Conclusions

Abstract  This book has explored an idea which has suddenly entered the field of public policy in this decade. When I wrote Welfare and Well-being: Social Value in Public Policy (2008), it had not been used since Schumpeter’s The Nature and Essence of Economic Theory, 1908 (Trans. Bruce McDaniel. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers (2010)), and then only to denote the value of collective goods. But the significance of social value in public policy has increased sharply during the coronavirus crisis, because of the polarisation in political responses to the pandemic and the economic recession it brought about, which seems certain to ensue as we emerge from lock-down.

Keywords  Globalisation • Nationalism • War • Recovery

The strong temptation for political movements everywhere will be to try to restore an approach to economic growth which is technical and consensual (Gray 2020), in an effort to conserve some of the ‘wartime spirit’ which prevailed during the crisis. But I have argued in this book that underlying divisions and conflicts of interest in societies cannot be so easily laid aside, and that radical new measures are needed if they are not to bring about a decisive turn away from the values and rights of liberal democracy.
The path to a pursuit of well-being and social value is not obvious or straightforward. The clearest case for it lies in the alternatives – authoritarianism, growing inequality and the growth of coercive social policies, in combination making up a political culture full of tensions, conflicts and restrictions. A politics of well-being and social value could counter all of these, but not always in obvious ways.

For instance, the approach to income maintenance through an unconditional Universal Basic Income would be expensive, but not the most redistributive option available, because the better-off would also be beneficiaries; it could alleviate inequalities only when combined with a progressive income tax system. Its greatest relevance to the immediate future lies in creating common interests among the whole population, and minimising the coercion of poorer citizens.

But other, quite different, issues illustrate the kinds of dilemmas which will arise. Because the divisive effects of the long stagnation in the real value of wages had fed into the Brexit vote, especially in the North of England, and strongly influenced the outcome of the December, 2019, General Election, an Immigration Bill to address the new situation was due to be debated in Parliament soon after the strictest phase of the lockdown was lifted. This placed a floor on the wages of anyone wishing to enter the UK for employment.

But this restrictive approach was challenged when the Chinese government clamped down violently on pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, and enacted powers to arrest and deport the leaders of the movement. The UK’s administration felt obliged to offer asylum to some 3 million Hong Kong citizens with British passports, allowing them to enter the country and qualify for citizenship after six years. Even though there was evidence that many would not avail themselves of this opportunity because of family and community ties (BBC World Service, ‘From Our Own Correspondent’, 12 July, 2020), this would represent a dramatic change of direction in immigration policy.

Opposition MPs had already pointed out that the new measure excluded many NHS auxiliary workers and cleaners, and nearly all the immigrant staff of care homes – the heroes of the recent pandemic, and themselves disproportionately among the victims. The government’s plan to train new recruits from school and university leavers was obviously unrealistic – almost as unconvincing as the idea that these same young British citizens would make up the shortfall in fruit-pickers that would be another
category of those hit by immigration restrictions (BBC Radio 4, ‘Yesterday in Parliament’, 19 May, 2020).

The other side of the same coin was that this generation of young British citizens were unlikely to have the same range of options for moving between more suitable work experiences, as a pathway towards rewarding and fulfilling careers. There was evidence (confirmed by both Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Thorsten Bell of the Resolution Foundation) that the loss of such opportunities affected the momentum and upward trajectory of this cohort, and would scar their earnings and promotion prospects for the rest of their working live (BBC Radio 4, ‘Today’, 19 May, 2020).

At the other end of the institutional scale, the German Constitutional Court was at odds with the European Central Bank over the extent of monetary easing in the face of the recession. The court accused the Bank of undermining confidence in the euro and ‘killing off any hope of euro-bonds or joint debt insurance’, as well as breaching EU treaty law. It accused the Bank of having ‘manifestly’ breached the principle of proportionality with mass bond purchases (of over 2.2 trillion euros and expected to rise further) and having trespassed from monetary to broad economic policy-making (‘Germany’s Top Court Clashes with European Central Bank in Revolutionary Ruling’, by Ambrose Evans Pritchard, The Telegraph website, 5 May, 2020).

So at every level, from the experiences of young people in the UK to the relations between one of the highest courts in Continental Europe and the EU’s Central Bank, there was hopelessness, confusion and conflict in the wake of the pandemic. This concluding chapter will explore the possible way forward in the face of these challenges.

**THE ROLE OF THE UK IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY**

Previous crises for the UK in the twenty-first century centred on the financial sector. With the decline of the manufacturing industry from the 1960s, and the growth of services which reflected inequalities of income (low-paid work to meet the needs of the wealthy minority), it was the banks and insurance companies concentrated in the City of London which took on disproportionate importance, as the only part of the national economy with conspicuous success worldwide, yet also a sector very vulnerable to global shocks. But the pandemic was a shock of a different kind, with the
greatest impact on face-to-face services, ethnic minorities and poor communities.

