DISCUSSION

Building from the bottom up: Politics after Covid

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1 | INTRODUCTION

What should we expect from politics after Covid? Many are looking to governments and politicians to protect them ever more strongly in an increasingly uncertain world. The question I am posing, from the perspective of Catholic social thought, is: are these the right answers? Can we provide better ones?

It is certainly true that returning to a pre-Covid normality is not an option. Not only have people faced their lives being turned upside down as the world closed up; entire industries faced being wiped out as their economies locked down. As a result, governments of left, right and centre have intervened in ways that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Here in the UK, Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak has rightly been praised for his swift intervention at the start of the crisis, paying wages for furloughed workers and keeping businesses afloat through grants and loans. The free market in rental property was then put on hold with landlords prevented from evicting tenants who failed to pay their rent. Universal Credit, the UK’s main welfare payment, was raised by £20 a week. Generally, financial caution was thrown to the wind.

The result of this government intervention, while it may have been sorely needed in human terms, was that deficits and debt soared. Only in 1945, as Europe was rebuilt after World War II, was government debt as a share of GDP so high.

2 | A LARGER ROLE FOR THE STATE?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many are using the crisis to call for a much larger role of the state from now on, arguing that people need much greater shielding from the ups and downs of life, both financially and in terms of stronger and more resilient public services.

On the left, Larry Elliott (2021) has argued, for example, that:

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The world has been fighting a war against Covid, and in wartime the power of the state always increases.

Failings of the old model were exposed in the run-up to the crisis, while the benefits of a more hands-on approach have been demonstrated during the pandemic response. Unsurprisingly, there is an appetite for a different way of running the economy. The reason a new variant has emerged is simple: there is a need for something stronger and more resilient than the old model.

You know things have changed, however, when it is not only the Labour Party but also the governing Conservatives arguing for state intervention. As William Hague, a former leader of the Conservative Party, has argued in The Times, governments are now facing massive new problems that open markets and individual freedom cannot resolve without state intervention. Free market philosophy triumphed in showing how to create prosperity but it struggles with how to make that prosperity more equitable, sustainable or resilient. Without government intervention, a globalised economy leads to clusters of great wealth while other places decline. In the absence of laws on climate change, humanity will destroy the natural world on which it depends. If we allow freedom to eat whatever manufacturers make delicious, people become chronically unhealthy. Leave it to individuals to prepare for the costs of old age and many will be unable or unwilling to do so. And so British conservatism, that most adaptable of political philosophies, is redefining itself to create a more interventionist state and it is feeling the internal tension of doing so. (Hague, 2021)

And with a government emphasis on ‘levelling up’, large-scale plans for infrastructure, as well as the sheer costs of policies already announced and in the pipeline – social care and education catch-up, for example – this more interventionist approach seems to be one which is being followed by the current Johnson administration.

Even among the non-political – and thoughtful Catholic – voices, there have been calls for more ‘state’. For example, Mark Carney’s 2020 BBC Reith Lectures and book Value(s) (2021) argue that the crisis had exposed a much greater need for ‘resilience’ in the UK’s National Health Service and other public services.

Of course, from many angles these calls for action are wise and true. We do want health care to be accessible to all – particularly at times of crisis. But I would argue that government spending and action can only ever act as a short-term expedient. There are fundamental forces at play that we need to address.

3 | MORE FUNDAMENTAL FORCES AT PLAY

Another even more urgent fragility was exposed in the crisis: the fragility of our family lives, our communities, our local societies, our faith organisations. In short, the crisis exposed a weakened and vulnerable civil society.

As we shut our doors on the world during the pandemic, the Office for National Statistics (2021) found that up to a million more people became chronically lonely (“feeling lonely often or always”), increasing the total to 3.7 million adults by the beginning of 2021. Far more, it was found, were feeling lonely some of the time.
This feeling of isolation and loneliness is not just a result of a lockdown, however, but the result of an ongoing and deeper malaise in society, which was exacerbated by the measures taken.

In his final work *Morality*, the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks documents the increase in the number of people living alone, in an era he describes as that of “the solitary self” (2020, p. 30), without the traditional sources of support in place. In the USA, for example, he notes:

- only half of adults are married, down from 72 per cent in 1960;
- more than half of those 18–34 do not have a steady partner;
- a third of Britons and Americans over the age of 65, and more than half of those over 85, live alone; and
- fewer and fewer children live as adults in close proximity to their parents.

There are also fewer opportunities for people to embrace the ‘other’ through broad and diverse real-world networks. Perhaps the best-known of the social scientists describing the fracturing of institutions that have traditionally brought people together across generations, communities and classes is the American social scientist, Robert Putnam. In his book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2020), he charts the decline in membership of sports teams, local charities, religious congregations and so forth. Once we bowled in leagues, usually after work, but no longer; if we go bowling, we go alone or with a close-knit set of friends, reducing the opportunity to mix across diverse groups. This seemingly small phenomenon symbolises a significant social change which, Putnam argues, has wreaked havoc on our physical and civic health.

