Towards a Civil Society

by

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Home Secretary

Rt Hon David Blunkett MP is the Home Secretary. This pamphlet accompanies his speech at the ippr fringe event 'Are We Nearly There Yet' in Bournemouth 2003. The views expressed remain the responsibility of David Blunkett and do not necessarily represent the views of ippr.

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Freedom Through Citizenship

At the centre of my political beliefs is the idea that individuals achieve their full potential when they are active as citizens in shaping their own lives and contributing to the governance of the community of which they are a part. It is by engaging in society that mutuality between individuals develops, and it is a two-way process of contributing to, and receiving support from, the wider community. This is more than just the exercise of rights and responsibilities. It is about the development and extension of our democratic processes in the community, which I believe can lead to a wider renewal of civic and political engagement.

In a very important sense, human freedom resides in self-government, and this in turn depends on active membership of a community. If you are not the author of your own actions then someone else is governing you, and your freedom is curtailed. As human beings, we are part of social, economic and political networks, and we cannot escape the consequences of the actions of others. We need to engage formally and informally in the governance of our community in order to have a say over our own destiny.

That does not mean that there is an overarching or 'general will', made up of the sum of all our individual parts. Nor does it mean that we all have to engage in simultaneous and continuous direct democracy. These are romantic, unrealisable and – more significantly – undesirable goals in complex, plural societies. But it does mean that unless we are active in the public realm, as citizens helping to shape the world around us, then we are not really free. That is why active citizenship is so fundamental. It is also why in reshaping government we need, as we are endeavouring to do in

the Home Office, to relate these values and theoretical concepts to the practicality of delivering services and building capacity within communities to take hold of their own destiny.

Thinking about citizenship in this way means we cannot just conceive of human liberty as the pursuit of private goals. That traditional liberal view of freedom is limited and simplistic. It fails to generate a strong account of civic duties and virtues, and as I have written elsewhere, it neglects the 'public interest' which is about the communal and not just the private space we occupy. We may not 'own' our brother, but we are dependent on each other for our well-being and fulfilment.

In some instances what we might benevolently countenance for the individual, we cannot accept for a group of individuals because it would breach our social norms. These are our rules of living and, in a world of rapid change, they provide stability and security in our society, determining behaviour and the very culture and framework within which we live. Our norms radiate out of respect built within the family to the broader community, and set the terms for how we maintain social order and social cohesion.[1]

However, to have real meaning and content for the Centre Left, a commitment to active citizenship has to be more than philosophical. It has to be capable of generating policies that will deliver our ambitions in the twenty-first century. I hope this pamphlet will help contribute to that task.

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[1] David Blunkett, *Civil Renewal: A New Agenda,* London:Home Office, 2003. The full text is available at http://www.homeoffice.gove.uk/docs2/civilrenewagenda.pdf

Civil Renewal

I use the term 'civil renewal' to describe the policy framework that flows from a belief in active citizenship. Civil renewal is about educating, empowering and supporting citizens to be active in their communities, socially and politically. As a first step, young people need to be educated for citizenship. That is why we have introduced citizenship education into the school curriculum. We have also proposed plans for language and civic classes for applicants for naturalisation in Britain. I further intend to develop education and training for community leadership and civil engagement for the adult population.

These are all means by which education can develop the skills, knowledge and habits of mind necessary for engagement as citizens. More broadly, lifelong learning – whether formal or informal – enables people to become and remain active in society, and it will grow in importance as our population ages. We have a rich and diverse history of adult learning in the Labour movement, and we draw inspiration from that past to inform the present. No-one should dismiss this as romantic nostalgia, for it was working class communities that survived through tremendous adversity by applying these principles in practice.

A thriving citizen culture also depends on people having the capacity to get engaged in the world around them. Sceptics argue that disadvantaged communities do not have the resources or commitment to take on the tasks of shaping and helping to deliver public services, and more often than not, it is just determined individuals or narrow interest groups that capture community participation forums.

That is a pessimistic and sometimes self-serving world view. But it demands a more considered response than simple dismissal. It is true that serious and sustained efforts are needed to build up the capacity and

willingness of communities to engage in collective decision-making. We know too little about how to do this, despite the plethora of activity in this area, and our evidence base is thin. That is one reason why we are creating a new Centre for Active Citizenship, funded in part by Home Office grant, so that we can build up our knowledge and expertise about what works in developing the capacity of communities to govern themselves. But there are inspiring examples out there in the real world, from Balshall Heath in Birmingham to the Royds in Bradford.

