The Social Animal* (2011), allegedly ‘required reading’ for the cabinet, said of schools: “If you don’t focus on character and behaviour, then the results of handing out money are always going to be disappointing”.⁹ State schools like West Kidlington primary school in Oxfordshire or King’s Langley, a secondary school in Hertfordshire, show that embracing values and ‘character’ education can transform a school and its results. South Korea is one of many countries whose education systems have been redesigned to embrace character development and creativity, not as a bolt-on, but as an integral part the school experience for its young people.¹⁰ Greater thought needs to be given in Britain to the purpose of schools, reorienting them to ensure they

⁹ David Brooks, *The Social Animal*, (Short Books Ltd, 2011)

¹⁰ *The Sunday Times*, 22.05.11

develop enduring qualities and capacities in our young. Excellent though Gove's policy is in many ways, it currently lacks any clear vision of what an educated 16 or 18 year old should be like. Exam passes are not enough.

2. **Universities.** Universities could be doing a much better job to prepare young people for the world of work, and for living healthy, independent lives. They suffer from inadequate funding levels, poor student-teacher ratios, limited opportunities for extra-curricular enrichment, and often poor levels of pastoral care, especially for students in their difficult first year away from home. More than 76,000 students who started at universities in 2008 failed to graduate in the summer of 2011, a national drop-out rate of 21%.¹¹ Depression and anxiety amongst undergraduates is increasing at an alarming rate: the numbers who reported mental health difficulties rose by 270% in the first five years of this century, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency.¹² Much greater emphasis needs to be placed on providing appropriate levels of pastoral care for undergraduates, and to ensuring that the quality of student support, as well as academic enrichment, equals the best universities in the US, if the trickle of British students currently crossing the Atlantic to study at university is not to become a torrent. Again, a clear vision needs to be articulated by government about the purpose of universities, and the legitimate expectations that young people can expect from higher education in the developments of their minds, imaginations and characters. Universities, like schools, need and shape young hearts and minds, not give them a sludgy amalgam.
3. **Law and Order.** Schools are microcosms of society at large. High levels of punishments are always a feature of poorly run schools. Why? Because good schools deter problems from occurring, by ensuring that the teachers are on the front foot and that opportunities for poor behaviour are reduced to a bare minimum. The model should provide a model for society at large. The idea of deterring crime in society in fact has a long history, dating back to the work of Patrick Colquhoun who founded the Thames River Police in the late 18th century to discourage the theft of cargo from the Port of London. In the second half of the 20th century, the concept of 'community policing' spread. This was in response to the perceived failure of traditional policing, criminal justice and prison to reduce crime, and because of a growing understanding that taking police away from foot patrols and placing them in squad cars damaged police/community relations. From the early 21st century, stock police practices have therefore included visible foot patrols, neighbourhood meetings, more local police sub-stations, working with schools and youth groups and a greater commitment and coordination with 'Neighbourhood Watch'. New Metropolitan Police Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe, appointed in September 2011, has already signalled that he wants to focus on prevention of crime. From November 2012, the public in England and Wales will elect police crime

¹¹ *The Daily Mail*, 01.04.11

¹² Higher Education Statistics Agency Data for 2004, collated by the Open University, 2006

commissioners who will be accountable for how crime is to be tackled in their police force area. Here is a real opportunity to continue the shift towards deterrence of crime. The hope is that new structures sustain a commitment to community policing and deterrence, and that the tabloid cry for instant justice will not switch the focus back towards a reactive policy.

4. **Health.** Few fields cry out for early intervention and proactive policy than the realm of health. Preventative medicine or palliative care, which refers to measures taken to prevent injury or ill health, as opposed to treating the problems once they have occurred, has been known about since ancient times. Public health measures have long been attuned to the need to prevent the spread of illness through immunisation such as flu jabs, measures such as putting chlorine in swimming baths, and screening of individuals deemed to be in high risk categories. The word 'prophylaxis' refers to any procedure whose purpose is to prevent, as opposed to curing, a disease. Common prophylaxis measures include birth control, fluorides for tooth cleaning, and pills to ward off disease such as malaria. The pathways are thus already well established, and all that is required is a greater shift in emphasis by government and the health services towards helping people, young and old, learn how to live healthier lives. More needs to be done at school. The growth of physical and mental health problems amongst young people, including eating disorders and depression, underline the urgency for helping to educate young people to take more responsibility for their lives. Government-sponsored campaigns have had some success in reducing cigarette smoking, but alcohol and drugs remain severe problems for young people. Remodelled support and information for expecting and young parents, as well as for the young at school and university, would help deter much illness and lead to a happier and less distressed nation, and one that needed less to be spent on healthcare.