The more I have read about the crisis, the more strongly I have concluded that virtually every analysis of how to respond to the pandemic – in the Anglo-Saxon world at least – shies away from the critical need to reinvigorate family, kinship and community ties and recognise the role of faith groups in mutual support during the crisis. Or at least, if this is recognised, the fracturing of bonds in society is treated as inescapable fact; the tough policy choices we need to face up to if we are to reverse the trend are ignored.

There are some obvious reasons why this fragility has happened. We are facing an era – which started in the 1960s – in which individual desires are increasingly trumping the collective need for order, self-restraint and the common good. We are increasingly living in a world of subjectivity and value-free social mores, with an emphasis on individual autonomy. It is not unusual to hear the refrain from Generation Z that he or she is ‘living their best life’. This search for self-realisation has seemingly come at the expense of a richer account of human flourishing and human fulfilment.

**4 | THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS**

We must start by recognising that individuals are fundamentally social beings. This is not a conclusion that you have to be religious to reach. Far from it.

One of the most interesting writers today, Anthony Costello, eminent medic and anthropologist, examines the evolution of humanity from pre-social hunter gatherers to the present day. He argues that rather than being obsessed with finding big, complicated, technological solutions to modern ills, the solutions lie not in techno fixes but in harnessing the power of one of the oldest and simplest human units – the sympathy group.

In *The Social Edge* Costello writes:
Living in groups is our human condition. We were born to share and struggle, to care for others, be sensitive to their feelings, divvy up food, and work together on tasks. A balance between the individual and the group drove our evolution as the most successful species on earth. Survival of the fittest individual, and sibling rivalry, drives human success in many ways. But other traits determine success within and between groups: the size and cohesion of the group, the division of labour within it, the ability to communicate and to read the intention of others. Group diversity and our willingness to sacrifice personal for collective benefit create trust ... Our five or so close family members also usually provide nurture, love and unconditional care. But much of our happiness and skills come from sympathy groups, gatherings of perhaps three times that number in social meetings – through the workplace, religion, farms, gardens, hunting, clans books, sport, choirs, politics, loans, dance, games, nature, conservation, investment, hobbies, theatre and voluntary action. (Costello, 2018, p. 14)

Yet instead of arguing for rebuilding community, many on both left and right seem content to allow civil society to atrophy so that all that is left is market and state.

There is a deep problem with this approach. As Jonathan Sacks (2020, p. 126) writes:

The state cannot provide strong families or supportive communities. It cannot provide children with stable and responsible parents. It cannot generate the work ethic, self-control and resilience that are vital if individuals are to escape the vicious circle of poverty and unemployment and lead lives of happiness and hope. It is ... not surprising, that those who are suffering from this lack of resilience are increasingly discontented with those who govern them, asking from politics and politicians a satisfaction which they could never hope to provide.

This dissatisfaction is mirrored in the statistics shown in the Edelman Trust Barometer (2020, p. 12): fewer than one in five people in 26 countries in 2020 agreed that ‘the system’ was working for them; half said that it was failing. In my view, we need to rebuild from the bottom up, not from the top down, redefining what is meant by human flourishing, redefining what is meant by freedom.

One of the few who approach the subject from this point of view is Adrian Pabst (2021), who has called for a ‘post-liberal’ politics. He writes:

A truly post-liberal politics starts with the things that matter to people: their families and friends, the places where they live and work; the relationships of support and community that sustain them, and the institutions that provide security. Key to this conception of politics is the idea that we are embodied beings who flourish when we are embedded in interpersonal relationships and institutions giving us both meaning as well as agency.

This vision of what could be termed a ‘relational’ state is one that builds on the resilience and strength that we have shown in the face of crisis: one that learns that alone we are stranded, but that together we can overcome adversity.
RECLAIMING THE BRITISH ENLIGHTENMENT: A MARRIAGE OF FAITH AND REASON

Not only is this vision of reinvigorated families and communities consonant with Catholic social teaching, which teaches that we should always take action at the lowest level possible; it is also, I would argue, particularly British, stemming right back to the age of the British/Scottish Enlightenment. This is an Enlightenment which we now need to reclaim as uniquely ours, and one which stands in stark contrast to the individualism and rationalism of the French Enlightenment.

The late Gertrude Himmerfarb gave a lecture many years ago highlighting a key difference between the British and French Enlightenments by focusing upon a subject that has not received much attention to date: the distinctive social ethics in the two traditions. “The British did not have philosophes”, she said, “they had ‘moral philosophers’” (Himmelfarb, 2001, p. 298).

