

“It’s not an absence of freedom but ‘power failures’ that let down modern Britain...”

POWERFUL PEOPLE

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POWER FAILURES

I could not think of a better setting for a debate on modern philosophy than a Streatham community centre on a cold January day. So it was there I invited forty south Londoners to talk about ‘aspiration’ to help me get the policy and pitch right for the Government’s white paper on social mobility. ‘Twenty years from now’ I wanted to know, ‘where would you like to see yourself – and your children?’

‘A job you enjoy’ was the answer from most; the kind of work that offered a good work–life balance, happiness and interest and a bit less stress than today. ‘When you are stuck in a dead end’ said one ‘and not making ends meet, it is impossible to see yourself in a better place.’

Some liked the idea of ‘being your own boss’ because it brought flexibility, freedom and enjoyment; some wanted to make it in the profession they were training for; some wanted a bit more ‘freedom to spend time with the kids’ – and almost everyone thought they could command a better job than their parents:

‘We have more options, more facilities, computers. They never had those things, not like we’ve got now.’

Money was not the pinnacle of ambition either for parents or for children. ‘Better’ isn’t better, said another, ‘if you don’t enjoy your work,’ and when I asked people about their ambitions for their families and children, people naturally wanted their kids to do well. But freedom to make their own decisions was the real prize; ‘I want my kids to be independent.’

Our debate in Streatham is immediately familiar because it was a latter-day tour around an age-old question: how do we lead the good life – and what are the political consequences? For 150 years, much of the best answer to this was set out by one man in one book – Mill, whose *On Liberty* is 150 years old this year.

It is not often to have Labour ministers quoting JS Mill these days. But it was Mill who first provoked me to think about the philosophical edge of practical politics. I was fascinated, in particular, by the extraordinary insight Mill set out in chapter three. ‘It is useful’, Mill wrote, ‘that while mankind are imperfect, there should be different opinions, so that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others.’

In thirty seven words, Mill gives us the best argument and the best defence of freedom as the great ideal in political life. In the twenty-five years since I started secondary school, the advances in the freedom each

of us has to conduct ‘different experiments in living’ have defined the world in which I have grown up. Advances that allowed some-one like me, to go from a first job behind a fry-station in McDonalds in Harlow to the Harvard Business School to a job in the Cabinet. The wealth of our country has literally doubled since I started school. Our freedom to move around – in the real world and online has been created and then transformed. The way we work is different. The way we live is different. We are part of a trade and technology network that links some 4 billion of the world’s 6 billion people.

Mark Penn, the American pollster, is an expert in understanding modern society. His book ‘Microtrends’ summed it up well. ‘Today’, he said, ‘changing lifestyles, the internet, the balkanisation of communications and the global economy are all coming together to create a new sense of individualism that is powerfully transforming our society.’¹ ‘The world is being pulled apart by an intricate maze of choice.’

Mill would have been rather pleased with that. But he set himself limits. He excluded freedom that could cause ‘injury to others’.² His notion of freedom contained a liability too. RH Tawney was right when he argued that guarantees of freedom ‘must not be merely formal, like the right of all who afford it to dine at the Ritz.’³ And this is the flaw that tells us that ‘freedom in politics is necessary but not sufficient. Here is the flaw that tells us that although we need a constant debate about enlarging the borders and boundaries of freedom, the debate about *power* and how we create a country of ‘powerful people’ is the real question in modern politics.

In debates like the one in Streatham and back home in Hodge Hill I see not the absence of freedom but the ‘power failures’ that still bedevil modern Britain. Power failures I see in the hundreds of meetings, surveys, conversations I have pulled together to create our plan for regeneration.⁴ I hear it from the people who do not feel they have the power to get a job, because they lack the skills or the health – Hodge Hill has the fourth highest unemployment in Britain. I hear it from our young people. Like the youngsters in a workshop I ran near St Peter’s College who did not feel they had the basic power to walk wherever they wanted, for fear of gangs in area codes different to theirs, or drug-dealers. They are young people whose lives are becoming bounded by the few streets where they live, the walls of their homes, and the homes of their closest family and friends.

