

# A POSTLIBERAL FUTURE?

By David Goodhart

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Britain is a good country. One of the best places in the world to live. But it also, of course, has many failings. Some of these are deeply embedded in our history and institutions. Others are of more recent parentage and easier—or at least possible—to rectify through political action.

In this essay I want to argue that this task of changing the country for the better would be made easier if a certain cluster of ideas—what is sometimes called postliberalism—held greater sway in the political nation. The word/phrase is a clunky one and there may be better alternatives: ‘one nation liberalism’ is one candidate or, more polemically, ‘liberalism for actually existing people’.

But postliberalism seeks to acknowledge the achievements and ascendancy of liberalism in recent decades while also capturing a sense of moving beyond it, of maturing into something more robust that can address concerns that are neglected by, indeed sometimes exacerbated by, mainstream liberalism.

Postliberalism is not a policy or political programme, it is more like an ideology or worldview—it tells a story about what Britain looks like today, where it has gone wrong and the attitudes, assumptions and principles that should guide reformers.

It also has a view of human nature that aims to capture people in their messy reality rather than reduce them to a single, dominant drive such as self-interest or a desire for autonomy. People are competitive and co-operative, selfish and altruistic. They are in the main neither strivers nor shirkers and generally flourish in secure, settled lives surrounded by love and recognition and with useful, purposeful activity to occupy them. So far, so unremarkable.

But unlike the freedom ‘from’ liberalism that measures progress in terms of the reduction in constraint, postliberalism—in common with

most of the centre-left—sees people as embedded in relationships, and wider groups, and conceives of their wellbeing as being dependent on those relationships and the state of the wider communities they are part of. One might call this embedded individualism. Freedom does not already exist inside each individual, it has to be created.

In its challenge to mainstream liberalism, postliberalism wants to combine ideas from left and right in new ways and challenge some of the tired polarities that clutter contemporary political debate: left v right; state v market; individual v collective; self-interest v altruism; open v closed.

It shares with the left, and the moderate right, an antipathy to the increase in income inequality of recent decades but is also sensitive to its psychological dimension. As we have moved from an industrial to a post-industrial society most people have got richer and better educated and lead more comfortable and freer lives. But as society has become more fluid and competitive it has also created an epidemic of status anxiety and an increase in loneliness and mild depression. In an era of plenty, postliberalism registers human flourishing as much in feelings of esteem and status as in material wealth.

A market culture of competitive individualism is in some respects cushioned by a state culture of citizen entitlement. But as settled, group-based, identities have given way to more individual and mobile conceptions of the journey through life it has become easier to fail because the possibility of success has been held out to many more people. The greater transparency of the media society combined with an ideology, if not a reality, of meritocracy means people are more likely to unfavourably compare their own lives with those of the rich and talented.

And as the labour market has moved from a pyramid shape to an hourglass, honour and respect has drained away from ordinary jobs. One of the biggest public policy mistakes of the past generation was the assumption that routine, unskilled jobs would dwindle and almost disappear (Gordon Brown predicted there would be just 600,000 by 2020 in his last budget, in fact today there are about 8m in retail,

cleaning, care and so on). Labour market de-regulation and the decline of manufacturing has helped to create a long tail of low paid, private service sector jobs, and many people doing them were once in better paid and higher status positions.

Employee voice, living wage, vocation: these are some of the tools postliberalism would apply to economic life and, in particular, the bottom half of the hourglass. All are attempts to place limits on the liberal market reforms of the 1980s.

Postliberalism shares with most of the centre-right a respect for tradition and duty, plus a dislike of top-down statism and the political rationalism which disparages the role of human emotion in public life. It sees the 1980s economic liberalism of the right as a close cousin of the social and cultural liberalism of the 1960s, more usually associated with the left. The instinct of both has been to reduce individual restraint and collective attachment.

In the case of the 1960s it is more accurate to say there were two movements closely entangled. There was the rights and equality revolution for women and minorities that represented a leap forward in freedom and equality. There was also a more libertarian impulse to reject obligation and tradition. In some cases the two impulses were hard to untangle: easier divorce, for example.

But an atmosphere that has made it easier for people to break contracts with each other has also created much misery and sometimes left children and older people adrift and neglected. The reforms were felt as a liberation by some people and an abandonment by others.

The 1960s and the 1980s were not mistakes, they are just not enough. For the big questions in politics today are less about individual rights and more about the nature of our institutions and the quality of our relationships. The two liberalisms have few answers to many of the most pressing issues of our times: family breakdown, the increase in loneliness and depression, the withering of trust in fellow citizens and politics, unfulfilling jobs, high inequality and declining support for the welfare state.

Postliberalism has a more balanced view of the good society than the two liberalisms: it is not just about freedom but about interdependence, dialogue, trust, negotiation and problem solving. It is based in today's post-deferential, equal rights world. It is not nostalgic for an era when people, and especially women, were kept in their place. But it does want to squarely face up to some of the issues thrown up by the great liberal reforms of the past 60 years, including in family life.

Moreover, the two liberalisms have taken the creation and maintenance of 'social glue'—a sense of interconnection and mutual interest—too much for granted. My own journey to postliberalism came through an interest in immigration and so in the nature of community and identity and the social glue, the semi-conscious trust and mutual regard that underpins all well functioning societies from simple tribes to complex, diverse, modern market democracies.

It is this glue that supports welfare states and the redistribution of resources across classes, generations and regions. And it is usually found where the state is neither too strong nor too weak, a condition that developed in parts of Europe in the early modern period. It is the lack of that glue in many low-trust, authoritarian, poor countries that makes it so hard to create the sort of public goods and public co-operation that we take for granted in Europe.

On a recent trip to China I interviewed the Communist Party secretary in the city of Nanjing, who explained that democracy would not work in China because many voters would always be on the losing side in an election and their interests would be ignored. His reply shone a bright light on something that Chinese society lacks and most European societies still have at least to some degree: the sense of an unwritten social contract between citizens that comes prior to democracy and that both allows us to accept the outcome of elections we are on the losing side of and obliges the winners to take some account of the losers.

Societies are not just random collections of individuals they have histories and traditions and, if they are well governed, citizens experience some mutual interests and shared norms that transcend both class and ethnic differences. It has often taken long and bloody

histories to get to this point but there certainly is such a thing as society and, as the big society slogan has it, it is not the same as the state. Indeed, between the individual soul and the state are the institutions and networks that really constitute society—families, friendship groups, pubs, clubs, churches and other religious institutions, businesses and so on. Postliberalism is concerned as much with institution and ethos as with state and legal regulation, though the latter are indispensable.

One form of glue that does, thankfully, persist is national identity. Postliberalism sees a special attachment to fellow citizens not as a prejudice but as a priceless asset in a more individualistic and diverse society. Danny Boyle's Olympic opening ceremony captured how the national story in recent years has become more open and less chauvinistic and less grounded in simple ethnic loyalty. And the connection between the local and the national narrative, which can sometimes get lost, was brilliantly expressed in 2012 by the local heroes carrying the Olympic flame through their neighbourhoods on its way to the national stadium.

Postliberalism takes people as they are, it does not believe they are reactionary troglodytes in need of re-education. If you examine public opinion closely on attitudes to immigration, welfare and so on, it is not as irrational or ungenerous as many conventional liberals believe. The left rightly highlights the importance people attach to fairness (though not necessarily equality) but in modern times the left has been more ambivalent about other things that many people value including religion and traditional forms of family life. Not all traditions are worth preserving, of course, but if traditions have lasted, especially in the democratic age, it usually means they have some value to people and should not be dismissed out of hand.

As the individual has become more powerful in recent decades, empowered by technology and endowed with more rights, so the role of communities—national and local—has weakened somewhat. As philosopher Michael Sandel puts it: ['In our public life we are more entangled, but less attached, than ever before.'](#)

But people still place a high value on stability, continuity and familiarity in the way they live. And in some places they cannot find

those things and start to see their fellow citizens as threats not as potential co-operators. Too many people feel powerful and secure only in online spaces, in the supermarket or on a temporary high from alcohol or drugs.

Our political system is by no means in crisis but it has come to promise too much and deliver too little. [Michael Ignatieff captures here](#) our typical intuitions about politics and democracy:

*Most citizens don't love the state or identify with it, and thank goodness they look to their families, their neighbourhoods, and traditions for the belonging and loyalties that give life meaning. But they also know that they need a sovereign with the power to compel competing sources of power in society to serve the public good. People don't want big government but they do want protection. They're perfectly willing to take responsibility for the risks they take themselves, but they want some public authority to protect them from the systemic risks imposed on them by the powerful. They refuse to see why large corporations should privatise their gains, but socialise their losses. They want to have a competent sovereign, and what goes with this, they want to feel that they are sovereign.*

Democracy implies not just a means of peacefully changing governments but also a sense of control over one's individual and communal destiny. Since the establishment of meaningful social rights, democracy has promised to spread to all a control that the rich have always enjoyed.

This idea of control is not an illusion but it has to concede that democracy is also unavoidably collectivist and compromise-based; you cannot get your own way as a democratic citizen in the way that you can as a modern consumer. Moreover, the control that democracy promises over your conditions of life with one hand, the market economy takes away in the interests of your wealth with the other. The market is restless and disruptive, giving you the iPhone and cheap flights but also exporting your job to China and then importing East Europeans to compete with you at home.

So the puffed up democratic politician is bound to be deflated by our semi-internationalised economies, and by promising a control he

cannot deliver he generates the cynical attitudes of many of today's voters—reinforced by the higher transparency and lower deference of today's political arena. But there is a bigger reason for the sense of lassitude that surrounds our democratic processes.