What does this mean for local government? Often it is argued that all this talk of civil renewal is an attempt to sidestep or sideline local government, by relating directly to community groups or creating direct elective mechanisms, in a reinvention of nineteenth century 'silo democracy'.

I reject these charges. They might have some force if you believed that we should just return to some mythical golden age of local government, or that all would be solved if we just gave lots more power to local authorities. The reality is different.

I am committed, unequivocally, to a living, vibrant, and enabling local government, which I wrote about 21 years ago in a Fabian pamphlet, and described in *Democracy in Crisis* in 1987.[2] As I said then: 'Defending democracy entails extending it, not merely holding the line.'

Local government should have greater power to innovate and lead changes in local service delivery. Partnership with other services, such as the police, are clearly crucial. But a key part of any reform agenda must be, in my view, to reconnect local government to local communities, building on core everyday concerns in areas such as the local environment and community safety. Security and stability are crucial to the very essence of building a decent and acceptable society and surely must be at the very core of the function of local government as much as for the nation state?

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[2] David Blunkett and Keith Jackson, *Democracy in Crisis,* Hogarth Press, 1987

It is very difficult to talk of quality of life, of public space, or even of regeneration when people's lives are bedevilled by anti-social behaviour and families from hell. In fact, this was the essence of the early Labour Party and Trade Union movement: a drive for the provision of protection and mutual insurance, coupled with opportunity, that gave people the ladder out of generational disadvantage.

It follows, therefore, that there should be a strong role for neighbourhood level engagement with local electors over issues of anti-social behaviour; community well being; and the quality, cleanliness and decency of the local area. From the imaginative development of existing Neighbourhood Watch schemes through to new Community Justice Centres, we are looking at how we can support at neighbourhood level those suffering the greatest degree of fear and insecurity to become part of the solution.

Building on these policies, we need to develop new forms of neighbourhood level democratic engagement, consistent with effective service delivery and economies of scale over wider service areas. I do not advocate just devolving everything down to a neighbourhood office.

Of course, to achieve equality and fairness we need to have mechanisms to overcome the inherent disparities and inequalities which inevitably arise in the allocation of public expenditure. We do this through distributive policies for resourcing of public services at a national level, although these are in turn distorted by demands of population and economic growth. We also have to do this at the local level to avoid investment being captured only by the most articulate, by those 'in the know', or by those with the loudest voices.

This is a big challenge. It is not simply consistency in what is provided in terms of public service and welfare entitlements. It is also about overcoming historic disadvantage and ensuring that the failure of

mainstreaming in the past is not replicated in the future. For if some experiments in targeted funding have been unsuccessful, it is a truism that the failure to develop such targeted investment and sustained capacity building is at the root of the mismatch between disadvantage on the one hand, and the means and resources to overcome it on the other. Anyone, like myself, brought up in an area of major disadvantage is only too well aware that the great strides taken in sweeping away slum housing, gross unemployment, and the worst of the environment, which as a child I knew to be indescribably polluted and destructive of health and longevity, would never have been achieved by relying solely on better funding through increased welfare payments, or marginal improvements in personal income.

Those who advocate general pooling or mainstreaming of all government resources point to the failure of targeted investment in areas of deprivation. In my view, some of this failure has resulted from a stiletto heel approach to targeting which has prevented flexibility and the cascading of resources across different boundaries (an issue which was raised in the Cantle report following the Bradford, Oldham and Burnley riots). There is a danger that we move too far to the other extreme and that the baby is thrown out with the bathwater.

So how do we balance greater local control and democratic empowerment with the demands of social justice, so that, for example, more resources go to schools in disadvantaged areas? How can we both revitalise and renew local democracy, whilst at the same time ensuring that public expenditure is distributed in a way that makes equality of opportunity and social fairness real? These are complex issues given that the areas of highest growth, economically and demographically, will draw down on national resources automatically, thereby reinforcing the long-term mismatch between need and the funds to support radical change.

Part of the answer to this question clearly lies in detailed study of the financing of services, and the balance of local and national spending. That

debate is currently underway. Crucially, we also need the best evidence for which interventions generate the most long term gains for equality: whether it is Sure Start and other early years interventions or strategies designed to prevent children becoming disaffected and dropping out of education.