5. **Families.** Families will remain the core building block of society in the 21st century. The decline of the traditional nuclear family was one of the most significant social changes of the late 20th century in Britain. By 2010, they made up only some 36% of British families. Changes in legislation relating to divorce, the spread of contraception and abortion revolutionised women's place in society in the second half of the 20th century. High divorce rates and a decreasing number of marriages has resulted in more co-habiting couples and single parent families. The birth rate has fallen to an estimated 1.9 children per woman in England and Wales, a significant drop over 40 years from the figure of three children per woman recorded in 1971.¹³ Fresh energy in policy in policy terms as well as exhortation is required to bolster the nuclear family, where the presence of a regular father-figure is more likely to result in emotionally and psychologically well-adjusted children. The measure announced in December 2011 by Cameron and Communities Secretary Eric Pickles to make £450 million available to support the community's most troubled families was a move in the right direction, not the least

¹³ The Family Policy Centre, 09.11.09

because of the money it takes – estimated to be £9 billion a year – to protect children in such families. More, much more, is required along these lines.

6. **Communities.** Communities in Britain have been depleted of much of their life as a result of economic and social change, as well as government policy. Public rail and bus transport, the closing of local pubs and shops, the spread of out of town shopping centres, and the closing of local post offices have all contributed to the heart being ripped out of local communities. The Treasury can justify the closing of local post offices by looking at short term economic gains, but when quality of life is factored in it becomes evident that such closures are detrimental not only to the social fabric, but also to the long term economic sustainability of local communities. As with dysfunctional families, some money has to be spent now to save money in the future. Some measures that could be taken to boost communities are:

- Every community to hold annual prize-givings, celebrating those who have done good work for the community.
- Every locality should encourage volunteering, and make it easier to link up would-be volunteers with where help is most needed. All schools to have compulsory volunteering afternoons: those children who volunteer when young are more likely to continue when older.
- Local figures who have benefited the community to become ‘local ambassadors’, going into schools and becoming role models for the young and others to emulate.
- Local communities to be encouraged to become more economically self-sufficient – e.g. by shopping, eating and going out locally, as in ‘transition towns’ such as Totnes in Devon.
- The arts to be encouraged more in each locality, with more local art exhibitions, lectures, concerts and theatre performances – local taxes and funds should be raised to subsidise local cultural events, e.g. a weekend of free local theatre each month.
- Greater impetus to be given to the physical appearance of each community – run down areas should be identified and addressed, with the community working together to ensure public spaces are safe and look attractive. Local volunteering should be encouraged, to remove graffiti and enhance the physical appearance of the community, for example normalising the local clean-up efforts that took place after the London riots, which showed the public’s appetite to improve their locality, given the leadership.
- Each community to make more of its own local history as a way of imparting pride and shared identity, with local history walks and more signs on historical buildings and spaces to nurture curiosity and deepen an understanding of the past.

- Annual street parties to be instituted as a way encouraging collective action and rebuilding friendships with neighbours and streets.
 - Non-political local representatives to be established, responsible for small 'ward' areas to act as a conduit between residents and councillors – they should enable residents to feel a personal investment in and engagement with their community.
 - Each locality to have more people visible on the streets to help answer questions and provide information about shops, transport, facilities, directions etc.
 - The elderly to be more purposefully involved in their communities – e.g. retired people should volunteer and continue to be actively involved in helping others in their communities. The focus should shift to asking how retired people can best help others.
 - Communities should be encouraged to create or extend gardens or allotments – more green spaces should be made available for this purpose.
 - Greater volunteer presence, especially at night, with the emphasis on deterrence so residents feel protected not alarmed.
 - Local communities should hold sporting events including sports days and football tournaments, encouraging local residents to form their own teams – e.g. the Surrey County Football Association held the 'Epsom Community Football Festival', which attracted teams from the Islamic Society, the local homeless shelter and other minority groups.
 - A greater voice should be given to young people in the community by establishing youth councils. The more the young feel trusted or respected, the better they will respond.
7. **Employment.** A laissez faire economic policy that allows unemployment to reach its 'natural' rate of unemployment is no longer sensible, if it ever was. In late 2011, unemployment amongst 18-25 year olds rose above one million, from the level of 900,000 where it had been for the previous ten years. While youth unemployment is not yet at European levels, it has become arguably the most pressing single problem that government has to solve. Spending on unemployment benefit, and on the social problems associated with widespread unemployment, is unacceptably high. A far more activist employment policy through a dramatic boost to volunteering and training schemes should be urgently introduced to ensure that every young person can be occupied in meaningful employment.
8. **The environment and transport.** The government should show much more determination in boosting alternative energy and other green policies to combat climate change. This does not mean a halt to new economic activity or investment in transport. Britain should be doing far more to become a leading provider of clean transport, with real leadership now. The