I hear it from the teenagers who do not feel they have the power to go to university, although they make the grades and harbour the ambition. Eighty per cent of Hodge Hill’s youngsters want to go to college; way above the national average. Yet our community is in the bottom 5 per

cent sending kids to university. This is why I argued in June that we should try to achieve in Britain a country of powerful people in charge of change; in their communities; in their care; in their self development and the unlocking of their future.⁵

For those on the right, Mill's liability – the powerlessness of some to enjoy the 'free scope' of freedom available today – is a perfectly satisfactory state of affairs. Indeed it is a world that it would be dangerous to disturb. The great guru of modern conservatism, Milton Friedman, in *Capitalism and Freedom* put it bluntly. These inequalities in our ability to exercise 'freedoms' to any effect, are not something to be contended or wrestled away he argues, but something to be accepted – indeed cherished – in the same way that we would accept the outcome of a lottery – albeit a lottery of life – in which we had bought a ticket.

The left by contrast, have something more to say. John Rawls, who argued that inequalities, like the power failures in Hodge Hill, are not to the benefit of all. They should be seen therefore as 'injustice'. And if we were ignorant of our own advantages or disadvantages we would happily agree to two rules. First, an equality in basic rights and duties. And second, the arrangement of social and economic inequalities so that both are organised to the greatest benefit of the *least* advantaged and, under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.⁶

Here, then, is where I think we can detect no longer an argument about simply freedom but an argument about power. But, it is not quite decisive enough for me. It is hard to see how we can provide equality of opportunity unless we equip individuals not just with free range but the same power of access to the options the world may offer. But the trickier problem is that while equality of opportunity offers us a vision, where we get everyone in life to the same starting line of the race, it does not say enough about how we get people as far round the track as they would – or could – go.

This is the great insight of Amartya Sen, who for me has done more than anyone in the last decade to advance the ideas of Mill and Rawls. In his magnificent book *The Idea of Justice*, Sen makes the case that the greatest goal in politics is to try and equip people in society with a range of capabilities to live a life that one has reason to value.

Sen argues that for change to be meaningful we must deliver better equality in these capabilities or 'substantive freedoms.' This argument takes us beyond the idea that poverty is simply the absence of income, and beyond the idea that equality of opportunity is on its own enough. It tells us that both income and opportunity might get you to the starting line in life, but without capabilities, you will only get so far down the

track, stopping perhaps a long way short of your ambitions or indeed your potential.

This emphasis on capability is vital. It recognises that we must break out of a confined and contorted debate about simply ‘equality of outcomes’ and the thin notion of an equal place at the starting line of a race that is ultimately fixed.

This argument has great merit, but there are still a few tests that Sen’s argument has to pass. Before writing this I rang Professor Sen to pose some challenges, starting with the basic question of why he insists capabilities – what I would like to call ‘powers’ – are a better way of looking at our goals in politics than simply equality of opportunity.⁷ He responded

If many things are open to me I have opportunity to do them if *only* I could, but if I’m illiterate and education has been neglected [then] I might not be able to use that opportunity.⁸

Two further points are vital. First, this argument about capability is not confined merely to developing countries; not least because in rich countries⁹ many still do not have access to some basic needs, like a decent education or good healthcare.¹⁰ Second, capability – or power – is something that cannot be frozen in aspic. It simply cannot be the case that we get people up to a fixed threshold of power or capability and then stop.¹¹ Rather, the capabilities, or powers that people need to thrive, to live that life they have reason to value, is something that has to advance as society progresses: ‘It’s not’, said Sen, ‘that the capabilities in concept change the basic idea of what it is doing to human life remains the central question. Thus 100 years from now, they will talk about many other capabilities.’