My own interest in postliberalism was also prompted by the intuition that as left versus right has receded in importance a new political divide has emerged in the growing gap between the political class and the ordinary voter, especially on the so-called 'security and identity' issues such as welfare, immigration/multiculturalism and national sovereignty, but also less tangible areas like mobility and meritocracy. This partly explains the 'you're all the same' response that many political activists find on the doorstep and the rise and rise of the non-voter. And this is a particular issue for the old centre-left alliance of blue collar/poor Britain with the progressive middle class. This alliance, as in much of the rest of Europe, has largely broken down; or rather there is still a common interest in redistribution and well-funded public services—itsself harder to sustain in an era of lower public spending—but very different attitudes and interests on the security and identity issues.

It is not just that political elites have moved too far ahead of voters, they have increasingly different life experiences and interests. (This is reinforced by so-called 'assortative mating' meaning for example, as Alison Wolf puts it, that with the rise of educated female professionals doctors now marry other doctors rather than nurses.) Upper professionals, men and women, whatever their social background, now almost always leave home in their late teens to go to university and thence into a world of geographical and social mobility with a portable 'achieved' identity based on a more or less successful career. Most people are not particularly mobile and draw their sense of themselves much more from place and group. Around 60 per cent of the British population live within 20 miles of where they lived when they were 14 years old.

Our elites tend to be liberal, the ordinary voter communitarian or postliberal. Postliberalism overlaps with social liberalism at many points. It is marked by the 1960s rights revolution and the idea of human equality—and who could disagree with [Nick Clegg's description of liberalism](#) as 'enabling everyone to get on in life, without the

state looking over your shoulder and irrespective of the circumstances of your birth'. But postliberalism favours the actual over the abstract, freedom 'to' as much as freedom 'from', particular obligations and loyalties over universal claims.

Reflecting the prejudices of the highly educated, the upper professional elite, including much of the political class, are often universalist-individualists—believing we have more or less undifferentiated obligations to all humans—and therefore think welfare and public services should be distributed mainly according to need rather than membership/contribution. This is one reason for the sharp fall in support for social security spending as society has become more diverse and individualistic: most people do not believe in universal welfare, they believe support should go to those who have paid into the system or who deserve support because of past service or inability to help themselves.

Another point of tension between the mobile elite and the majority is over social mobility and meritocracy. Almost nobody in modern Britain is against bright people from whatever background travelling as far as their talents will take them, and who can be against getting the best qualified people into the right jobs? But listening to politicians talk about social mobility it often sounds like the upwardly mobile (or in the case of those born to privilege, the guilty) insisting that everyone should become more or less like them. Not only is that logically impossible it also presents a very narrow vision of what a good and successful life entails.

Postliberalism is not against aspiration or ambition, especially for those at the bottom of the heap, but it prefers the idea of vocation; aspiration implies a moving up and out which tends to cast a shadow over the lives left behind. A good society is not a collection of ladders it is a circle of mutual interest: the best and brightest still rise to the top but all contribution is valued. Michael Young's [critique of meritocracy](#) is more relevant today than ever.

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There are many postliberals in all three political parties and none, though they would not necessarily recognise themselves in the term.



Both Blue Labour and Red Toryism are expressions of postliberal thought wearing party labels. I come to it myself from the left rather than the right but part of the postliberal appeal is that it is less encumbered by the old polarities.

The radical centre is an established tradition in British politics from Harold Macmillan in the 1930s through Jo Grimond in the 1960s and David Owen in the 1980s to, arguably, New Labour in the 1990s. It has usually been associated with an unorthodox combination of ideas from both left and right, more economically interventionist than is usual on the right (in recent decades) and more conservative on social and cultural issues than is usual on the left (again, in recent times).

But to place it in the centre in that manner does not do justice to the rich currents of thought that feed into it, upon which I claim no expertise and in many cases only a nodding acquaintance: Catholic social thought, Christian Democracy, the Italian civil economy tradition and various civil society thinkers. (Karl Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* about the market revolution of the 19th century is especially admired by the Blue Labourites.)

Some postliberals have come to it through a critique of the managerial state and an interest in the power of 'relational' politics: those areas of life that are not subject to market or state, such as the family, friendships and religious and civil society organisations where 'gift relationships' and reciprocity predominate. Some postliberals of the centre-left have ended up here as a result of disappointment with New Labour's performance in office (many from this group contributed to the seminar series that led to the publication ['The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox'](#)).

In the same way that some New Labour politicians over-adjusted to the free market so some Tory 'modernisers' have over-adjusted to social liberalism. On the moderate right it therefore tends to be Conservatives from religious or working class backgrounds who are most attracted to postliberalism.

Is there a postliberal movement? Not yet, it is more a loose coalition of people with different backgrounds and motivations. I have already

mentioned Maurice Glasman's Blue Labour and Philip Blond's Red Toryism. Other names associated with it include the philosopher and theologian John Milbank and political figures from left and right including Frank Field, Theresa May, John Denham, David Willetts, Jenni Russell, David Lammy, David Green, Rachel Reeves, Jesse Norman, James Purnell, Rowenna Davis and Tim Montgomerie. This range of experiences and perspectives is part of the point of postliberalism.

Postliberalism already has some influence in both main parties though it is easier to achieve influence in opposition than in government. Blue Labour is an important intellectual grouping in the party and has the backing of Jon Cruddas—a key figure in shaping Labour's story. But most MPs and activists are sceptical at best either fearing that it wants to take us back to the 1950s or baffled by its sometimes obscure jargon about 'relationality'. As a movement to help close the gap between blue collar Britain and a largely middle-class Labour party it has a long way to go.

There are clearly elements of nostalgia in the postliberal appeal—and perhaps the 1950s were a better time for some groups, unskilled working class men for example—but at its best postliberalism appeals to perennial principles which have been smothered by some aspects of liberal modernity: the idea of the common life, mutuality, vocation, the dignity of labour and the idea that everyone has a contribution to make.

Both Blue Labour and Red Toryism will continue to have their respective roles in the two main parties but part of the point of writing this essay is to see whether postliberal ideas have a wider echo and political rationale in domestic politics (some of these ideas could be applied to foreign policy and international relations too but that is for another time). In the next few thousand words I want to provide some boundaries which others will, I hope, dispute. It may be that the whole idea is successfully shot down; but that too would be a useful outcome of a kind.

In what follows I spell out the contours of postliberalism, as I see them, in six further short chapters followed by a conclusion. Chapter two is a philosophical critique which attempts to join the dots between

a range of familiar and less familiar criticisms of freedom 'from' liberalism.

Chapter three is about attachment: the preference for the particular over the universal and the continuing importance of groups, communities and national boundaries even in a more individualistic age.

Chapter four is on the economics of postliberalism focusing on voice, vocation and finance but also considering meritocracy and social mobility and how the hourglass labour market can be reformed.

Chapter five on welfare and contribution considers how parts of the welfare state have drifted away from peoples' moral intuitions and how we might think about a new more contributory and localised welfare settlement.

Chapter six on public services and localism considers how to improve the experience of state services and how to think about the London question.

Chapter seven is on the family and character formation, and how the family can adapt to the great liberal transformation of the past 50 years, especially in the role of women.

## <ch> 2 THE CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

Liberalism is the most elastic word in the political lexicon of contemporary Britain. It is seldom used in its original meaning to refer to the long history of political struggle to apply checks and balances to the main monarchical and propertied centres of power.

With the prefix 'economic', however, it still often refers to the small state, free market economics of the 19th century revived in rather different circumstances in the 1980s. There is also the liberalism associated with the 1960s rights revolution and the gradual spread of the idea of equality of treatment and opportunity for women, ethnic minorities and gay people—reinforcing the more generic sense of liberal meaning decent and broad-minded. (The social reforms associated with the New Deal in the US and Beveridge plus the NHS in Britain, are sometimes called liberal too, in the American sense of favouring state intervention.)

Postliberalism is a child of the two liberalisms—the 1960s (social) and 1980s (economic)—that have, together, dominated politics for more than a generation. But it is a restless and critical child, and one that cuts across some of the old lines dividing left and right. It does not want to go back to corporatist economics nor to reverse the progress towards race and sex equality. Britain is a better place for many of the changes of recent decades including the decline in deference, even if it has weakened authority (both reasonable and unreasonable) and made Britain harder to govern. Top down prescription in lifestyle choices is neither possible nor desirable in 21st century Britain.

But post-liberalism does want to attend to the silences, overshoots and unintended consequences of economic and social liberalism – exemplified most recently by the financial crash and the August 2011 riots, respectively. The many young people adrift in our inner cities and elsewhere do need more support and structure in their lives but this will come as much from 'society'—from formative relationships with family members, neighbourhood role models, local businesses—as from the local or central state.

'Individualism plus rights' is a powerful and now deeply rooted force

in society, which has increased choice and opened doors for many. Liberalism has a positive freedom tradition represented in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the 'new liberalism' of the 1906 government and the origins of the modern welfare state. But liberalism's dominant strand of negative freedom 'from' has had too little to say about unequal starting points or about our duties to and dependence on each other. It assumes freedom as the natural state of being; postliberalism knows it has to be nurtured by the right relationships and institutions.

The starting point of much liberal philosophy—as well as the underlying assumption of market economics and law—is the autonomous, self-interested individual rather than the interdependent, variously motivated one. Yet as the Blue Labour thinker [Jon Wilson](#) puts it, rather poetically:

*Our existence with others comes before our independent sense of ourselves. More than that, our existence with others gives us our sense of who we are and what we want to do with our lives... Children thrive when they're surrounded by love and conversation, through a mix of autonomy and dependence. In the family, we are neither independent machines constantly calculating our best interest nor passive recipients of another's concern.*

Neither market, nor state.

Liberal philosophy stresses the great variation in human values and goals and so is rather shy, even relativist, about what constitutes the good life. I recently heard a left-wing Labour MP, when asked why he had entered politics, say something like 'I want to help people to realise themselves.' But self-realisation is a lonely fate and one that again fails to capture the reality of human interdependence. People are not discrete packages of potential ready to be unwrapped, we exist in connection to others and our flourishing usually depends on the flourishing of others.

