

## The Intoxicating Mix of Power and Paternalism

*"We believe that the State is under the moral law of God, and is intended by Him to be an instrument for human welfare. We therefore welcome the growing concern and care of the modern State for its citizens, and call upon Church members to accept their own political responsibility and to co-operate with the State and its officers in their work."*

1948 Lambeth Conference resolution

Did Archbishop Temple realise that in abdicating provision of welfare to the state, targeted help for the most disadvantaged would be severely reduced by universal provision for all? Or that the UK's national debt would rise inexorably over the next 70 years, to be paid off by future generations? Or that the Church itself would decline massively as a result of losing its living witness to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'?

And, turning to politicians themselves, how do they balance the motives for power and the paternalism which drive universal provision within their conscience, particularly when they know it undermines the extent of support available for those most in need? I would say 'with difficulty'.

The first question on the BBC's Question Time programme last Thursday was on the Resolution Foundation's proposal to give all 25-year-olds £10,000, and I was much heartened by the short shrift it was given by both panellists and audience alike. It set me thinking about what drives influential people to come up with universal solutions, whether they be Karl Marx or David Willetts.

We are a species which doesn't easily tolerate individual freedom. History tells us that as soon as people were able to coerce others, they did: starting with the Pharaohs in Egypt or before, stretching through millennia of kings and emperors, and extending into religions which corral their followers into line.

The desire for power has a longer pedigree than paternalism, but the only difference is that whereas the former could be either bad or good for its subjects, the motive for the latter is by definition benign. However both seek to apply collective control over others, and they become easily confused with each other in the self-justification of leaders for their actions.

However paternalism has provided an acceptable cloak for power over the past 200 years: even spreading into business, with industrialists such as John Cadbury providing housing and welfare for his employees, and moving on through John Spedan Lewis whose inspiration led to what is possibly the world's most famous co-operative, with even holiday mansions purchased and set aside for employee use.

No doubt many of these leaders were driven by altruism as well as self-interest: they are indeed a far cry from the self-centredness of Ayn Rand, who made a virtue of deploring altruism. But it's one thing to recognise the yearning for people to belong in society and care for each other and quite another to use that natural instinct as a justification for control over others.

The reaction against Margaret Thatcher's misunderstood quote 'there is no such thing as society' should not be taken as an excuse to control that society. Going back over the past 100 years it is possible to see how universal provision of welfare has almost subconsciously fallen foul of a shift from paternalism to power.

Before World War II, welfare was generally provided by people of faith, driven by Jesus's teaching to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'. Who is my neighbour? The parable of the Good Samaritan taught that it was the person you'd least expect. And Jesus went on later to teach 'for as much as you did this for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me'. Christian welfare was unequivocally targeted on those most in need.

World War II not only increased the need for welfare immensely, it also severely impacted the resources available to those people of faith to continue with their good work. So when the Attlee Government proposed universal welfare, Archbishop

Temple welcomed it with open arms with the resolution at the head of this commentary, possibly failing to realise that it brought with it a shift from targeting help for those most in need and adopting the socialist code of universal provision.

So, for the past 70 years, politicians of a socialist persuasion have used paternalism as an acceptable cloak for grasping power whenever, wherever. The fact that most people would be capable of choosing and paying for their own healthcare or education has been masked, in democracy, by a “something for nothing” culture: any suggestion that state monopolies might not be the best way to organise basic human needs being met with derision.

As a result the national debt has risen inexorably and to unprecedented levels in peacetime decades, and the youth of tomorrow are left with picking up the tab for the huge cost of our indulgence over these seven decades.

Paradoxically, Archbishop Temple's statement has also played a central role in the decline of his own – and my – Church, since it condoned removal of the living witness that people of faith were giving to that teaching to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'. Food banks, street pastors, help for the elderly, are still going on in large quantities run by people of faith, but they are side-lined in terms of the Church's profile. What the secular world sees is club-like tradition of music and ceremony, which will be further emphasised in next weekend's royal wedding, rather than supporting the weakest and most disadvantaged.

Meanwhile David Willetts has fallen directly into this trap of universal provision, and needs to re-think his ideas. What people, and especially young people, want is the freedom to achieve their potential, to build confidence, and to take control of their own destiny. Of course they want to maintain relationships and help others - what they seek is not freedom from belonging but freedom in belonging. The best instructor for that is not Karl Marx or Aneurin Bevan but Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine a society full of confident people who care for others not so fortunate as themselves? In control of their own destiny, but with a deep respect for others and a desire to empower others to take control of their own lives?

That's what egalitarian capitalism looks like. It may be an '-ism', but it's not collective. It's what 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité' was all about, before the politicians got hold of it.

Gavin Oldham

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