Why? Because we should not look at the idea of capabilities – or powers – in a way that is detached from human life and the reality about the way it is lived in the modern world. In other words ‘don’t try to assess society in a way that is detached from the lives and freedoms of the people.’

The debate is now underway around the world about the kind of capabilities or powers that we should aim for in a modern developed country. In the US, writers like Martha Nussbaum have made a flying start.¹² We need the same here in British politics: how do we equip people in our country with the capabilities they need to live that life of value – the kind of lives and future that people talked about in Streatham? What in other words are we going to do to create a nation of powerful people?

My answer is easy to say and hard to do: a new agenda of civic rights, rendered real, living and breathing through a renewed modern partnership; where we ask of government, strategic investment in a some new certainties – some new guarantees. And where we ask of individuals, families and communities a new ethos of civil responsibility.

A Civic Rights Moment: Guarantees not gambles

If we want to lock in, nourish and develop advances in a wider range of capabilities that help individuals and their families lead the kind of life and seize the kind of future they want and take on the power failures I confront in Hodge Hill, then a new movement for twenty-first century civic rights is part of the answer.

If we get this right, we could translate our ambition to create a country of powerful people powerful into a practical agenda for political reform. “The rights which are essential to freedom must be such as to secure the liberties of all, not merely of a minority...in so far as the opportunity to lead a life worthy of human beings is restricted to a minority, what is commonly described as freedom, would more properly be called privilege”¹³. At this stage of the argument, we need to ask ourselves two questions; in modern Britain, what are the capabilities, or powers that everyone needs to have to lead a life they reason to value? And, second, how do we guarantee those powers with a series of civic rights, which are enforceable?

For me this is a positive agenda for the way we think about public spending and public services and the reform of both. In a range of strategy papers on public service reform this year – Working Together¹⁴, Building Britain’s Future, and Power in Peoples’ Hands¹⁵ – we have sought to make the case that we should now look across health, education, policing, welfare reform and beyond, to create a series of rights and entitlements for citizens, a new civic rights movement.

This approach can transfer extraordinary power. In the best public services, strong entitlements embed, and extend to everyone, the standards and quality provision of core services. It creates a foundation not only of fairness but of security. Our starting point, should be to look at the targets we put in place to drive up the standard of public services in the past and begin to replace them with rights – not one for one, but in the right places to shift the emphasis.

For public service reformers, this has huge upside. We all know rates of public spending growth in the future will be slower than in the past. Innovation is therefore the key to improving public services. But this cannot be ordered from Whitehall. It has to be un-locked by a radical

decentralisation of power over the way services are delivered by the front-line; but amidst that difference, we have to preserve a degree of equity.¹⁶

Rights and entitlements could secure that we do not return to post-code lotteries. Of course, they need backing with simple, strong methods of redress that mean public servants are not in court every fifteen minutes. It needs underpinning with good quality information systems so citizens know how their civil rights are being delivered, when they need them. But around the world, where this approach has worked, rights and entitlements have created a degree of personalisation, and a shift to prevention, hitherto beyond our reach.

Where then, should we explore these new rights and entitlements? Again, I return to Streatham. The debate we had there was precisely about how we help, in modern Britain, people achieve their ambitions; turn aspiration into success. I believe we need to look at the ‘arc of support’ that most people need to get on and up in life and become more socially mobile.

We are learning a lot about how to do this. Social mobility is now on the move in this country for the first time since I was born in 1970.¹⁷ And now we know that to help create a more socially mobile country, you have to do two things. First, create the new jobs that make ‘room at the top’; a bigger supply of new skilled jobs with better wages, so there is more opportunity to go round. Second, you have to create an arc of support that lasts a lifetime; good childcare services; good teachers; good choices for developing learning and skills at 16-18; the chance to go to university or get an apprenticeship. The chance to train and re-train – as professionals do – once you’re in work.¹⁸

It is in this prescription for achieving social mobility in Britain that the ideological and policy differences between right and left are most pronounced. The right reject an active government which fosters opportunities for all and propose to withdraw essential services across the arc of support for people to get ahead in life. Their rhetoric that people become automatically empowered by a smaller state is simply meaningless in a constituency like Hodge Hill. Theirs is not a vision for a post bureaucratic age,¹⁹ as Mr Cameron likes to say. It is an ambition for a post-government age.