Jon Wilson has a much more appealing explanation for the purpose of politics: 'It is to protect and care and provide a basis for us to lead good lives together.' Liberals will point out, rightly, that there are many different ways of living a good life. But part of the purpose of politics will always be to reconcile different values and interests in

pursuit of common ground. In any case, is there really such a wide spectrum of views on what constitutes the basics of a good life in modern societies?

As John Milbank has pointed out, [classical political liberalism in the shape of John Locke and David Hume has a pessimistic view of humans as self-interested](#), fearful and greedy, while the romantic liberalism of Rousseau takes the opposite view, seeing people as free and innocent but society as corrupting. British (and American) liberalism premised on Lockean pessimism is concerned with the balancing and checking of power, the Rousseau-an approach abolishes the problem of power by assuming, in the general will, that everyone has the same interests.

Of course people do sometimes behave like the rational self-interested person of economic theory but the idea of self-interest versus co-operation is a false opposition that doesn't connect to the way people live their lives.

Modern welfare democracies create extensive networks of mutual interdependence and obligation between citizen-strangers. Most overtly through the tax and benefit system and public services, but also through just sharing a highly regulated public space and culture, we have an interest in other peoples' outcomes too. John Stuart Mill's libertarian '[harm' principle](#), in which people can do what they like so long as it doesn't harm anyone else, was an understandable reaction against the Victorian era's crushing moralism, but it has diminished relevance today given the level of mutual entanglement in the great conurbations where most of us live. Too oppressive a moral framework is hardly a pressing issue in 21st century Britain.

Right and left liberals converge far more than they imagine. In both cases what is basically celebrated is individual choice and desire. Part of the new left in the 1960s was pursuing emancipation not just rights. And most liberals are uncomfortable with anything that is not chosen. This creates an ambivalence about community which is something to be celebrated in the abstract but escaped from through geographical or social mobility in practice. Human association or relationship is too often seen as a bureaucratic impediment or an expression of cultural oppression. [The right holds the remedy in the](#)

[hidden hand of the marketplace, the left in the hand of the state, but in either case society is by-passed,](#)' writes Milbank.

Why, as [Michael Lind has famously asked](#), are there no libertarian countries? Social democrats can point to the Nordic countries as some sort of embodiment of their ideal. But it is only in failed states that the market operates without regulation, where the state scarcely exists and where people (at least strong ones) behave like autonomous, self-interested beings. Liberals are not generally libertarians, especially in Britain, but much of liberal philosophy especially on the American right, has a libertarian default.

My critique of liberalism draws on sources that are almost as old as liberalism itself. Hegel's critique of Kant was one of the founding documents revived in recent decades by Charles Taylor and the communitarians. And other modern critics of liberalism, such as Alasdair Macintyre and Michael Sandel, have stressed how liberals like John Rawls downplay relationships and loyalties.

[John Rawls's individualistic egalitarian liberalism](#) starts from the assumption that you must eliminate existing attachments, Hobbes assumes you have none, Montesquieu believes them to be immoral: 'A truly virtuous man would come to the aid of the most distant stranger as quickly as to his own friend... if men were perfectly virtuous, they wouldn't have friends.'

For similar reasons postliberalism is suspicious of social contract theory and the philosophy of rights. Rights do not fall from the sky. People who are fortunate enough to be British citizens through birth or choice are richly endowed with rights thanks to a long historical struggle to establish legal, then political and finally social rights. These rights are made real by institutions including parliament, courts, the police and the welfare state.

Much of today's human rights rhetoric is preposterously ahistorical. It also individualises rights, disguising the degree of interdependence that underpins them. Rights are connected to obligations and duties not just in Blairite rhetoric but in reality. Some rights, such as the right to equal treatment if you are gay, are just the enforcement of widely accepted norms. But in many cases the right claimed by one person,

especially rights that require funding such as the right to education or decent housing, creates a corresponding obligation on another person to supply the wherewithal to make the right possible.

The rhetoric of rights entitlement is usually directed at the state but the state, in this case, is just other citizens. A strong sense of one's rights as a citizen can empower and protect but in recent years there has been a 'rights disconnect': a declining willingness of those called upon to fund, through their taxes, the rights of others. Behind rights often lies redistribution, and that requires the willingness of the strong and affluent to feel some connection to and sympathy for the weak and the struggling. And that in turn requires some sense of shared citizenship and space.

Yet human rights, as the name suggests, is a transnational ideology that asserts that people have rights as a result of their humanity and not, as is usually the case, as a result of their membership of a national community. And as the human rights lobby works to reduce the distinction between national citizens and others, in the case of illegal immigrants for example, it unwittingly undermines the national solidarity on which rights continue to be based.

But the pull of modern liberalism is not just found in the familiar ideas and practices of individualism, autonomy, choice, rights. As [Will Davies has argued](#), liberalism's great appeal in complex modern societies is how undemanding it is: it is an agreement to disagree. Compared with traditional societies, modern societies have a low moral and political consensus, which makes the weak consent requirement of market individualism seem attractive. Similarly, liberalism does have a view of interdependence but it is based around Mill's minimalist 'harm' principle whereas communitarian and postliberal views stress commitment, loyalty and reciprocity.

Conventional liberalism does not like the idea of the common good because—in all but basic things like peace and security—it does not know how we can arrive at it in diverse, individualistic societies with many conflicting interests and ideas of the 'good'. It fears that like the 'general will' it will end up being imposed by those who think they do know what it is. (I think liberalism has a point here against the Blue Labourites, who place the phrase at the centre of their project. In



contrast with the common good, the more concrete notion of the common life of a neighbourhood or town is something that really exists and can grow or shrink. Similarly the idea of a common purpose for a group or a whole country is a tangible and contestable idea.)

But the absent centre in ‘modus vivendi’ modern liberalism is hardly a clinching argument for it. And alongside conflicting interests and ideas there continues to be quite wide consensus on many important questions in today’s Britain: a regulated market economy, individual rights, support for basic social standards and a free health service, objection to widening inequality. Part of the point of politics is precisely to build a degree of consensus around common goals. Moreover, to the extent that liberalism is right about value diversity, postliberalism is on the same side—it is *not* trying to micromanage peoples’ moral lives.

Yet postliberalism does aspire to a more realistic account of the human condition than liberalism offers—based on the idea of formation through institutions and tradition, on freedom based on security and the nurturing of capabilities, on the common life and common purpose. Autonomy and choice are not rejected but are understood in the context of the frameworks and institutions within which we know people flourish such as loving families or workplaces where employees have voice and recognition.

To conclude here is [Duncan O’Leary on postliberalism’s double challenge](#) to the 1960s and the 1980s:

*On the left, it asks whether social liberalism has sufficient resources to motivate people not just to avoid harming one another, but to positively do good for (and with) one another. On the right, it draws out the tension between economic liberalism and social conservatism, questioning whether unchecked markets are capable of fostering some of the things that we hold most dear—from green spaces to preservation of our cultural inheritance and adequate time for family life.*

### 3 ATTACHMENTS

Postliberalism is universalist in the basic sense that it believes all humans' lives are of equal worth. But it also believes that this universalist ethic must be tempered by moral particularism: all humans are equal but they are not all equal to us; our obligations and allegiances ripple out from family and friends to stranger fellow-citizens in our neighbourhoods and towns, then to nations and finally to all humanity.

This does not have to be a narrow and selfish idea: charity may begin at home, but it does not stop there. Postliberals can be outward-looking and internationalist and care about the progress of the world's poor countries, but they do not regard as shameful the fact that Britain spends 30 times more every year on the NHS than on development aid.

Moral particularism is not morally inferior as many artists and writers have long recognised. The novelist [Jonathan Franzen puts it like this](#):

*Trying to love all of humanity may be a worthy endeavour but, in a funny way, it keeps the focus on the self, on the self's own moral or spiritual well-being. Whereas to love a specific person, and to identify with his or her struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender some of yourself.*

A world in which people had undifferentiated emotional and social attachments would be a bleak one and a global government would be an Orwellian nightmare if not given legitimacy by nation states.

British national identity has become more open and fluid in recent years but remains something real and meaningful. People connect to the national story in many different ways. Native citizens may identify most through history and ancestry and have a strong sense of continuity, more recent citizens may stress the political dimension of living in a rich, free society. But most people have a mix of the ethnic and the civic factors behind their connection and a blurring of the distinction is a healthy thing.

A country with a strong, confident national identity does not thereby

solve all its social and economic problems but it has a template, an idiom, in which the discussion can take place and which assumes certain shared norms and common interests. (A confident national story is also a useful tool for integrating newcomers, a symbolic pathway to belonging that is usually welcomed by new citizens.) And if we really are all in this together, as a national identity assumes, then it ought to make us want to narrow the gaps between north and south, rich and poor, native and minority. National identity ought to have an in-built centre-left bias.

One reason it often doesn't have that bias in Britain is that the national story for almost 200 years was marked by imperial domination and racial discrimination. But too many liberals, and people on the left, have failed to notice how attitudes have changed. Not only has racism been in rapid decline in recent decades, national identity too is no longer an expression of superiority. British national citizenship still signifies a special relationship with fellow citizens, at its most basic just through sharing a space and resources, but when did you last meet someone (at least under the age of 75) who felt they were innately superior to German or Chinese people?

National identity tends to be weaker among the highly educated and most globally mobile. The globalisation story about growing interconnectedness and weakening nation states is their story, partly because it reflects their lives. But it is only partially true. Almost everything that matters is still rooted in national institutions: law, democracy and accountability; tax and spend and welfare states; cross-class and generational redistribution; labour markets; the national media. If anything after the financial crisis there has been a renationalisation of parts of the global economy. And most people even in a noisily varied place like Britain still attach great importance to national symbols and feelings: consider the growing significance of Remembrance Day.

Nevertheless the universalist assumptions of some parts of the political class, what one might call the 'global villageist' elite, do have political consequences. One area is the human rights movement discussed above. The power of human rights legislation and the activist judiciary behind it has a significant impact on immigration policy, for example, making it harder for governments to control their

borders. (Though in some cases this also reflects the failure of governments themselves to properly describe the differential entitlements of citizens and non-citizens.)

