

# We are in this together

Liberalism is rooted in an individualistic account of humanity that has difficulty in accommodating the concept of objective virtue. Instead of ruling ourselves in line with this diminished 'reality', we must develop institutions and government that take account of our essentially social nature

It is one thing to establish the case for virtue; it is another to create its content and the institutions that will enable virtue to flourish, develop and prosper. Last week I argued that the current political and financial crisis was in part caused by the collapse of a pre-existing British virtue culture, one that fostered notions of good character, service and most importantly a common good. This good was not simply a democratic aggregate of people's private values, nor was it the imposition of a foreign value system on a subjugated class for the benefit of a ruling caste. On the contrary, it was both hierarchical and democratic; it posited a moral scale which exceeded the reach of most but established thereby the adherence of many.

If British moral culture had merely been that of elevating the code of the dominant caste above all others, conformity enforced through power would have created a static system that could not have survived a generation, let alone a century, of extreme social and economic change. Instead we had from the late-eighteenth-century Christian campaign against slavery, all through the long and contested nineteenth century, up to and beyond the two great world wars of the twentieth century, a fairly consistent and readily recognisable virtue culture that, if it changed, only did so to include more and more aspects of life under its ambit. So, for instance, the great eighteenth-century evangelical revival borrowed deeply from the Bible by arguing, contra the slave owners, that black people were also made in the image of God and therefore "our" brothers and sisters. This Christian insight transferred itself to the politics of capital and labour, shaped the politics of trade unionism and itself inspired the Tory nineteenth-century factory acts that limited the hours and addressed the conditions of Whig-sanctioned proletarianised labour. On the continent this writ extended to Pope Leo XIII's transformative social encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, which took a Christian view of human nature and stressed the mutual and reciprocal nature of a Christian economy. The last century saw the extension of this writ of full participation to women, and the melding of all of these goods in various notions of shared welfare and mutualism that, whatever its subsequent ills, established the post-war welfare state and the halcyon image of 1950s' Britain. I mention all of the above to stress the long duration of a consistent British virtue



tradition so that its attempted recovery should not seem quite so foreign or indeed unlikely.

Compare the preceding account, though, with what passes for morality today. Contemporary mainstream ethics are wholly liberal – that is, they endorse and validate the individual as he or she is and as whatever they assert themselves to be. Thus, since classical liberalism is essentially a-social and indeed highly individualist, it imagines the human being as a self-forming entity that emerges auto-generated from the state of nature. The task of a political morality is then merely to confirm this emergence and whatever nature is brought into the world. There is no sense in liberal morality whereby the human person must be educated, formed and shaped into the sort of person one *ought* to be: a person, for example, who is capable of recognising the common and reciprocal goods that constitute a life that, of necessity, is shared with others. Contemporary ethics does not enact a change upon the human person, nor indeed can it imagine transformation at all. It tends instead to confirm whatever assertion, need or prejudice the modern subject has. This innate individualism shatters common codes and pits individual against individual in the struggle for self-realisation. In a contest of wills somebody has to win. Equality is a construct

not found in nature, and since liberals are in essence creatures of raw nature (remember Rousseau's assertion that we are innately free but everywhere in chains) whose social emergence shackles them to society, they are at first pitted against civilisation, culture and ultimately any notion of a humanity that extends beyond their own nature. But of course since no human exists without other humans, society needs some bulwark against such aggressive individuation. Since the liberals, *pace* Rousseau, repudiate notions of shared virtue they must submit themselves to an authority that is their own but at the same time allows them to be with others. So conceived, liberals enter a social contract where the state ideally tries to blend them and their interests with others. Yet the problem of conflictual contest encountered on an individual level is merely repeated at the level of the state. The general will cannot blend wills that in essence are irreconcilable, so the state becomes either an absolute will in its own right enforcing its writ upon all others or it becomes captured by the most powerful and well-placed individuals, becoming a vehicle instead for their own power and self-realisation.

And if we are honest, is this not exactly what the current version of the British state exemplifies? We now have a powerful, authoritarian state bureaucracy centralising decision-making and social judgement – whilst at the same time the rich and well connected move seamlessly between state authority and market hegemony and reap vast financial and political rewards as a result.

Seen in this way, the real contest of history is not between capital and labour, men and women, or black and white people but rather between cultures of virtue and their destruction by liberal individualism. For the latter tends to enshrine conflict and therefore power at the heart of its political and economic order. Since conflict always tends to central resolution, the old corrosive oscillation between liberal atomisation and authoritarian state centralisation looks set to continue.

But there is an alternative to this destructive alternation: the revival of virtue. So what are the preconditions for the revival of a higher culture? Well, David Cameron outlined this in part earlier this week, when he said: "I believe the central object of the new politics we need should be a massive, sweeping radical redistribution of power: from the state

to citizens; from the Government to Parliament; from Whitehall to communities; from the EU to Britain; from judges to the people; from bureaucracy to democracy." What Mr Cameron is doing is reviving an older Burkean Tory tradition of intermediate structures and the politics of mutual and reciprocal communities. Instead of the vertical sanction of the state, which citizens can only experience as an act of external coercion, we now have the horizontal sanction of our peers, friends and colleagues. Crucial to a revival of virtue is the restoration of genuine liberty. Under liberalism, freedom is putative, formal and procedural. A revival of groups and genuine intermediary associations make liberty real, practised and predicated on actual content, not abstract form. The ordinary isolated person can never really enforce his or her freedom against the state, since their litigation can easily be overruled, ignored or derogated from. Nonetheless the language of rights appeals to an assertive and aggressive middle class whose penchant for lawyers only reveals their failure to understand the common basis of law. Rights themselves are only ever appeals to mutual understanding and the sharing of duties and obligations.