government should invest in major transport schemes, including high speed rail, with tunnels to take the lines under environmentally sensitive areas. Although the economic benefits will not be felt till completed, an airport for London in the Thames estuary is essential for the country to keep pace with major airports in Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt. Already the British economy is suffering because of the paucity of direct flights to China, South America and South East Asia enjoyed by other European airports. Even during construction phase, the cost of some £50 billion for the airport would provide a significant stimulus to the economy.

9. **Housing.** By the early 21st century, the rates of house building had reached the lowest levels since the 1920s. The problems had been present for a number of years, but were severely exacerbated by the credit crunch, with lenders unwilling to operate at affordable rates, deterring builders from constructing new homes, and restricting the opportunities for new purchasers to buy. Increasing numbers of families are being forced to live in cramped conditions, while the average age of a couple being able to buy their first home had risen to over 40. In November 2011, Cameron and Clegg pledged themselves to build 16,000 new houses, and unveiled a £400 million initiative to accelerate the rate of construction. It is easy to criticise this as too little too late, but again it is a step in the right direction. With so many in the construction industry out of work, and so many families wanting new homes, it is folly for government not to act as it has. But more activism again is needed.

These nine areas can all benefit from more intelligent government policy which anticipates the future rather than reacting to problems once they occur. The future does not need to be like the present – it can be better for all, even in the economic climate likely to affect the country for the next decade. Indeed, the adverse economic outlook makes the case for activist government policy all the more pressing.

5. Revitalising the Big Society: An Optimism, Goodness and Trust Agenda

Greater proactivity of itself by government is not enough. Policy needs to be shaped further by applying the three further principles of optimism, trust and goodness. Each will make their own impact on government policy, allowing it to be more coherent, and better adjusted to the requirements of the next decade and century.

1. **Optimism.** In 2009, Martin Seligman with his team from the University of Pennsylvania began to introduce positive thinking to the US Army. A ten-day master resilience trainer (MRT) course provides face-to-face resilience training, imparting the skills to sergeants for their own use as well as for them to teach the skills to their soldiers. This ‘train the trainer’ model has been

evaluated and has been found to be successful in enhancing the mental health of the US Army, the cause of widespread concern.¹⁴

There are six million public sector workers in Britain. The government should trial the resilience techniques which Seligman is teaching the US Army on selected groups of them. Prison guards, the police or NHS staff could be the place to start. School teachers too would benefit from learning more about this thinking. It involves learning how to detect 'inaccurate' thoughts, evaluating the value of those thoughts and how to challenge negative beliefs by considering alternative patterns of thinking. It teaches a variety of strategies useful in solving problems, and coping with difficult and stressful situations and emotions. Participants learn techniques to enhance assertiveness, to improve their negotiating skills, to boost decision-making and deepen their ability to relax and simply 'let go'. Seligman's programmes have been extensively evaluated, and while his approach has detractors in the academic world and beyond, the training would nevertheless be valuable in bringing greater optimism and human warmth into public services. The private sector would also gain immeasurably from learning more about these skills. Many of the most successful companies employ them implicitly anyway.

Cameron and Clegg, like Blair before are naturally optimistic leaders (in stark contrast to Gordon Brown). They are ideally well-suited to lead government policy in a more optimistic direction. Many of the greatest political speeches in history have been informed by a gritty and relentless optimism, whether F D Roosevelt's "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" address in his inauguration speech in March 1933, or Churchill's "we will never surrender" address of June 1940. Alex Salmond has achieved spectacular results, not the least in the elections of 2011, by dint of optimism and vision for the Scottish nation. Cameron understands the importance of optimism intellectually, hence his words at the 2011 party conference speech that Britain must not be "paralysed by gloom and fear" and must reject pessimism: "turn this time of challenge into a time of opportunity", he said. Optimism ran like a *leitmotif* through the speech, one of his strongest since 2007, eclipsing easily his first speech as Prime Minister in 2010. "Let's reject pessimism", he told us in 2011. "Let's bring on the 'can-do' optimism. Let's summon the energy and the appetite to fight for a better future for our country", he said, to rousing applause. But the speech was much stronger on offering assurance that the country would come through the economic crisis, rather than on saying exactly *how* Britain was going to do so. Optimism is a necessary quality of every great leader, not the least because optimism begets optimism: but it is insufficient alone to be a great leader. For that, Cameron must turn not only to proactive policy, as described in the preceding chapter, but also to trust and goodness.