By trying to minimise the citizen/non-citizen distinction the human rights focus of the judiciary, and some parts of the political class, will almost certainly make it harder for governments to take the sensible path in immigration policy towards lower levels of permanent settlement combined with quite high movements of more temporary arrivals: students, skilled workers and so on. Such a policy requires a clear distinction between full and temporary citizenship with correspondingly different rights and obligations, something that is anathema to human rights philosophy.

The other area where the idea of national boundaries and preferences is under pressure is the European Union concept of 'non-discrimination' on grounds of nationality. I do not intend to advance a wider argument here about the EU which at its best can pool national sovereignty in the interests of all member nations. But European integration does not always co-exist comfortably with legitimate and common sense notions of national sovereignty and identity. The idea of freedom of movement is found in the original Treaty of Rome of 1957 but it was never envisaged as the mass movement that it became after 2004, with the accession of the central and eastern European countries with average per capita income about one quarter the average of the rest of the EU (it has also been substantially widened and extended by the European Court of Justice in recent decades).

Freedom of movement at moderate levels, like immigration itself, is a benefit both to the movers and the country they move to. But the liberal economists and politicians who dominate the EU debate gave little thought to large-scale movement nor do they seem to have realised the extent to which they were eroding national social contracts. For thanks to the principle of non-discrimination between EU nationals the British government has to treat a Spaniard or Latvian, so long as they pass a simple test of 'habitual residence', in all respects like a British citizen (except for voting in national elections). That includes labour markets, the welfare state and social housing. It is not even possible for national governments to offer

special employment incentives to its own nationals in areas of high unemployment without offering them to all EU citizens.

Almost without noticing, the idea of fellow citizen favouritism—an idea supported by the vast majority of EU citizens—has been suppressed inside the EU. This is not a plea to end all sovereignty pooling or competition across national borders but it is a reminder that those national borders do still exist and matter to people. Our labour is connected to a complex social contract, it is not a normal good to be traded competitively like a banana or a washing machine—and especially not when it is crossing national borders.

What about the idea of community more generally? It is a word rendered almost meaningless by over-use but most people still place a high priority on relatively stable and familiar living conditions, especially when they are young or old or raising a family. As people have become richer and more mobile the chosen communities of friends, interest groups, workplaces and cyberspace have become more significant alongside the 'given' communities of place and family. These micro face-to-face communities are connected to bigger local and national communities of strangers by often barely visible threads. But as [the philosopher Michael Walzer put it](#):

'Neighbourhoods can be open only if countries are at least potentially closed... The distinctiveness of cultures and groups depends upon closure and without it cannot be conceived as a stable feature of human life.'

Community can be felt as oppressive or as an interference with individual choice. Indeed, much of modern culture describes the individual's struggle to free him or herself from tradition and convention. Conventional liberalism often celebrates this escape through geographical or social mobility.

Ten of London's 33 boroughs change half their population every five years, and figures are similar in other big conurbations. There are many reasons for that: more divorce and fewer extended/multigenerational families living in close proximity, changes in communication technology, the expansion of higher education, and in recent years a big increase in immigration.

Immigration, at least on a significant scale, can be hard for both incomer and receiver especially when the cultures of traditional societies are being imported. Opposition to it can be xenophobic but is not necessarily so. When social scientists like Michael Young in the 1950s and 1960s discovered the significance people in settled working class communities attached to stability and continuity, and how it was often lost in new housing developments, it was considered something to celebrate and defend by people on the left. But when, a few years later, those same communities objected to that continuity being disrupted by the churn of mass immigration they were often ruled beyond the pale.

Liberalism is often uneasy about group attachment: 'What's the fuss, we are all just individuals aren't we?' And when thinking about immigration conventional liberals too readily assume a society without any pre-existing attachments. But group attachments of many kinds remain strong, indeed are hard-wired into us. Societies are composed of people who come from somewhere, speak a certain language, have certain traditions and ways of doing things. (The idea of multiculturalism is partly premised on the overwhelming importance of these traditions to people.)

The idea of 'people like us' whether in class, regional or ethnic terms is a simple reality of life. Outsiders can, and often are, absorbed into these groups and communities but it is usually easier if it happens gradually and in small numbers—one reason for postliberalism's support for a return to more moderate levels of immigration. Modern colour-blind liberalism demands, rightly, that everyone be treated the same; but that does not mean that everyone *is* the same. And that raises issues about how we live together: about communities, about integration/segregation, about contact, trust and familiarity across ethnic and other boundaries, about areas people feel comfortable living in and areas they don't.

When it comes to ethnic integration, people of all backgrounds tend to have ambivalent feelings. On the one hand they recognise the reality of 'people like us' feelings but they also acknowledge that a good society is one with lots of contact between citizens and a sense

of mutual recognition.

The actual integration story in Britain is mixed. On the one hand there is a story of declining racism, an increase in mixed race couples and children, upwardly mobile minorities and unselfconsciously mixed communities. But elsewhere there is also a story of white exit and parallel lives—and what Robert Putnam has called [‘hunkering down’](#)—especially in parts of the north of England. Most people from the white British majority are resistant to becoming the minority in any given area and this has led to almost half of the ethnic minority population of Britain living in wards that are less than 50 per cent white British. According to [Eric Kaufmann](#) of Birkbeck College that number was only 25 per cent in 2001.

Many liberals believe it is enlightened not to notice the extent to which group identities both exist and influence behaviour, but this does nothing to prevent what Trevor Phillips has called [‘comfort zone segregation’](#). We need to think harder about how to lean against the drift to separation, especially in schools. Postliberalism also favours a ‘Peace Corps’ style national citizen service programme for young people, designed to mix people up.

If you want to improve integration you do not just preach the importance of tolerance, as many liberals tend to, you promote contact and interaction and a common in-group identity. As the American social psychologist [Jonathan Haidt puts it](#) you can make people care less about race and group identities ‘by drowning them in a sea of similarities, shared goals and mutual interdependencies.’

## 4 ECONOMY AND WORK

Postliberalism favours a market economy but knows also that markets are embedded in social institutions, something that is sometimes poorly accounted for in orthodox economics.

Self-interest is clearly one of the motors of economic life but the reality for most people is co-operating in small teams to achieve specific goals for fixed rewards. And even entrepreneurs and innovators are often driven as much by the thrill of discovery or the esteem of their peers as much as by profit-seeking.

As John Kay has pointed out most of the important risks we face are not handled through the market at all but in families, among communities and by government. And while it is true that economic co-ordination is usually better achieved through market mechanisms than central direction those mechanisms are not infallible and are often the product of government intervention, social institutions or agreements between market actors.

The embeddedness of markets in national, social institutions places significant limits on globalisation. Democracy and sovereignty are mechanisms for expressing particular national preferences and values, which underpin the institutions within which markets work. As [Dani Rodrik has argued](#), this institutional variety increases transaction costs across national borders meaning that democracy and globalisation are necessarily in tension.

Postliberalism is not against globalisation or free trade or economic openness but recognises that these things must continue to pay their respects to national autonomy and that openness is not always the right approach, especially when it results in worse living conditions for a significant part of the population. Moreover, postliberalism holds to the traditional view that labour and capital are not normal commodities and should remain at least partly governed by national social contracts and local ideas of what kind of competition is fair and legitimate. To give a basic example, companies that are more efficient or imaginative should be allowed to drive competitors out of business but not by employing child labour.



Postliberalism shares much of the centre-left critique of predatory capitalism and wants to counter the drift towards greater inequality. It worries about the development of the hourglass labour market and the status and incomes of the least successful and wants to apply notions of loyalty, voice and just deserts to the workplace as well as to community and society. Businesses are citizens of a kind too and economic life should not be regarded as a separate domain where different conceptions of human behaviour and motivation apply. Postliberalism wants to reform capitalism not just collect taxes and 'share the proceeds of growth'.

The attraction of the more co-ordinated and less financialised market economies of northern Europe (Germany in particular) is obvious. The institutions and attitudes of Britain's more transactional, short-termist market system cannot just be wished away, but nor must we remain slaves to the past. British business looks very different to 50 years ago. There is no reason why the risks and rewards of different stakeholders—lenders and borrowers, investors and owners, shareholders and managers, employers and employees—cannot be better balanced and 'skin in the game' both encouraged and rewarded.

There is a fair amount of consensus on the desirability of a higher investment economy less scarred by rent-seeking and oligopoly. There is less agreement about the institutional reforms required. The three areas I will briefly touch on here are where postliberal type reforms should focus: vocational training, employee voice/control and finance.

**Training.** The company-based vocational training system in Britain collapsed in the 1980s as many big companies closed or broke up or cut back on any spending perceived as non-essential. It is now being gradually put back together again but in a piecemeal company-by-company way. And the combination of low employer demand for higher skills and a government apprenticeship target often means the apprentice label is being artificially attached to some very basic training activities. In the meantime too many of the young people who should have been starting their working lives developing 'intermediate' and technical skills have been encouraged to take up

sometimes low-grade university courses (reinforcing the historic bias against the vocational). The result is a huge hole in the British skill base which has been partly filled by skilled workers from abroad, most notably in the construction industry. Repairing this is a national priority.

There is no point attempting to directly emulate a German-style apprenticeship system; that requires a significant role for chambers of commerce, which have never been important in Britain. But some sort of more formal national frame is required in which employers and young people can plausibly commit to each other through the training period. It could be based on the current three-year engineering apprenticeships and overseen in different sectors by the relevant professional associations, which still retain significant prestige (as [proposed by David Sainsbury](#)).

As Maurice Glasman has pointed out there is a historic gulf between professions and trades—becoming an accountant is dependent on acquiring a set of skills and standards of behaviour, becoming a builder is not. We require a trickle down of professional-type standards to more ordinary jobs rather than regarding university degrees as the only path to well paid and respected employment.