There is also a debate taking place in relation to the importance of the accumulation and control of community assets, which would promote the building of the long term capacity for sustainability in disadvantaged areas. I think this is an essential area. Having promoted the necessary research whilst at the Department for Education and Employment, I welcomed very strongly the steps taken by Gordon Brown as Chancellor in setting up the Child Trust Fund and the broader debate on how we can narrow the gap between those who by inheritance or geographic location have substantial assets which are not available to those renting accommodation or living in low income and low value areas of the country.

In addition to these questions for national policy and funding, there is also a political challenge for local democracy. I became a councillor at the age of 22. But the average age of a local councillor in England and Wales is 57. Some 72 per cent are men, and only 2.5 per cent are from ethnic minorities. Local government, and local councillors, need to be more representative of the communities they serve, and more connected to their concerns. And at the level of political strategy, it is also vital that we embed a culture of active citizenship in our communities, so that temporary electoral setbacks do not unravel the gains we have made in democratic participation and service improvements.

All these issues are concerned with changing culture, but they are also about mobilising people to promote their own interests and to defend them. This was after all one of the successes of our political opponents in capturing the intellectual high ground in the 1980s. But now the opportunity for the Centre Left has the opportunity to redefine that debate, and the task of creating a civil and decent society is at the forefront of this

political argument.

Social Order and the Decent Society

Social order and security are the fundamental prerequisites of progress towards a decent society. Individual liberty, civil society and economic enterprise can only flourish in stable, orderly and strong communities. A strong community depends on its citizens' free acceptance of their rights and duties.

The rights that we exercise as individuals are based on the responsibility that we feel towards our families and to those in our communities. The foundation of a decent society – of a truly functioning civil society – requires a respect for the public spaces that we share, the property of our neighbours and the right of people in our communities to live free from fear and harassment.

The agenda to enhance quality of life and tackle anti-social behaviour is grounded in this responsibility. It starts in the home and in the family, and the responsibilities of communities. It moves out to encompass our neighbours and our local communities. Today there are people prepared to make a stand against the lack of respect and the anti-social behaviour that can blight our communities. As a government, we are giving people the powers they need to take that action, be they police officers, local councils, residents, teachers or environmental health officers.

As bonds of trust, belonging and mutuality grow, crime and disorder can decline. Working together our communities can be turned from places of fear into ones of confidence and safety and take their place as the essential building blocks of a decent society. It is only then that individuals and their families are empowered and enabled to lead self-determined, fulfilling lives. These are foundations that are important for us to build upon as we develop the inter-relationship between democratic engagement, active citizenship and the reform of public services.

Citizens and Consumers

The concept of citizen 'co-production' of public services is often counter-posed to that of choice and consumer focus. Many on the Centre Left argue that, whilst services should be responsive and user-friendly, the language and values of choice have no place in public provision.

I reject that dichotomy. It would be foolish and politically suicidal, in my view, to reject the concept of choice, and the importance of tailoring services to individual needs. We cannot fall back on standardised, bureaucratic models of service delivery. In their everyday lives, people are rightly used to high standards, flexibility and responsiveness in the goods and services they purchase in private markets, and they expect similar standards from their public services. Many more people today can actually buy private provision, and if the state service is inadequate, they will choose to do so.

However, that does not mean that individual choice takes place in abstraction from the conditions in which services are designed and delivered, nor that equity goals do not sometimes run up against the (usually unintended) consequence of individuals – parents, patients and other service users – exercising their rights to choose. As far as the design of services is concerned, a commitment to choice does not mean importing crude market models into public delivery.

So to present complex arguments about how to organise and deliver public services as a simple dichotomy between 'citizen' and 'consumer' models is unhelpful. Instead, the way forward should be to explore how best to unite our commitment to democratic deliberation and active citizenship with what we know to be the inescapable and legitimate demands of individuals for high standard, tailored services. That is not an easy task, and it will involve difficult decisions.

Ownership for All

A similar need to challenge dichotomies presents itself in the debate over ownership and asset building. The debate on the revision of Clause 4 boiled down to whether the Labour Party's commitment to common ownership was a conflation of a particular, historically contingent set of means with our ends, the core values of equality and liberty.

This debate was years out of date, of course. Tony Crosland had comprehensively critiqued the assumption that socialism meant nationalisation in the 1950s,[3] and most of our sister parties had long accepted the reality of a mixed economy.