A New Civic Ethos

So, here is a philosophy and a policy programme for a country of powerful people. A view that we must equip with all with basic powers; fitting to make the most of life in modern Britain; backed by real rights

and entitlements; an arc of rights that would help people get on in life; to live a life they have reason to value.

But even this is not quite enough for me. If the power failures I see in Hodge Hill have taught me one thing, it is that to render new rights real, we must match public investment from government with an ask of individuals, families and communities; a new ethos of responsibility.

My argument is philosophical and practical. Both are important if we are to avoid the trap of thinking that ‘giving power to people’ is simply about dissolving the state. Creating powerful people will not only require the state to create rights as I argued above; it will also require the state to help nourish community life, and enable the fulfilment of certain responsibilities.

Amartya Sen is amongst those who acknowledge that community is absolutely key to developing a society of ‘powerful people.’ In our interview, he puts it thus:

I think that so many of our abilities to do things depend on interaction with each other. Many of these require organisation which is often difficult at a bureaucratic level to do...without the help of *local* organisations and so forth. And that’s so important in the context like town living, inner city existence whether in Europe or America.

Take the basic power to move around freely. Peaceful streets, as any police officer will tell you, do not come from effective policing alone. They come from a strong partnership between the police and the community. And in communities that are peaceful, local leaders are better prepared to come forward and lead the kind of change that makes a place better and more prosperous.²⁰

Or take the power to go from school to training and university. A path-breaking, two year study in Hodge Hill’s schools is about to reveal that the reason Hodge Hill’s youngsters lack the power to go on to university is not because they lack ambition. It is because they lack what Professor James Arthur who is leading the research calls ‘a mental map’ of how to get on in life. Our young people want to develop not only their understanding of the things around them but an understanding of the things inside them – self-confidence, self-esteem, ambition, motivation, nerve. In other words, the wisdom and insight and *savoir faire* that come from *community life*.

Everything I have seen in Hodge Hill tells me that a stronger community life is critical to helping people beat power failures. But the larger

argument is philosophical. Genuinely living a life we have reason to value, unless we are a monk ofdemands a life *in* society. And the strength of a society's bonds – the *trust* within it – has a critical bearing on how easy it is to live, to thrive and to prosper.²¹

This was an argument that Mill himself came to see. 'Civic activism' he wrote in *Principles of Political Economy*, 'would widen horizons, strengthen communal bonds and ennoble the individual citizen', who would come to see that not only that 'the common weal is his weal, but that it partly depends on his exertions'.²² If we believe that community life is vital to creating a nation of powerful people, then, alongside an argument for new rights, we have to raise our voice and argue for a new ethos of responsibility. Put simply, community life does not come from thin air. It comes from people giving something back; not simply taking away; and that includes putting something back into civic and political life.

This is the tradition of 'democratic republicanism' in British political life.²³ It argues that if we gain our freedom through membership of a great club called a free state, then it is wrong to see that membership as a 'free ride'. Membership comes with a fee.

belonging means giving. It involves responsibility-based culture of respect, not a rights based culture of complaint.²⁴

Of course it is not easy work, or a simple agenda. It is hard to be precise about why people today feel a weaker link to their neighbours than before.²⁵ As Amatai Etzioni suggests, we have to fill the gap – some would say a gulf – that opened with the breaking down of the norms and traditions of the 1950s and 1960s – a world that few of us would want to go back to.²⁶

But the question that remains is what will replace the shared basis of good conduct? We talk a lot about market failure, but there is also such a thing as social failure, and in a good society most of the people most of the time do what's expected of them without being coerced or forced, because they believe it is the right thing to do.