For much of the postwar period it was possible to move from GCSE-level education into professional jobs—engineer, banker and so on—through further study but without having to go to university for three years. The narrowing of that route and the creation of a kind of graduate/non-graduate apartheid has surely helped to diminish occupational mobility. This is a complex field and one should not be dogmatic. But the knowledge economy still needs well-motivated technicians and cleaners. Too much of the decision-making here has been taken by people looking down from the academic pinnacle rather than looking up with some understanding of how non-academic post-school training, and personal motivation, works.

**Voice.** The employee voice is too weak in British business. It is neither possible nor desirable either to return to the powerful but oppositional union regime of the 1970s nor to graft on the system of co-determination and works councils found in Germany.

Nonetheless the unqualified right to manage has not produced obviously first-rate outcomes over the past 25 years and some qualification on it through specific requirements to involve employees over takeovers, significant redundancies and, in larger companies, the pay of senior managers/directors would help to better align the interests of ordinary workers with senior staff and shareholders.

Even more important than a formal 'voice' is some degree of control over one's working conditions and a sense of doing work that is worthwhile and useful. These are the factors that produce happier and better-motivated employees, according to most surveys on job satisfaction. More powerful incentives to create John Lewis-style partnerships and profit-sharing schemes would also help to make the economy more productive.

**Finance.** There is now a broad national consensus that finance should be more boring and more local, with lower profits and more normal levels of pay at the top, and that this should be achieved without jeopardising Britain's historic comparative advantage in finance. This may be a less daunting task than it seems, at least in the banking sector in Britain, as market evolution ensures that most of the functions currently carried out by banks migrate to other businesses.

Lending to business ceased to be a priority of the British banking system at the end of the 19th century with the disappearance of most local banks and a focus on financing international trade in London. A revival of strictly regional banking today would concentrate risk too much in particular places but an ethos of local commitment, patient finance and a much greater variety of financial providers, including a bigger and more dynamic venture capital sector for growth businesses is desirable (and perhaps a revival of the old Industrial and Commercial Finance Corporation, which became 3i). The takeover system of trading ownership of companies is currently sluggish but, as Colin Mayer has exhaustively shown, it is a destructive form of discipline on senior managers and ought to be restricted to cases where there is an overwhelming business/industrial case.

At the more macro level there are some further lines to draw between

liberal and postliberal economics. Liberal economics says that countries do not compete, companies and workers do. It is thus largely untroubled by Britain's continuing balance of payments deficits. Postliberal economics is not so relaxed and it sees the balance of payments as an indicator of the country's competitiveness and its ability to earn its way in the world.

The rhetoric of the global race is, it is true, often just an argument for holding down pay and transferring more risk from governments and businesses to individuals and families. Britain has continued growing richer as many countries, starting with the US at the end of the 19th century, have passed it in per capita income. Domestic services remain by far the largest part of the economy and it is the level of productivity in that sector, rather than direct competition with foreigners, that substantially determines national income.

Liberal economics is nevertheless wrong to be indifferent as to whether growth is driven by services or manufacturing. The latter will not grow significantly in size but remains central to improving the balance of payments either through increased exports or building back broken supply chains to reduce imports. Liberal economics is also wrong to be indifferent to national ownership. Foreign ownership has been enormously beneficial in some areas of the economy, the car industry for example. But Britain is an outlier in the extent of foreign control of its assets: 70 per cent of all commercial organisations employing more than 1,000 people are foreign owned, [according to the writer Alex Brummer](#). As with immigration, something that is beneficial in moderation might be damaging above a certain level.

We need a cost-benefit audit of foreign ownership that looks at corporate tax, the location of key high value functions like R&D, the greater likelihood of closing a 'satellite' operation, the effect on supply chains, and so on. Britain might also find it harder to redirect its export attention to BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) when so many exporters are foreign owned companies who are here specifically to export into the EU.

Liberal economics was clearly too relaxed about debt at all levels in the society and economy. The Bank of England's narrow focus on

price inflation incubated asset price inflation. (The US Federal Reserve has been a more postliberal central bank with its formal targeting of the employment rate.) As Jonathan Todd has pointed out, the famous [Modigliani-Miller theorem](#) which showed that the value of a company is unaffected by whether it is financed by debt or equity, along with the more general belief in self-correcting markets, also encouraged blindness to high leverage in the banking sector.

Borrowing is a necessary part of any capitalist economy, it allows companies to grow, families to buy houses and individuals to smooth out income over the life cycle. But an economy or an individual over-dependent on debt loses power to creditors or 'the markets'. And the ability of ordinary families to live comfortably without dependence on tax credits and debt is central to the more balanced growth of the economy.

The long term goal of economic and industrial policy is to help to shape a more productive, investment-friendly economy that can pay higher wages to the bottom half of the income spectrum without reducing employment levels; and can also find new sources of tax revenue—land and wealth being the obvious candidates—that do not choke off enterprise. The short-term goal is to assist households to reduce debt without becoming a significant drag on growth. The latter might be achieved in part by improving access to, and reforming the rules governing, credit unions to reduce dependence on pay day loan companies.

This is obviously not meant as a serious reform programme and I am not qualified to provide one. There are many economic concerns—such as utility regulation and Britain's long term energy supply or creating effective public support for innovation—that I have not touched on at all and most of the argument here is neither original nor exclusively postliberal. But in one area there is a distinctively postliberal emphasis: economic life is not just about earning a living; it is a major source of esteem and status and has a big impact on how people feel about themselves. This is partly about how people are treated at work but also about whether they think the work they do is useful and socially recognised.

For this reason postliberalism is ambivalent about the language of

meritocracy and social mobility. The first is unassailable in principle but in practice can serve to legitimise big increases in inequality, especially in an era when the affluent and well-educated marry each other. The second rarely pauses to consider the feelings of those who do not climb the ladder. In a more individualistic and competitive society we are valued by what we have achieved rather than who we are, creating a constant threat of low esteem for the less successful. This may be an inevitable aspect of modern life but it sets up a tension with the more egalitarian principle of a citizen entitlement to esteem and the right to a decent life.

A major concern of postliberalism is how to mitigate that conflict by restoring dignity and honour to the mundane and middling in a world in which status, as well as wealth, is so unevenly distributed. Ambition and the pursuit of success are perfectly decent human impulses but most people know that being special is not the same as being best. As [Eamonn Callan has written](#):

*We unashamedly love unremarkable cats and dogs, mediocre books, trivial jobs, ugly houses with unmemorable yards, in addition to our perfectly ordinary friends, kin and lovers... The lover may be perfectly aware of the modest value that the beloved has in the larger scheme of things without that thought diminishing love.*

The old idea of the dignity of labour that used to attach to physically demanding manual jobs—in coal mines, steel mills and shipyards—has faded with the decline of those jobs. When most people in the country were doing pretty basic, low or semi-skilled work, as was still the case 50 years ago, it made no sense to disdain it. But when an increasing number of one's generational peers are going to university or working in the better-rewarded high productivity top 40 per cent of the economy, it becomes inevitable, perhaps, that people will start to look down on more basic jobs—especially those that involve *servicing* the richer and better educated.

Moreover, there is now often a mismatch between the high expectations that many young people acquire before they leave school and the grim reality of the bottom part of the labour market hourglass: about 80 per cent of the new jobs created over the past three years are paying below £8 an hour. This helps to explain both

the fact that about 20 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds are unemployed and that about 20 per cent of low skilled jobs are taken by people born outside the country. With the stress in mainstream culture on aspiration and success, the basic jobs that we still desperately need to fill—cleaning, working in supermarkets, caring for the elderly—are seen by too many people as only for ‘failures and foreigners.’

Increasing the pay, status and productivity of the bottom 8m or 9m jobs is one of the central economic priorities of postliberalism. Large-scale immigration has made the task harder. Whatever the benefits of economic/cultural dynamism and plugging skill gaps, the large recent inflows of well educated workers with a good work ethic and low wage expectations have also exacerbated some traditional weaknesses of Britain’s economy—above all lack of investment in training—and helped to sustain a ‘low pay, low productivity equilibrium’. Mass immigration has inevitably reduced the incentive on governments and companies to properly educate and train existing citizens.

Status to some extent follows the money, so higher pay—in the form of a flexible living wage—is a necessary condition of creating the sort of decent jobs that people are happy to do. But pay is not everything, a sense of pride in a job well done—however basic—will also produce happier and more productive staff, the ‘insiders’ of [George Akerlof’s identity economics](#). Good workplaces have employees that internalise the objectives of the organisation and are thus more productive and need less supervision.

A modern economy is a complex organism, but careful reform that fosters a fairer, more pluralistic balance of interests and promotes longer-term relationships (and thus higher investment and more vocational training) is a realistic goal. Postliberal economics can worry about the balance of payments without being protectionist and can support a manufacturing revival without picking winners. Postliberalism also wants to promote a better balance between rewarding ambition and success and providing dignity and meaning at work to the majority.

## 5 WELFARE AND CONTRIBUTION

We all have a small stake in each others' success (and failure), that is what risk-pooling is. But in modern Britain this noble notion has become smothered in bureaucratic indifference. Moreover, when politicians do speak about community and solidarity it usually sounds abstract and hollow. The welfare state is a particular point of conflict. There is an increasing reluctance to pay taxes into today's welfare state because people feel it encourages dependency in others (usually poorer others) and then provides inadequate support when they need it themselves.

Society does remain in part a moral community even if looser and less prescriptive than in the past. And most people rightly assume that their fellow citizens have moral agency, though clearly constrained by their formation and circumstances. For that reason postliberalism is comfortable with the distinction between the deserving and the less deserving—among the highly paid as well as the welfare-dependent. The point is not to abolish the distinction but to ensure that it is a fair reflection of today's less judgmental country and not of the assumptions of 50 years ago.