If this crisis resembled any previous one, it was perhaps that which overtook the Macmillan government in the early 1960s. Although this is remembered most vividly for the Christine Keeler scandal, over a Cabinet Minister’s involvement with a high-class prostitute, the underlying issues which came to the surface then were issues over the country’s future global role. With the independence of so many of the former Empire countries in Africa during the previous decade (what Macmillan called the ‘Wind of Change’), there was a vacuum which became obvious, because the overture by the Prime Minister and his envoy, Edward Heath, towards General de Gaulle over membership of the European Community had been suddenly rebuffed.

If Macmillan lost his way at this point in his leadership, a more changeable and inconsistent figure still was Enoch Powell. A brigadier at age 24 during the war, he quickly rose to Cabinet office as a supporter of the British Empire, but then became a Nationalist in the 1960s, and made his notorious speech about the ‘Rivers of Blood’ which would flow if Commonwealth immigration was not checked in 1968, quoting the example of the race riots then taking place in the USA. Having supported Britain’s earlier attempt to join the European Common Market, he opposed membership in the 1970s, and became anti-American as well (Edgerton 2019, pp. 260–1).

In the new century, the UK’s global role is confused and unclear. Because of the legacy of Empire and the links embodied in the Commonwealth, there are many British citizens living on every continent. Economic globalisation has meant that British firms have branches and outlets which are similarly widespread, and the UK’s economy is very dependent on imports for components of its high-tech products, as has become clear in various circumstances, from storms to strikes, when supply chains were interrupted.

But the most controversial issues have concerned British involvement in military operations, such as the long war in Afghanistan, and in the conflicts in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, both at the turn of the twenty-first century. By far the most significant of these was the decision to join the USA in an invasion of Iraq in 2003, justified by Prime Minister Blair by reference to the Nazi threat of the 1930s and to Saddam Hussein’s possession of ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ (no evidence of which was later discovered).
This was an instance of the UK trying to retain a significant role in global politics through its close relationship with the USA. The enduring image of Blair and President George W. Bush marching in lock-step, in a kind of parody of military might, symbolised this weakness posing as strength. The rationalisations and untruths used to justify these actions had the reverse effect, of revealing the UK’s dependence and enfeeblement (Edgerton 2019, pp. 515–7).

**Final Thoughts**

Well-being and social value will therefore have to compete with several other priorities and policies, including military prestige, Imperial nostalgia, dependence on the USA, the global interests of international companies, inequalities of income and coercive benefits systems, in order to become central to public policies in the UK. They will face different but substantial obstacles elsewhere. There are very few Bhutans in the world – benevolent Buddhist monarchies, which can introduce such principles as priorities for their citizens by edict.

But the coronavirus pandemic has supplied a break in the flow of economic and political forces which has involved, as I have shown, some surprising developments, such as those in the USA (see pp. 66–7). The power and effectiveness of national state agencies, the self-sacrifice of public servants, the voluntary commitment of millions of ordinary people, and the everyday willingness of most to endure hardships without complaint have all suggested that many of the least attractive features of consumerist and competitive cultures are only skin-deep. People are potentially better (more public-spirited and co-operative) than the marketing managers have tried to make them, and the shrill media commentators have portrayed them to be.

So it is probably only the threat of climate change that can focus attention on these measures in the medium term. In countries like Australia and India and in the southern states of the USA, extreme weather conditions demand the attention of the international community, and protests by young people will refocus their concerns once the coronavirus pandemic has passed. Then the measures discussed in the later chapters of this book will again start to command political support, with the added credentials of the experiences gained during the pandemic itself.

But there are also danger signs. The misuse of AI is reckoned to cost some $1.3 trillion, yet it has not been deployed to address climate change
to any effect so far. Some fear that it could initiate changes with unintended consequences, such as using up all the earth’s oxygen or water supply, or making everyone sterile. People could be made more malleable and easily satisfied; the ethical issues are vast and quite difficult to anticipate (BBC Radio 4, ‘The Spark’, presented by Helen Lewis, 18 May, 2020).

In this book, I have argued that the greatest limitation on well-being and social value in the Western developed countries has been the inequality that accompanied capitalist globalisation in recent decades. But two new factors are now added to this one. First, the coronavirus pandemic is of unknown duration, and could continue to afflict many nations worldwide. Second, the ambitions of China, based on a combination of authoritarianism, technology and consumerism, are driving a new wave of globalisation, which poses a threat to liberty and human rights across large parts of Asia and Africa. Social value as a criterion for the future evolution of human societies faces an uphill struggle.

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