¹⁴ Reivich, Karen J.; Seligman, Martin E.P.; McBride, Sharon, 'Master Resilience Training in the US Army', *American Psychologist*, Vol. 66 (1), Jan 2001, 25-34

2. **Trust.** It is essential that the Coalition government seizes upon the opportunity to restore trust, not only to government, but across British life. To do this, the leaders themselves must behave in a way which is beyond reproach. After Blair and Brown, and the behaviour of their courts, a higher tone is needed. Behaviour of political leaders matters if trust is to be built on solid foundations. Blaming the media is not good enough: leaders should do nothing for the media to be able to chastise.

The government's drive for providing much more data to the public about the performance of public services is a start, because transparency breeds trust. More is required though, much more in this direction. Compromising the independence of the Civil Service, for which the most notable prime ministers to blame are Harold Wilson, Thatcher, Blair and Brown, has to be reversed. An independent-minded Civil Service might be a pain to government: it is also essential. For good government, we should be wary of the 'yes-men' rising to the top of the Civil Service in the last 25 years. Public service should again become a profession which the most bright, high minded and independent-thinkers aspire to join: they will not do so unless the Civil Service is seen to exhibit a really independent voice.

The quality of democracy across Britain needs urgent attention if legitimacy and respect by the electorate is not to be further lost. The government should use the digital revolution to reconnect with the electorate in a range of imaginative ways. Enhanced websites for Downing Street, government departments and Parliament are all importance steps, albeit timid. A wholesale revolution is required in the way that government connects with the electorate, the most radical since the Secret Ballot Act of 1872. Never before in history has government been able to communicate so readily with the electorate. The opportunities digital technology offers for modernising democracy and renewing a new social contract between government and electorate are boundless. Why should we continue with 19th century technology, walking in the rain to grainy polling booths, when we can communicate regularly with government and express our views from the warmth and seclusion of our own homes? Accountability, participation and respect for public voice are all core ingredients of the building of trust. All would be satisfied by being imaginative in the use of these new technologies, long used by political parties and interest groups, but relatively neglected by government.

3. **Goodness.** Peter Riddell in his book *In Defence of Politicians* (2011) produced a necessary riposte to the perception that all politicians are sleazy.¹⁵ The expenses scandal of 2009, fuelled by media outlets with their own agendas, and presented by journalists whose own lives were often no better than those whose errors they were castigating, conveyed the impression of mass wrong-doing by most political classes. Most politicians are not venal, but far too many have been, and the 'revolving door', the process by which retired politicians and public servants

¹⁵ Peter Riddell, *In Defence of Politicians*, (Biteback, 2011)

glide effortlessly into lucrative jobs in the private sector, capitalising on the knowledge they have gained, is not healthy. Nor is the reluctance of too many politicians to tell the truth when they have been found to be in error. The public needs to believe in the good character of public figures. The transition will not be easy. Plato argued that rulers needed long training to embody the four virtues of temperance, prudence, fortitude and justice. Aristotle believed that all are capable of leading, as long as they seek to attain *eudaimonia*, which he describes as the happiness that comes from a life of goodness. A new generation of politicians, acting from high-minded values and virtues, and whose private lives mirror their public words, is vital for the restoration of public trust. Those running banks, media outlets, sports and television companies should equally be principled and honourable. Britain needs to have more figures who are truly admirable as role-models. Too many figures, like singer Pete Doherty and footballer Wayne Rooney, offer poor examples to young people by conveying the impression that 'they are all in it for what they can get'. Figures like David Beckham, Bob Geldof, Bono and the recently deceased Jimmy Saville in contrast offer positive role models. The government should institute a scheme for a thousand ambassadors who have achieved distinction in their fields, and who lead exemplary lives. They should be charged with responsibility for visiting schools and communities, to inspire young and old with a vision about how to pursue a better life, and how greed and poor behaviour are not necessary for success. A model exists in the BBC's Robert Peston, who has established a successful programme for celebrated figures to talk in state schools.