But as the welfare system has expanded in recent decades it has in some respects also got out of kilter with people's moral intuitions. The average taxpayer thinks that too many people are getting something for nothing. But then if they need the system, they find they get almost nothing for their something. You may have paid national insurance for 25 years but if you lose your job you qualify for jobseekers' allowance for just six months at £71.70 a week (the same level as someone who has paid national insurance for just a few weeks), then after six months the means testing rules require that if you have £16,000 or more of savings or your partner works you get nothing. Similarly if you have worked for 40 years and have a stroke you will only get the ESA (sickness benefit) for one year if you have a working partner, whereas a single person who has never worked will get it indefinitely. People can also be dismayed to discover that working more than 40 hours a week they are worse off than a mother with two children who works 16 hours a week.

We ask our battered and unloved social security system to do too



many conflicting things: to provide a decent standard of living for the low paid and the genuinely needy without damaging incentives to work or save, while also not costing too much or offending people's sense of fairness.

Moreover, changes in society and in welfare have created a greater social distance between middle Britain and the typical social security recipient (partly because of changes to public housing, see below). As people have grown richer the Beveridge ideal of a cross-class social security system that all citizens feel part of has given way to a more residual system for the poor or nearly poor. Instead of unemployment being a temporary misfortune that could befall anyone, it is increasingly associated with people in the old industrial regions who have lost the work ethic or inner city youths who never acquired it. As in the US many recipients of welfare are regarded as members of a separate caste.

Such social distance does not matter so much when a welfare system is heavily insurance-based, as it is in much of Europe and used to be in Britain. You don't need a moral consensus when there is a clear link between what you pay in and what you get out. But social security in Britain has become increasingly 'non-contributory': paid for out of general taxation. This has happened at a time of declining trust between citizens and relatively open borders.

When life experiences and values become more diverse, it becomes harder to assume that other people will have the same attitudes to work and welfare that you do. People want a system that rewards work, saving and honesty about financial circumstances and think we are a long way from achieving it. (Although outright welfare fraud is not significant, the extent to which people change their behaviour to maximise their returns from the system is quite widespread.)

The Tory welfare cap is a popular policy as is the idea of simplifying the benefit system in the shape of Universal Credit. But current reforms do little or nothing to increase the contributory nature of welfare or reduce means-testing, both central goals of a postliberal welfare system (means-testing now covers about two-thirds of social security spending, excluding pensions). And with the decline of the contributory system so-called 'conditionality' has had to bear the

burden of reassuring people that they are part of a reciprocal system in which people work, or at least seek work, in return for making claims.

Making the system more contributory is easier said than done. It did not grow less contributory by accident but rather because of the end of full employment and the big increase in relative poverty in the 1980s; the fact that many women are in full time paid work intermittently and less caring is done within the home. But rather than punish those groups which draw out more than they pay in, the alternative is to pay extra to those who have contributed more. (There could also be non-financial rewards, less stringent signing-on procedures for those with long work records, for example.)

The reality is that as societies like ours get richer and more diverse, and more tax-resistant, public welfare systems will become somewhat more fragmented and residual. Postliberals and others who care about preserving aspects of (national) universalism, social solidarity and redistribution in the system can lean against that trend by nudging the system closer into line with people's feeling about reciprocity and contribution. (For this reason it is not necessarily a good idea to take low earners out of tax completely, they should contribute even if it is a small amount.)

Welfare reformers should favour extending the experiment with personalised budgets, currently used to support some forms of disability, and be open to new combinations of state support and private insurance. My colleague at Demos, Duncan O'Leary, has come up with an idea that neatly combines both private insurance and rewarding greater contribution in the public system. His idea is that [Support for Mortgage Interest](#), which currently pays out about £350m a year when people lose their incomes and cannot cover their mortgage interest, should be passed over to the private sector. When people take out a mortgage they should have to insure themselves against unemployment (it could be as little as £20 a month). The money saved could help pay for a two-tier Job Seekers Allowance; the current rate and a higher rate for those with good contribution records. This idea could be replicated in other areas.

Asset based welfare schemes such as the Child Trust Fund which

both encourage saving, especially among the low paid, and provide an asset cushion for later in life should also be encouraged (the CTF was scrapped by the current government). Another idea, floated by the think tank Civitas, is to [turn national insurance into a personal welfare account](#) with the aim of boosting the contributory element of the welfare system and encouraging more saving for old age. Funding for such schemes could be found from reducing those generous tax breaks for saving for the better off.

Modern national welfare states are inevitably, in [John Milbank's phrase](#), a 'unilateral gift from nowhere.' And as I argued above several features of the British social security system are making it harder to sustain: the fact that it is mainly funded out of the common pool of general taxation rather than more individualised social insurance, the decline in fellow feeling in a more socially and ethnically diverse society and, finally, the fact that entitlement is based too much on need and too little on reciprocal or communal ties.

One answer to this might be the return to more local forms of provision. It is not feasible to return to the mutuals, cooperatives, credit unions and local building societies out of which today's welfare state and housing finance system grew. But it is possible to imagine that some national benefits could be administered by local authorities rather than the national social security system. (The experiment of merging benefit policing with back to work support in the national job centre network has not worked well.) People who are jobless for more than a year could become the responsibility of the local authority, rather than the Work Programme, which might have the freedom to adjust their benefits up or down, insist on voluntary work in return for benefits (or not), and also be in a better position to help with training/job placements and so on. There are already some experiments along these lines.

An implicit promise of the modern welfare state is that you can stay put, even when your town or region loses its main economic purpose, and support will come to you (though in theory a job seeker has to be ready to apply for a job up to 90 minutes travel time away). Postliberals should support that 'right to stay put' but should also acknowledge that it can encourage inertia and a mismatch between where new jobs are being created and where people who need jobs

are. If the declining areas themselves administered more of the welfare budget they might have an incentive to encourage movement to more dynamic zones within a reasonable travelling distance.

In reality the trend has been in the other direction, towards more centralising of welfare decisions. In public housing for example the 1977 Homeless Persons Act effectively removed discretion from local housing managers. Until then they had often been allocated according to local connection and 'sons and daughters' rules but the new legislation required them to allocate according to 'need'. That often meant giving priority to recent immigrants with large families (who had often been excluded hitherto) or people unable to work, and so begun the gradual shift in much public housing away from homes for the mainstream upper working class to ghettos for those suffering multiple deprivation.

In recent years there has, rightly, been some support for moving back to more residence-based entitlement in housing. This raises those broader questions about the boundaries of sharing already touched on in chapter 3. Postliberalism assumes people are readier to share with those they feel some connection to in local or national 'imagined communities', but what really matters to people is whether their fellow club members are drawing on the system appropriately. There is intense hostility to free riding wherever people come from; this is an issue of fairness not generally of xenophobia. Surveys show that people think outsiders should not get immediate access to benefits and public services—and there may be special hostility to those perceived as foreign free riders—but after as little as two years of work and contribution most people are happy for newcomers to join the club.

A final point. The liberalisation of modern societies, and the welcome decline in discrimination, has gone hand in hand with a more general relaxation of boundaries. Along with the decline in 'bad' discrimination (racial, gender, class) there has been a decline in 'good' discrimination—discrimination which helps to reinforce good, virtuous behaviour in everyday life. This creates a particular problem for some immigrant families who, as they see it, lose their children to a society that has no boundaries; it may also have helped to increase the size of the welfare dependent, and often alcohol and drug dependent, so-

called underclass.

Rather than a state and welfare bureaucracy that strives for moral neutrality, it should in fact more clearly enforce the basic moral rules on which there is widespread agreement—rewarding effort and contribution. There are many ways in which this might be done in addition to the ideas floated above, for example by rewarding those who strive to lead healthier lives with quicker access to certain NHS services or paying more benefits to non-contributors with pre-pay cards rather than cash. All of these proposals throw up difficult technical and moral issues but moving in this direction may be what is required to help sustain a decent welfare state.

More generally the postliberal prescription for mitigating the negative effect on welfare and community of social distance and value diversity would include these two things: a more contributory and insurance-based welfare system, with more clearly graduated access for newcomers, and increased contact/interaction with fellow citizens both across the ethnic divide and between the poor and the rest.

## 6 PUBLIC SERVICES AND THE LOCAL

Postliberalism shares with many people on the right the belief that the state has cast too long a shadow over society in recent decades. Blue Labour in part grew out of a revolt against the Fabian managerial state and a wish to reclaim earlier labour movement self-help traditions. It is not anti-state but wants a different kind of state. In recent years both left and right in power have preferred regulations and targets to the more nebulous and difficult task of tending to the institutions and relationships that help to shape us.

Consider [this](#) from David Lammy:

*When my mother arrived in Britain it was not just the state that stepped in to help her. A friendly trade union official helped her on to a course that made it possible for her to find work and provide for her family. The local church provided a sense of fellowship and community. Friends and neighbours looked after her children while she juggled life as a single mother. When she was ill doctors in the NHS treated her illness, but Macmillan nurses also provided invaluable care. As she grew older she relied more and more on her children, just as we had once relied upon her. All these relationships made the difference to her life.*

Although as I described in the last section there has been a sharp drop in support for many kinds of social security, there remains strong public support for the tax-funded public services in particular the NHS. These are national institutions but they are also local institutions. The passionate campaigns to keep open local hospitals is testament to the fact that some local attachments remain strong.