Although Bryan Gould had raised the issue of employee share ownership in the policy review process in 1987, his proposals received a hostile reception, and the chance to debate how a future Labour government could promote a wider spread of asset holding in the economy was lost.

Yet the problem with having this debate at such a comparatively late stage in our historic development was that we failed to do any theoretical or ideological work on how private or mutual ownership could serve our values. At the time of the Clause 4 debate, argument centred on whether market regulation, rather than common ownership, could serve the public interest. But we did not debate how other forms of ownership might do so.

For most people on the Centre Left in the 1980s, the idea of a property owning democracy was Thatcherite anathema, and many people still think like that. But why should they do so? What is wrong with the idea that wealth ownership might be spread across

[3] In Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* London: Jonathan Cape, 1956.

society in private and other, non-state means, in pursuit of egalitarian objectives? Why can we not conceive of a society in which all citizens have an ownership stake, whether in savings, a home, or stocks and shares?

Such thinking has a long and proud radical heritage: from Tom Paine, through the Chartists, to contemporary progressive thought at think tanks like the IPPR.[4] In *The Future of Socialism*, Tony Crosland argued that: 'In Britain, equality of opportunity and social mobility… are not enough. They need to be combined with measures…to equalise the distribution of rewards and privileges so as to diminish the degree of class stratificiation, the injustices of large inequalities and the collective discontents…' that he felt they caused. Updating that debate is to look to the future. It is very much about fairness, but based and rooted in the reality of the twenty-first century. The challenge of today must be to reverse what appears to be the beginning of a trend of a reduction in social mobility and in equality of opportunity and social fairness.

Asset-based egalitarianism argues that acting on the primary distribution of wealth holdings in society can reduce secondary inequalities of income; promote autonomy and choice; and promote wider civic and political engagement. It is therefore essential to the wider long-term changes that we seek to effect.

Orthodox economists are sceptical of these claims. They argue that the assets we hold are largely a function of savings or investments derived from income (and borrowings against income), and that our expenditure or incentives to individuals should be directed at improving incomes, through education, work and post-tax transfers.

I do not disagree with the importance of income transfers, education and

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[4] See Stuart White, 'Asset Based Egalitarianism: Forms, Strengths and Limitations', in Sue Regan (ed,) *Assets and Progressive Welfare,* ippr, 2001.

skills, or jobs. It would be absurd to do so, not least because I was responsible for significant education and Welfare to Work reforms and improvements in service delivery. But I do make the claim that holding assets has an independent effect, over and above such factors as social class and educational achievement, on an individual's life chances, and that there is evidence to support that claim. When I was Secretary of State for Education and Employment I commissioned an analysis of two major data sets: the National Child Development Study, which tracks children born in a single week in 1958, and the British Cohort Study, which does the same for a generation born in 1970. The analysis showed significant correlations between the ownership of assets and improved social outcomes, such as a lower propensity to suffer unemployment or poor mental and physical health. The research offered strong empirical support for the contention that asset ownership helps develop self-reliance and responsibility, whilst opening up opportunity and rewards.

This has to be coupled with engagement and as the recent Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) programme of work on Democracy and Participation shows, there is a direct connection between engagement in the wider community based on a feeling of identity and belonging with both civic engagement and social mobility.

Particularly striking have been the findings from Sheffield University's Citizens Audit. In some respects this paints a healthy picture; people's fundamental attachment to the values of good citizenship are strong. Three quarters of people think they have a duty to vote and a similar number are willing to serve on a jury. But only 35 per cent of people are satisfied with British democracy, and over half feel that they have no influence over national policy decisions. This is a challenge to all political parties.

Migration and Identity

We now operate both in a global economy and in a world in which

national boundaries have been broken down, communication has been transformed and trade takes place on an entirely different basis to the past. These changes have produced unprecedented population movements. Migration is an inescapable feature of contemporary capitalism. As a proportion of the world's population, it was much higher at the end of the nineteenth century, when millions of Europeans migrated to the New World. But today, migration flows are more rapid, complex and integral to economic activity than ever before. In a modern economic framework, it is impossible to talk about social justice and economic prosperity without thinking about migration, its causes and consequences.

Migration is not something that can be wished away, as some would have us believe. We are not a 'Fortress Britain', and nor would it be desirable to try and become one. Migration – properly managed – can bring real economic, social and cultural benefits.