My argument is that this is the kind of conversation that political leaders and parties have to lead in our communities and this is not a challenge that we confront for the first time. In late nineteenth century Britain, as our cities grew with bigger and bigger waves of migration from the countryside, we cut a new social and culture fabric for ourselves that spanned civic and cultural life. Our response was not reactionary, or timid. It was bold and vivid. In cities like my own in Birmingham we created the most extraordinary new civic fabric.²⁷

The Labour party is perfectly capable of mastering this again. The notion of community, has always been part and parcel of our DNA – although at times we have found it hard to define.²⁸ It demands we think and act locally, with a renewed sense of purpose. That is where the links in the chain need tighter connection. It demands that we think about the way the new fabric of community institutions in our country – Sure Starts, neighbourhood police teams, the new infrastructure of schools – act to weave a tighter knit of community life around their frame. So that centres of local services become centres of local society. It demands we explore thoroughly, not in a cursory way, the potential for mobilising communities to help deliver aspects of public service; whether it is through mentoring kids after school, offering community service to teenagers, or expanding peer to peer support in health, probation or counter-addiction services, like the extraordinary Expert Patient Programme.

It demands we do more on the national stage to raise our moral voice about the responsibilities of good citizenship and parenting. It demands a party or two; I have argued elsewhere for a national day, to celebrate what we like best in our country.²⁹ It demands reform of citizenship for newcomers, so there is a clearer sign-up to the basics of life here. It demands that we *ask* communities to co-design and help shape the billions of pounds worth of bricks and mortar going into new homes, new town centres and primary care centres, new schools and nurseries, and not simply parachute in designs from on-high. It demands the Labour party as a party to do more in local communities to support, mentor, inspire the change-makers who want to make a difference to what is going on outside their front-door, but do not know where to start. Ultimately, it demands a constant exercise in imagination in every aspect of our work in government and out on the streets of our communities, to put community life first.

I am not cowed by this. My point is simple: we can create a country of powerful people in Britain. New rights, backed by the right investment, are vital. But for new rights to be real, we need responsibilities that are real, in communities that are strong. That is going to require a politics with the passion and the ambition and the courage that has distinguished this country at every great moment of challenge.

NOTES

¹ Penn, M. Microtrends: The small forces behind tomorrow's big changes (Twelve, 2007)

² Today this is a limit that poses new debates about the kind of constraints on freedom we should consider, to preclude the emergence of exactly this harm; the emergence of a terrorist ideology hell-bent of killing civilians, allied to failed states and dangerous technologies is a new and dangerous force. "The Declaration of Jihad" published by Usama Bin Laden sets as its argument that "Christians in America and in allied countries should be killed because they had voted for the governments who are now at war with Islam"

³ RH Tawney, The Attack and Other Papers, p83

⁴ Hodge Hill 2020

⁵ Insert reference to CBI speech

⁶ Thus John Rawls argued; "Undeserved inequalities call for address and since inequalities of (inherited) wealth and natural endowment are undeserved these inequalities are to be somehow compensated for...to provide genuine equality of opportunity".

⁷ The full interview in which we explore these ideas is posted on my blog; <http://tinyurl.com/mju5wb>

⁸ Liam Byrne, interview with Amartya Sen, 3rd September 2009

⁹ Sen makes this point with considerable force in Development As Freedom. In our interview Sen goes further and makes the point that for many – such as those with disabilities – it may remain hard to convert a given level of income into any meaningful 'freedom of living': "[If] you're less able to walk about quickly, you need athletic support...that makes it harder for you to get a job; it also makes it harder for you with the same amount of income to have the same kind of living that you could have had with that income if you were very young".

¹⁰ (a point underlined by Wilkinson and Pichett, in The Spirit Level)

¹¹ Hence the wisdom of Nye Bevan; 'progress is not the elimination of struggle, but rather a change in its terms' he wrote on the penultimate page of In Place of Fear.