Optimism, trust and goodness provide powerful underpinnings to policies which are based upon noble principle and thinking ahead to the future. If these principles are followed we will have a government that will not only steer the country through the current economic and financial crisis, but will elevate the nation to aspire to build a better country and world after the recession.

6. Optimism and its Critics, and the Journey Ahead for the Government

The launch in October 2011 of the Office of National Statistics' consultation into well-being, the launch in April 2011 by Richard Layard, Geoff Mulgan and me of 'Action for Happiness', inflamed the right wing. The agenda is deemed to be anathema to free enterprise, a product of muddled, left-wing thinking, likely to saddle extra costs and bureaucracy on companies, making British companies even less efficient. The right views the 'well-being' element of the four plank agenda as leading to an unacceptable increase in the power of the state, and introducing 'nanny' measures which are anti-libertarian and intrusive into the rights of individuals, families and companies. The agenda is criticised further by the right as being unworkable and inappropriate for government to pursue. Philip Booth of the Institute of Economic Affairs, writing in *The Catholic Herald*, said 'the idea that government exists to maximise the sum and total of happiness of its citizens involves the conceit that government is able to pull levers to perfect society, treating individuals, as Adam Smith put it, as a piece on a chess board'.

The reaction of the right is somewhat surprising. The 'politics of optimism' agenda is in fact supportive of the family and of individual and corporate responsibility. It envisages an enhanced role for communities and localities and a reduction in the size and scope of the state, all objectives dear to the hearts not only of Conservatives, but of Liberal Democrats too.

The first 18 months of the Coalition government has been dominated by the response to the financial crisis and the desire to save money. The Autumn Statement in November 2011 shows that this struggle will go on far longer than initially envisaged. It took many long months for Thatcher to move from the 'politics of austerity' to the 'politics of free enterprise': we should not be disappointed if it takes still longer for Cameron to move equally to the 'politics of optimism'. What can be learnt from Thatcher about the success of this difficult segue? Only when she was seen to have broken the back of inflation, followed by rising growth and ultimately a drop in unemployment, did she gain the credibility for her underlying personal agenda to be taken seriously. We are still a long way off Osborne similarly mastering the country's economic problems. External factors, most notably victory in the Falklands in 1982, boosted Thatcher's cause, but the success of British involvement in Libya in 2011 has not had the same long-term tonic effect on Cameron's personal standing in Whitehall, or indeed the country. Skilful party management was additionally essential to achieving Thatcher's cause, a task eased considerably by an influx of supportive MPs in the 1983 general election and the proven popularity of her leadership in securing the general election victory that year. Essential too was having a caucus of key figures within Cabinet who championed the agenda. Again, the comparison with Cameron's position today is not immediately encouraging, notably the reality of the Coalition, and figures within his own Cabinet who clearly have little time for this cause. A supportive intellectual climate aided Thatcher enormously, as did an intellectually sympathetic media, principally the Telegraph and The Times titles. Again, Cameron has nothing like that benefit to assist him.

Schools have been the conspicuous area where most progress has been made in delivering the autonomy aspect of the Coalition government's agenda. Progress has been swift because of the combination of an unusually single-minded and talented Education Minister in Gove, the unswerving support of the Prime Minister for action in this area, and the boon of having pathways already laid down by the preceding government. Elsewhere, a lack of self-confidence and cohesion in the government's agenda is evident. By late 2011, the Big Society appeared to founder still further. In December, the Public Administration Select Committee castigated the Big Society for an incoherent implementation programme and confusion over its message. It recommended the creation of a single 'Big Society' Minister, and for all departments to submit each new initiative to a test for how they will build a social contract. Finally, Conservative MP Jesse Norman, author of a book entitled *The Big Society* (2010), and one of its strongest champions, was agonising that Ed Miliband 'is seeking to contest the political ground now occupied by the Big Society', claiming it for his own.

There is no need for alarm. The Thatcher example is salutary. With the profound economic crisis that

Cameron and Clegg are facing, it will take still more time for the agenda to rise to the top of the pile. But still, more urgency is needed in the 'Politics of Optimism' agenda. Thatcher had been planning her revolution from the moment she became party leader four years before she entered Downing Street. If the Coalition government is to seize this opportunity and become an agenda-changing government, the vital policy work must accelerate and be grounded in the four principles outlined in this pamphlet: optimism, trust, goodness and proactive policy. There is no time to lose.

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