**W**e envisage the restoration and creation of new tiers and intermediaries between the state and the individual – which the state must acknowledge and which the individual can aspire to participate in. This qualifies and limits both state authority and liberal subjectivism. Indeed, it is where the ordinary person can enter true politics and see his or her assertions balanced by others and – crucially – by an account of what sort of moral beings they all *ought* to be. Since this is not a mere democratic aggregate but instead is blended with notions of higher example and social achievement – it unifies democracy and hierarchy – it saves the good from subjective reduction and instead casts it on an objective plane. For unless one can philosophically break free of radical individualism one can never even entertain the idea that there is an objective order that we can discern, debate and indeed follow.

To sum up, it is not for me or you to give content to the structure of virtue but it is for us to do so in concert with others similarly moved. We must look beyond ourselves to debate with one another the relative merits and claims of each group, interest or hope. But we already know that we are more than individuals, that we are born into the ties that bind, to the families, cultures and countries that give us a place in the world on which to stand. So, rather than looking in a mirror and remaining as we are, we cast our sight beyond to the broad sunlit uplands, where the old, the vulnerable, the yet to be born, the already conceived and the ill and unsecured are protected and nurtured by a virtue that encompasses us all.

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## CHRISTOPHER HOWSE'S PRESSWATCH

### 'I would love and admire *The Daily Telegraph* even if it did not pay my wages'



The secular press does not exactly respect archbishops but it does give them column-inches, regarding them as something like party leaders, rather as Tony Blair seems to see the Pope. This attitude can lead to archbishops being used as battering rams for causes of varying worthiness.

Last week the press got a new archbishop to play with. Archbishop Vincent Nichols was safely installed at Westminster, but a smudgy cloud hung over his happy day because of a comment he made on the report on the unspeakable history of abuse of children in Ireland. As Dominic Lawson, in an interview in *The Sunday Times*, put it, the archbishop had "praised the 'courage' of those in the Church who had 'faced these facts from their past'." It sounded as if he was referring to the guilty abusers, rather than to religious congregations that had confronted the evil in their midst.

Interviews with Archbishop Nichols showed that journalists are far better served by home visits than by lunch in a restaurant. The colour counts. "The books on his shelves are about politics, power and (inevitably) the Pope, but the grandeur of the decor and furniture has faded, as if the place belongs to an aristocratic but threadbare aunt," wrote Cole Moreton in *The Guardian*. It's a good job that the interview didn't take place in Manning's old Archbishop's House round the corner, "an ugly barrack-like building", where the cardinal lived in an atmosphere of "bleak austerity", as his biographer David Newsome put it. Dominic Lawson found the present-day decor less threadbare. "I ask, is this – the imposing drawing room of the archbishop's house in Westminster – the summit of your ambition? 'No; the summit of my ambition must only be to get to heaven,' he replies smoothly."

"You could say the Archbishop of Westminster is now the pre-eminent Christian leader in England," Cole Moreton judged. "More people go to Mass every week than to Anglican services." Perhaps, but it was still to the Archbishop of Canterbury that *The Times* resorted for comment on

the scandal of MPs' expenses claims. He helpfully distinguished between inherent honesty in behaviour and the fear of getting caught.

*The Times* piece reflected the three-week investigation of MPs' expenses by *The Daily Telegraph*, a newspaper which I would love and admire even if it did not pay my wages. The investigation has had a huge impact and one cannot help suspecting *The Times* is a little jealous.

Dr Williams wrote: "The continuing systematic humiliation of politicians itself threatens to carry a heavy price in terms of our ability to salvage some confidence in our democracy." The headline on an accompanying news report in *The Times* said: "Archbishop appeals for end to MPs' humiliation", which is not quite the same thing.

The next day Dr Williams and Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, fronted a statement about an undeniable threat to democracy: the British National Party. They "called on people to shun extremist parties and to use their vote positively in local and European elections on June 4", the *Sunday Mirror* reported. The BBC's website said that "on a European election campaign poster, the BNP has used an image of Jesus suggesting that he would vote for the party", as if the bishops were motivated by the poster. But the BNP needs no poster to be offensive. Even so, those posters are puzzling, bearing a rather soft and Italianate image of Jesus. I doubt if many BNP supporters have a pious devotion to the Sacred Heart.

An absurd report in *The Times* last month said that the Prince of Wales on his visit to the Pope was to be given a facsimile of an appeal by the peers of England to the Pope in 1530 asking for the annulment of Henry VIII's marriage. It would have been rum if the report had been true, and it was not. Last week the pesky parchment popped up again in a despatch by Richard Owen. "The Vatican has authorised the publication of a limited-edition facsimile" of the document. Wow!

A Venetian company is producing 200 copies. Who on earth will buy them? One has been sent to the Pope. Since he already has the original in the Vatican archives, he'd perhaps prefer more of those nice dessert plates, decorated with flowers from the garden at Highgrove, which made him smile when the Prince of Wales kindly gave him some when they met.

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