The model through which modern market economics conceives of life is a series of impersonal acts of exchange between lone individuals. And when you visit the supermarket the idea of market individualism seems to apply. But, [as Jon Wilson argues](#), there are some 'goods' where the pretence that we live as isolated individuals is obvious:

*Teaching, childcare, social services, getting the unemployed into*

*work, public broadcasting, even maintaining law and order are all public services. They have something more important in them than the fact they're all paid for by taxpayers. The quality of the relationship between user and provider is an essential part of the service being offered. In fact, much of the time, the relationship is the good being provided. Teaching, for example, isn't only the delivery of a lesson plan, but the creation of a supportive and challenging relationship between teacher and pupil.*

Most of the activities we rely on the state to provide are what the Italian school of 'civil economy' calls relational goods. Jon Wilson explains that relational goods have several special qualities:

*First, who provides them matters. We remember the name of the motivational teacher or caring home help. The benefit we receive has something to do with the personality of the provider. However much higher authorities try to define them, teaching or social care cannot be the anonymous performance of routine tasks. They embody forms of virtue and good practice that rely on trust and an honest relationship.*

*Second, relational goods are mutual and reciprocal. They involve the active participation of the person receiving them. The point of teaching is for students to learn and learning is an active process. Health and social care are about restoring or preserving the capacity of the patient for autonomous action; the patient's action is essential for recovery. Policing needs civilians to keep the peace.*

*Third, relational goods happen face-to-face, in complex, creative moments of interaction... However clearly learning outcomes are defined, a good teacher doesn't know where pupils will take them in a particular lesson... When people complain about feeling frustrated or powerless with public services, it is because they feel these relational qualities have gone missing.*

This does not mean that we should abandon all of the public sector reforms of recent decades, including private sector providers and quasi markets. Big strides have been made in making some public services more responsive and the old assumption that public sector professionals always act in the best interests of the public is clearly

nonsense. The assumption of public choice theory that public managers and professionals, local and national, have their own interests to pursue is an important insight that should govern the design of public institutions.

Nonetheless there is still something special about the public sector, even if it is a matter of degree rather than kind (after all private companies are also public institutions as indeed is the market itself). And the preservation and nurturing of a special public service ethos as well as the particular professional vocations associated with teaching, medicine, nursing and so on are important to the self-image, esteem and performance of public sector staff at all levels.

Postliberalism has a bias towards the local and the particular, in public services and in society more generally. The most sensible framework for increasing localism while preserving some sense of national standards is to have national guarantees in health, social care, education, social security, public housing and so on but with a high degree of autonomy and discretion in how they are delivered.

Greater local content applies to democratic politics too. The crisis of participation in British democracy is often exaggerated by liberal baby boomers who see politics as a form of self-expression; falling turnout has, after all, coincided with continuing improvements in British life. But if there is to be a revival of interest in voting and joining political parties it probably depends on a visible increase in the prestige and clout of local institutions—city mayors have been a good start. In the US there are more channels for individuals or political currents from outside the mainstream to emerge: city mayors; governorships; the Senate; the House.

As Duncan O’Leary has [written](#):

*In the US these different routes provide more opportunities for people to demonstrate real leadership outside of the patronage of the party’s central hierarchy. US judges and police are democratically accountable, for instance, which gives communities leverage if they get organised. Then think about the way Obama ran his campaign. He decentralised communication through social media, and democratised fundraising through small donations. People had*



*(more) ownership over the money and the message.*

As O'Leary implies, better interaction between politics and the internet/social media, to enable a higher level of digital 'voice', remains barely explored in Britain.

Finally it is impossible to talk about localism and the regional balance within Britain without addressing the London question. Postliberalism does not share the metropolitanism of commentators like David Aaronovitch who think of London as a separate, and superior, country held back by the ['resentful shires'](#). And it worries about the alarmingly low level of private sector growth in many regions even during the long boom.

London with its population of 8m and rising is almost eight times larger than the next largest city in the country, this is a ratio more commonly found in Africa, Latin America and East Asia than in Europe or North America. This year about 45 per cent of all advertised graduate jobs are based in London. And the gap is getting wider. As Tim Hames [points out](#): 'As far as the professional middle class is concerned London has become a form of gigantic black hole dragging everything into it. In England at least it is often London or bust.'

As Hames says this is not a positive state of affairs even for those in the capital:

*It makes London an incredibly expensive city in which to live and work, with the property market distorted by its status as an international enclave rendering housing close to unaffordable to most normal residents. It can make the rest of the country feel inconsequential. This is despite the fact that cities like Aberdeen, Bristol, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Newcastle and Oxford and world leaders in certain fields.*

London remains central to the success of the British economy, so rebalancing must be carefully managed and must focus on building up the second tier cities like Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow not on reducing the economic might of London. Relocating more national institutions, such as the House of Lords, from London

to the regions should be one part of that.

One reason British politics has been significantly more liberal, economically and socially, than the country it speaks for is partly because politics is based in London. It is the least postliberal part of Britain. It has the highest proportion of Richard Florida's 'creative class'—highly educated people who believe in the myth of their own self-invention and autonomy (and superior wisdom). And it has the smallest proportion of rooted, middle income/status people, and especially white British middle-status people, some of whom have felt themselves squeezed out both financially and culturally between affluent professionals and the growing ethnic minority presence.

This also helps to explain why a disproportionate amount of the national agenda is taken up with issues of race and diversity, sex (and sexuality) equality, environmentalism, higher education, social mobility, political participation: the issues of concern to the London-based mobile, liberal, graduate class. The rest of the country cares about these issues too but they loom less large and are balanced by other more basic issues like debt and decent, non-graduate, employment. And, increasingly, the rest of the country has come to resent being lectured by London on these matters; another reason for our shrunken politics.

## 7 FAMILY AND CHARACTER

The family is central to postliberal politics. Postliberalism's stress on interdependence and relationships is rooted first and foremost in the family. All the mainstream currents in British politics share this concern with the family but in practice modern liberalism has overseen a weakening of family life; the family is often, after all, an impediment to freedom and autonomy, a constraining realm of obligation and duty.

Postliberalism does not wish to insist on only one form of family structure or division of labour nor roll back the more equal relations that have evolved between men and women, but it does want public policy to try harder to help couples stay together when they are raising children. It also wants to think about the status and place of men, especially working class men, alongside female equality.

There has been, in recent decades, a sort of unintended collaboration between modern economics and a certain kind of feminism to undermine the significance of work done in the home: domestic labour, raising children and caring for the elderly. To the economist the work does not count because it cannot be captured for the purposes of GDP and to some feminists it is work done under patriarchal duress and so also does not count.

The work of the domestic economy was, and is, real and vital in the formation of young people and the caring for old ones. And much of that work is still done in the home, though more does also now take place in the public economy of childcare and social care providers. (One reason for the rising costs of public welfare.)

But, of course, over the past 50 years there has been a huge transformation in Britain from a quite rigid sexual division of labour, in which men and women occupied segregated realms, to a more flexible form of it. Most women now have a paid job, and most households need them to. But notwithstanding equal opportunity strategies geared to female economic independence most women still prioritise family life and prefer not to work too intensively while raising young children. (And most couples would have more children if they could afford to.)

Too much government policy sees only individuals when there is in fact a family unit, or is over-concerned with the formalities of marriage whereas what matters is keeping the institution of the couple/family together while raising young children. And policy often sees single mothers as would-be workers who are handicapped by having children, whereas they tend to be among the most traditional, child-centred women.

Moreover, in the pursuit of more equal relations between men and women not only has too little thought been given to how the glue of family life still sticks everyone together but also to the more general place of men in the new arrangements. If middle class women are now as financially self-sufficient as men and many working class ones are supported by the state, with benefits and priority in social housing, what is the place for the male provider?

The traditional notion of making men good citizens through family duties has largely disappeared—and anti-social behaviour of various kinds remains overwhelmingly concentrated among 16 to 24 year old males. As [Jonathan Rutherford has written](#): ‘The 1990s witnessed a growing consensus in the media and popular culture that men were emotionally inarticulate, socially and personally disoriented and demoralised.’

In fact, as the [sociologist Geoff Dench argues](#), most men do not take the idea of patriarchy seriously and, like women, are interested in finding the right kind of male-female mutual dependence in a more egalitarian age. The benefit system and public policy sometimes makes this harder, yet the idea of the breadwinner remains a powerful and motivating one for many men. According to Dench in the period 2005-8 around 85 per cent of men with no qualifications but with a partner were in work, while just 50 per cent of men with no qualifications and without a partner worked. And, [according to research by the Hera Trust](#), most women are happy to see a male main provider as a useful support rather than an unwelcome boss.

This is not a plea to restore the traditional breadwinner/carer model, but policy should not actively discourage it either and should also make it easier for men to take up the full-time carer role by, for

example, equalising paternity and maternity leave (as has recently been achieved and will come into force in 2015).

The liberal approach to the family is to remain neutral as to whether couples stay together or not but then compensate for family breakdown with various forms of state intervention such as extra support for single mothers. Postliberals do not have a fixed view of how families should organise themselves in conditions of gender equality but want to make it easier for couples to stay together in the first place.

That has an economic dimension which should include even more heavily subsidised preschool child-care but also ‘care money’ (as in Germany) to enable one parent, the mother or father, to stay at home when children are young, essentially a more generous version of child benefit reserved for those in full-time childcare. This creates a level playing field between those who want to work and those who prefer to stay at home. (It will also reduce the incentive to pretend to be a single parent.)

There is a cultural dimension, too, which regards the formation of parenting couples, whether formally married or not, as an institution and not just an expression of romantic or erotic love. (Almost half of all children in Britain are now born outside marriage.) Relationships based on tolerance, shared goals and love for children should be encouraged to persist, whenever possible, even after love has dwindled away. This is far better than divorce, legal wrangles (often involving impoverishment of fathers), separate homes and children with divided loyalties (it is estimated that about one third of children in lone parent families never see their father three years after separation).

And what about character? Character is the invisible ingredient, transmitted at least partly through parenting, that decides—along with your genes—what kind of person you turn out to be. Thanks partly to the [work on character](#) by Richard Reeves, when director of Demos, it is now widely accepted that the ability to defer gratification, persist with difficult tasks and acquire the skills of sociability is central to life chances. And the quality of parenting is a far better predictor of the ability to acquire these characteristics than parental income.

This rather old-fashioned sounding story of parenting and character was picked up by the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel (chaired by Darra Singh) which [reported in March 2012](#) on the riots of the previous summer. The panel dwelt at length on character and the importance of ‘self-discipline, application... and resilience in recovering from setbacks’, and how too many young people lack these qualities.