Repudiating John Locke’s claim to be the father of the British Enlightenment, Himmelfarb argued persuasively, that Locke’s student, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, has a better claim to that title:

It was he who gave currency to the terms that became the key concepts in British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the 17th century – ‘social virtues’, ‘social affections’, ‘natural affections’, ‘moral sense’, ‘moral sentiments’, ‘fellow-feeling’, ‘benevolence’, ‘sympathy’, ‘compassion’. (2001, p. 298)

Himmelfarb went further. The British Enlightenment was:

a philosophy in which compassion, not self-interest or even reason, played the larger part. In this respect, the Enlightenment was a repudiation of Locke as well as Hobbes, both of whom broke with the natural law tradition by positing a state of nature that was pre-social and pre-political, thus denying the social, political – and moral – character of man. (2001, p. 300)

It was this social ethic, she argued, a compound of the secular and the religious, the private and the public, that was largely responsible for what the French historian Elie Halévy called “the miracle of modern England”. This was the fact that England survived the economic revolution without succumbing to the political revolutions that wrought havoc on the continent (recognising that Britain had already faced the Reformation and the subsequent brutality of the civil war, which may partly explain its lack of appetite for another ‘revolution’ (2001, p. 311). In Britain “secular and religious institutions, civil society and the state, public relief and private charity complemented and co-operated with each other”. Himmelfarb argued that, unlike in the French Revolution (during which church and charity schools were abolished), the state and reason were not prioritised above other actors (2001, p. 321).

It is this complementarity of state and civil society that we are at risk of losing, if it is not clearly championed. It is essential that we continue striving to bridge the divide between reason and religion, and incorporate family, faith and charitable groups in the social reform agenda.

According to Himmelfarb (2001, p. 324), the heritage of the French Enlightenment can be seen in some of the most momentous events of recent times. Through its aspiration for the ‘regeneration’ of humankind, communism was intended to liberate people not only from religion but also from all the strictures and conventions of society; socialism “sought the ‘common good of men’ in an economy and polity that transcended both the good and the will of
individual men”; and it can also be seen in the creation of the welfare state, “whose penchant for social-engineering can well be described as an attempt to ‘impose man’s rational will on the environment’”. Today, the legacy of the French Enlightenment can be seen in “the disposition for ‘value-free’ social policies based upon an ostensibly ‘value-free’ social ethic, reminiscent of the philosophes’ idea of reason” (2001, p. 324).

Other thinkers have also argued compellingly that the greatest danger to democratic freedom is that people left the welfare of others to the state rather than took responsibility themselves. Most famously, the French aristocrat and political commentator Alexis de Tocqueville, in Democracy in America, written in the 1830s, was the first person to coin the term ‘individualism’. Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, similarly argued in his 1893 work The Division of Labour in Society that any society in which there ceased to be a shared moral code – a state he termed one of ‘anomie’ – would be unable to cope and would leave individuals stranded, vulnerable, at sea.

The hope we can take from the world’s response to Covid is that the sparks of a new approach have been kindled. And alongside the increase in loneliness, in anxiety and in depression – particularly among the young – we also saw some positive and unexpected results during Covid. Fay Alberti (2020) at the University of York has argued that we might even be seeing a grassroots redefinition of what ‘community’ means in the twenty-first century. In the UK, neighbours are looking out for vulnerable people and volunteering to offer support. University students and services are donating food and equipment to local hospitals, while urban and city dwellers alike in the early months of the pandemic stood outside their homes to clap every Thursday for hospital workers. Londoners are walking the dogs of people they have never met. These forms of community action are self-organised and dependent on the same social media networks that have previously been condemned as antithetical to real relationships. And they seem to be spreading, virus-like, between cities and countries.

6 \ LESONS FOR POLITICS AND POLITICIANS

This innate sense of empathy and common instinct to help each other unleashed at times of crisis contains lessons for politics and politicians.

First, I would argue, politicians need to rediscover the importance of family, of faith and of ‘place’ in politics. We all need to realise that change comes from the ground up and not the top down. This is not just a call for devolution, as is so often the case in politics, to the four nations of the UK, to mayors and cities or local authorities. Nor does it mean calling for a ‘small state’ which withdraws from delivering the services so many rely on. It is a call for a much deeper form of devolution. It means testing every single policy to see whether it supports and nourishes families, charities, faith groups and local communities, allowing them to take the active role that we have seen during the pandemic that they have the capacity for, or whether it undermines them.

There is not space here to consider many of the practical political implications that flow. But here are a few suggestions.

- The top-line message from one party conference being to remove tax privileges from private schools is hard to reconcile with wanting to promote the role of voluntary and faith groups in education.
- A benefits policy that grants significantly more to couples living apart than to married couples living together should be interrogated (and this is particularly the case for policies which claim to ‘put children first’).

KELLY
A policy that makes it harder for families to live in the same communities with mixed development, with space for elderly relatives, is putting artificial barriers in the way of family and community life.

As a politician myself in my former days,1 I tried to champion the kind of reforms that would promote parent-led and faith schools; that would tackle the discrimination against low-paid couples of the Working Families Tax Credit (as it was then); and for communities to be viable for extended families. I must admit that the gains, if any, were modest.

The good news is that coronavirus is changing what is possible. Alongside the heartbreak of friends and relatives suffering and even dying from Covid, alongside the sometimes intense loneliness of being separated from loved ones, alongside the economic turmoil of job loss or uncertainty, Covid has also provided the potential for more connectedness and more community. The challenge now is for that renaissance to be sustained, by politics, by faith communities and by our ourselves.

NOTE
1 The author served in a number of UK government posts between 2001 and 2008.

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