The Centre Left has never been fully comfortable with migration, despite its professed self-image. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, when British subjects from the West Indies exercised their rights under the British Nationality Act 1948 to come to the UK and work, they were met with a barrage of racism and hostility in working class communities. An emergency meeting of Attlee's Cabinet Economic Policy Committee in June 1948 asked the Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech Jones, to find out who the 'ringleaders' of the 'incursion' were, whilst Ministers briefly discussed sending them to Africa to work on government colonial projects.[5]

Later, in the 1960s, Wilson's government passed the discriminatory 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which created a second class of British Citizens with no rights of abode in the UK. Only recently, in the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act were we able to put right that wrong, and offer registration as full citizens to British Subjects, Protected

[5] Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain*, Macmillan, 2002, p138

Persons and Overseas Citizens. This was greeted with absolute silence on the liberal left, who with some notable and commendable exceptions had done very little to press for this wrong to be righted.

None of this is to say that migration does not pose significant challenges for progressive governments. It does, and the defeat of our sister parties across Europe in recent years bears testament to that. In the UK, the Right has regrouped recently to attack all forms of immigration. It tries to assert that migration is bad for jobs, housing, and economic performance, arguments which basically rehearse the Powellite position of the 1960s. That challenge is one that the Centre Left has to meet.

My contention is that progressive governments can succeed if they can manage migration effectively, in the interests of both migrants themselves and communities in the UK. Managing migration means having public administration systems, including robust border controls, in which the people can have confidence. It requires us to deal with abuse of immigration and asylum protection channels, so that it is clear to everybody that the different means to entry and stay in the UK are being used legitimately. And it means much better local strategies for inducting newly arrived asylum seekers, so that ignorance and hostility are minimised, and community tensions diffused. It is by building trust and confidence, reducing fear of change and difference, that we can develop both an acceptance and willing embrace of a more diverse yet integrated community. This is true of reducing anti-social behaviour and insecurity in the home and on the street, as it is in terms of building confidence in our nationality and immigration procedures.

We also need to integrate policy analysis of migration into a wide range of other policies including international development and traditional foreign policy; labour market and welfare to work reforms; and regional economic development. Migration has effects in all these areas, and the co-dependencies in different policy areas are becoming increasingly important. This can also be seen in the link between citizenship, identity

and a sense of belonging, and how we overcome exploitation of illegal workers who have entered the UK by clandestine means. The latter problem can only, in my view, be truly solved by advanced forms of secure identification, through biometric ID card provision.

Finally, migration has made Britain an increasingly diverse society. In addition to long established communities who came to the UK in the post war period from Commonwealth countries, Britain now has new ethnic minority communities including Afghans, West Africans and Somalis. Most remain concentrated in London and the major urban conurbations, but the need to disperse asylum seekers throughout the country has also led to the arrival of small clusters of ethnic minorities in many different towns and cities.

This increased diversity requires a new focus on civic integration. That is the main thrust behind our new plans for English language classes, citizenship education and confirmation ceremonies for new applicants for naturalisation. This is not an argument for assimilation. It is an argument for integration with diversity: neither a monoculture, nor segregation and endless difference.

This is a new departure for our political and civic culture. We have not historically had a strong tradition of common citizenship, or what is termed civic republicanism in political philosophy. We have tended to the laissez-faire, resting on anti-discrimination legislation to tackle racism and exclusion, and loose association in the public realm, rather than giving real meaning and content to the acquisition of citizenship.

Conclusion

The development of a just society must grow from the bottom up, rather

than being imposed from above. Civil renewal and active citizenship is about creating the conditions for people to take control of their own lives, with the state acting as an enabler, a supporter and a facilitator. In other words, government on your side, not on your back.

This is an agenda of historical significance and importance. Just as the late nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of community through municipal action, and the twentieth through state intervention and welfare provision, so in the twenty-first century, democracy must be revitalised. We need to rebuild our civil architecture. And to do this we must meet the challenge presented by an electorate who want government at every level to see them and treat them as partners, not simply as endorsers of distant decision-making.

A clear framework for working towards a civil society can give greater definition for the Government's reform agenda. Weaving together the strands of democratic engagement, active citizenship alongside choice in public services and greater asset ownership, all underpinned by the order and security essential to the stability of our communities, is a challenging agenda. But it is one that I believe can sustain the next phase of reform in the years ahead.

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