Social liberalism tends to be squeamish about character seeing it as a throwback to Victorian times: about instilling a narrow set of class values and implicitly overestimating peoples’ ability to fashion their own lives. Social liberals tend to see social failure—poverty, crime and so on—as created by people's circumstances and even if you make bad moral choices that is not really your fault. Your character, in other words, is seen as a fixed part of your social circumstances. But it is not fixed: it is created, at least in part, by your family background.

It is one of the cliches of social policy that already by the age of three children in poor families have slipped significantly behind their counterparts in terms of cognitive, verbal and other key indicators of childhood development. Where has this come from if not from a culture of parenting and the transmission of behaviour and character from one generation to another? Your parents are a central part of your social circumstances and who you are but how they raise you is not pre-determined. In other words, character and social circumstances are intertwined but distinct and the first is not the inevitable product of the second: poor people have moral agency too, even if they have to apply it in more difficult conditions.

The later years of formal schooling and apprenticeships used to place more stress on rites of passage into adulthood and emotional maturity. Postliberalism wants to see far more focus on the creation of character in the education system and in discussions of social failure and families. It also wants to help struggling parents in all social classes to create homes marked more by ‘love and boundaries’ rather than send in the state to rescue children (though of course sometimes that is necessary). Although it is hard to generalise about something as various as family life, especially across national

cultures, there appears to be some evidence that British teenagers have less connection with adults and more with their peers than in some European countries. And Britain is near the bottom of an international league table for teenage girls who find it easy to talk to their mothers.

What Francis Fukuyama has called the '[great disruption](#)', the liberalising wave of the 1960s and 1970s, has influenced character formation for both better and worse. Individual self-control, hard work and a willingness to delay gratification was the puritanical norm for our parents and is increasingly just a life-style choice for some of our children. Yet almost any conceivable version of a good life entails at least some aspects of that character formation and, as Richard Reeves has noted, the class and opportunity divide is increasingly becoming also a character divide.

In imperial Britain character was regarded as more important than intelligence. And perhaps in those days when most people still lived lives of great privation and military conflict was an ever-present reality, it was not such a stupid order of priority. A combination of utilitarianism, with its elevation of the pleasure principle, and rationalism, with its worship of education and intelligence, has subsequently eclipsed the idea of the virtuous character, of simply being a good man or woman. Yet character is in some ways a more egalitarian and meritocratic field than intelligence. (Our modern obsession with sport as a stage for the characters of professional sportsmen and woman to emerge is perhaps an acknowledgement of its continuing importance.)

We can only order our own lives to achieve the goals we set ourselves and interact lovingly with those around us if we have the resources of character to do so. It sounds sentimental to say it but character is, in fact, our greatest natural resource as a country.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Conventional liberals often find people puzzling and reactionary. But if you look more carefully at public opinion on many subjects it is not as illiberal as such liberals, often still mired in the battles of the 1970s and 1980s, presume. Attitudes to racism and gender equality have been transformed in the past 30 years, and attachment to country has also now shed much of the chauvinism that still characterised it even as recently as the Falklands war.

A popular bias against large-scale immigration is perfectly compatible with an overwhelming national consensus on race equality: most people are anti-mass immigration, pro-individual immigrants; they are not persuaded that they benefit either economically or culturally from high inflows but the idea of racial equality is now part of their commonsense notion of fairness. And if you track the anxiety that people feel about immigration, it was virtually non-existent in the mid-1990s when net immigration was low and has risen over the past 15 years broadly in line with the increase in numbers. Anxiety about immigration is partly about fear of the unknown, but the latter is a perfectly rational human emotion.

Similarly, although public sympathy for the poor is not usually high people do accept a relative rather than absolute idea of poverty. Also in the 1970s when relative poverty was low public opinion regarded it as largely self-inflicted. By contrast in the 1980s in the wake of de-industrialisation it was clear that many people were suffering poverty and long-term unemployment through no fault of their own and sympathy for the poor rose sharply. (And, as I mentioned earlier, although people, especially poorer people, are acutely sensitive to welfare free-riding, they regard only quite short qualifying periods, a couple of years for most things, as necessary to become a full club member.)

People, even well-educated people, can be comically misguided about simple social facts—such as the number of Muslims in Britain—but their ignorance may reflect media coverage of issues, and their basic intuitions about things are often broadly correct.



It is one of the contradictions of conventional liberalism that it tends to think individuals are wise, and should therefore make as many decisions as possible about their lives, yet crowds are stupid. But, as the Tory radical Douglas Carswell puts it, [the crowd has long since ceased to be a mob](#). Moreover, people are often more sensible than politicians and academics in accepting that all good things do not go together and that human life and politics involves trade-offs, sometimes painful ones.

I became attracted to postliberal ideas about 10 years ago when I wrote an essay in Prospect magazine about the [‘progressive dilemma’](#), the tension between two of the left’s most cherished principles: solidarity on the one hand (meaning a high trust/high sharing society) and an increasing diversity of values and ways of life on the other.

The progressive dilemma is a permanent balancing act and part of an even bigger tension at the heart of the human condition itself, between commitment and freedom. Many of us want the freedom to be geographically and socially mobile, to break free of commitments if we find them too burdensome—to get divorced if our marriages are not happy, to park our elderly relatives in care homes if they become too burdensome—yet these choices can be disruptive to the strong, stable families and communities that we also say we want. We value the liberal idea of self-realisation, autonomy and the free authorship of our own lives, yet we also acknowledge our dependence on others to realise those goals and seek to embed ourselves in human groups both big and small.

In politics the progressive dilemma takes many forms. Today it is often found in arguments between a communitarian notion of club membership and the more universal cross-border rights championed by some modern liberals. This was the conflict in places like Tower Hamlets in the 1980s between the locals-first ‘sons and daughters’ housing allocation policy and the more pressing housing needs of the recent immigrant with a big family.

The dilemma is also played out in some of the multicultural debates between the right to be different and the duty to integrate. Respect for difference is an important principle but it is not absolute. There is also

the need to preserve common norms and mutual regard, which may be damaged by too much diversity.

If we opt for a more individualistic and diverse society it is likely to be a dynamic and competitive one, but over time it is also likely to manifest lower levels of sharing and a weaker sense of belonging and solidarity. Likewise a more mobile and career-oriented society is likely to have weaker family and extended family ties to support childcare and care for the elderly; paradoxically higher individual mobility may require more state support. By squarely acknowledging these trade-offs a postliberal politics becomes one way of mitigating them.

In recent years, what would postliberalism have prioritised differently to the two liberalisms? It would have tried harder on low wages and high debt, and worried more about the emergence of the hourglass labour market. It would have placed more emphasis on rebalancing the economy away from London and finance/housing, it would also have given employees more voice and applied some limits to the sale of national assets. It would have controlled immigration more carefully, mitigated its effects by building many more houses and had a more explicit integration strategy for newcomers.

More emphasis would have been put on the contributory principle in welfare and reducing the scale of means testing, with its disincentives to work and save. Discipline and character would have been more explicitly nurtured in education, and there would have been as much energy expended on post-school vocational education as on university reform.

It is sometimes said that the story of politics since the fall of Margaret Thatcher is that the right won the economic argument and the left won the social argument. But in more recent times both of those victories seem tainted; reflecting the limits of the two liberalisms.

And despite their recent political dominance many consequences of the two liberalisms have not had much popular appeal particularly in the bottom half of society: growing inequality, needs-based welfare and the spread of means-testing, decline of middling pay/status jobs, and a feeling that people are sharper elbowed and that 'anything goes'.

One kind of postliberal response to that comes from [John Milbank](#):

*We can contrast this liberalism with George Orwell's genuinely socialist trust in 'common decency'. People have always lived through practices of reciprocity, though giving, gratitude and giving again in turn. By way of this process people achieve, in a simple way, mutual recognition and relationality. Most people pursue association, and the honour and dignity of being recognised in significant ways, however lowly, as their main goals, and are relatively unconcerned with becoming much richer than their fellows or achieving great power over them. Indeed, most people wisely realise that such things will only increase their anxiety and insecurity—they prefer a less spectacular but quieter life. They are basically hobbits.*

Whether or not they are hobbits they are certainly not the free-floating individuals of liberal ideology. Rather they are rooted in communities and families, often experience change as loss and have a hierarchy of moral obligations. Too often the language of liberalism that dominates public debate ignores the real affinities of place and people. Those affinities are not obstacles to be overcome on the road to the good society; they are one of its foundation stones. People will always favour their own families and communities; it is the task of a realistic liberalism, a postliberal politics, to strive for a description of nation and community that is open enough to include people from many different backgrounds, without being so open as to become meaningless.

By representing too much the interests and prejudices of the upper professional class in economic and labour market de-regulation, in post-school education, in welfare, in immigration, in family policy, the two liberalisms have created the very populist response that they now denounce and ridicule. Postliberalism does not welcome the rise of UKIP or similar parties but it sees their emergence as a political signal that requires a response—it is tough on populism while also being tough on the insecurity and disconnect that causes the populism in the first place.

Postliberalism is an attempt to give a shove to the two more conventional liberalisms, to assert some interests and ideas that have

been neglected in recent years and thereby achieve a better balance in our political life. In the famous Blue Labour 'paradox' it wants to promote a radicalism that is not afraid to attack the status quo in the name of conservatism; not a nostalgia for the past but a desire to preserve what was best about it, in new forms if necessary.

My own version of it reflects my particular journey and experience but I hope I have at least given a bit more shape to a combination of ideas that I believe are destined for greater prominence in rich, open but anxious societies like Britain. This prominence is partly because as the left/right conflict recedes, postliberalism can speak to an emergent 'hidden majority', but also because, magpie-like, it can pick out the best in the three intellectual traditions that have dominated politics since the advent of modern democracy: liberalism, conservatism and social democracy.