¹² Martha Nussbaum, (2000) Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge). The summary of the ten capabilities Nussbaum argues should be supported by modern democracies is set out on with admirable clarity on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capability_approach

¹⁴ Working Together – Public Services on Your Side, Cabinet Office, 2009, p.65

¹⁵ Power in Peoples' Hands – Learning from World Class Public Services, Cabinet Office/ HMT, p9 onwards

¹⁶ This was the approach taken in both Sweden and Finland in child-care and healthcare

¹⁷ See "Getting on, Getting Ahead: A discussion paper analysing the trends and drivers of social mobility" Cabinet Office November 2008

¹⁸ Some facts that make my point: Toddlers who enjoy high quality pre-school education enjoy reading results nearly twice as good as those with only home care by age 10. School qualifications at 16 account for some 20pc of intergenerational mobility. Kids with five GCSE's of any grade will earn 10 per cent more than those without. Missing education, employment and training between 16 and 18 is the best predictor of being unemployed at 21. Analysis shows that those who get trapped on low skills stay low paid for life and have little access to training: less than 10 per cent of those without qualifications had any workplace training in the last three months - where over a third with Level 4 qualifications did.

¹⁹ Not a phrase, by the way that is an invention of Mr Cameron. It was coined by Andre Cerny, in *The Next Deal*

²⁰ Thus, elsewhere I have argued that respect is the groundfloor of renewal. Our campaign for change in Hodge Hill started with our campaign for community policing. Scores of my meetings documented safety and drugs problems. Now police numbers are up 50% in our area - and crime has fallen 13% for two years in a row (way over the Birmingham average). Neighbourhood policing and community justice are not simply community safety issues. They are fundamental to the fight against poverty – and the march for a more mobile country.

²¹ Thus in the 1990s, writers like Francis Fukuyama argued that trust only comes from community life and the ability of members of a community to share norms and rules and ‘subordinate individual interests’. ‘Social capital’ argued Fukuyama is quite simply ‘the crucible of trust’.²¹

²² David Marquand *Britain Since 1918*, p70, citing, JS Mill, *Principles in Political Economy*, p572-3

²³ Quentin Skinner and others have posed this as the neo-Roman school of civic virtue; the tradition of classical republicanism. David Marquand in *Britain Since 1918* describes it thus; a tradition that stands ‘for fellowship and dignity more than economic equality...[and] faith in the kinetic energy of ordinary citizens’

²⁴ Dr Jonathan Sacks, *A Home We Build Together*, p240

²⁵ Robert Putnam concluded up to *eleven* different causes – from busyness and time pressure, movement of women into the labour force, residential mobility, suburbanisation, TV, changes to marriage, the welfare state, to the sixties (Vietnam, Watergate and the cultural revolution against authority) – were responsible in America.

²⁶ As Prof Etzioni put it; ‘If you go to the 1950s, norms were clear, crime was very low, drug abuse was very low, people didn’t have to lock their homes or their cars, people knew what was expected of them, people took responsibility, and it was a God awful society, because it discriminated against minorities, it discriminated against women, it discriminated against the handicapped, it discriminated against gay people; it was a very authoritarian society.’ See [insert link]

²⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, we saw in Victorian Birmingham, a new generation of politicians like Chamberlain created the ‘civic gospel’; philanthropists like Cadbury’s pioneered, in Bournville, new designs for communities. Political movements – like the National Education League, headquartered in the city, were founded to conduct national campaigns for new goods like free education. In 1902, the Birmingham district labour representation council brought together a huge constellation of working class organisations. In civic life, we invented things; Aston Villa, Birmingham City, Warwickshire County Cricket Club. By 1914, Asa Briggs estimates some 19,000 young people were attached to youth organisations.

²⁸ Bernard Crick once said of it that as a feature of the socialist world-view, community is ‘the most rhetorical, potent, but least defined of values’²⁸, cited in Hazel Blears *Communities in Control*, (Fabian Society, 2003), p8

²⁹ Byrne, L. *A More United Kingdom* (Demos, 2006)