

# THE REAL LIFE STATE

Putting dignity at  
the heart of our  
public services

**Alison McGovern MP**

**FABIAN  
SOCIETY**

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Do morals matter to politics? On the one hand, it seems obvious, even uncontroversial, that they do. Politics is the process of making collective choices about the world we wish to live together in. Competing priorities require principles by which to take decisions. And yet the practice of politics rarely interrogates the moral assumptions our political debate relies upon.

Our political choices are made, in some way, on the basis of the values we prioritise. There is a diversity of 'things' that are valued: efficiency, efficacy, beauty. And one of these qualities is the moral quality of a choice. Political choices are 'right' or 'wrong' in moral terms, as well as other terms.

We need to understand who we truly are and what matters to us. The fire in our hearts for change is derived from somewhere. To paraphrase Aneurin Bevan, we are not desiccated calculating machines. Or not all of us. The passion that inspires politics, the desire for change, is the core of its importance. To understand it is to know why it all matters. It's why we fight.

This pamphlet seeks to understand the moral values we share and explain why the concept of dignity is the foundation of progressive politics. Dignity means enabling autonomous, capable people. Dignity represents people who have respectful, caring relationships to each other. It means not allowing market transactions to exploit undue advantage. Rather than seeing improving public services solely through the prism of increased spending levels, a state that prioritises dignity would rethink how politicians relate to public servants, and how public servants relate to the people.

Firstly I will ask where our moral values come from and what they are. And then I will look at the role of the state, using the NHS and JobCentre Plus as examples, and see if we can reshape the role of government so that our values flow through it. Saying what these institutions are good for and whether they espouse and promote our values could help us change the way they operate for the better. Dignity should be our guiding principle and help us to understand what we are looking for.

In 2008, the world economy failed to the extent that governments were forced to provide vast amounts of capital to global banking institutions. The finance companies that failed did so because they had obligations to others they could not fulfil. To this extent, there has been a crisis in the market

economy. The collateral damage of this crisis – company failure and high government debt in some countries - has had a huge human consequence. Unemployment has risen sharply.

This situation is a disaster. Governments lose tax revenues from those out of work as well as gaining liabilities for the social payments that prevent destitution. Unemployment is costly, not just to the person concerned, but to their society. Crime rises in areas with high unemployment, as people become susceptible to drug abuse and other crises. So even those who keep their job suffer, and the economy is more unstable as a result.

Yet high unemployment is wrong, not just because of ineffectiveness with regards some particular aim, but because it offends our moral sense. We should change our world not just because we see an imbalance in power and resources which restricts global economic growth, but because we value human dignity. We are moral creatures who react emotionally and subjectively to the world, as well as being able to understand it scientifically.

Zero hours contracts, low skilled work, the threat of redundancy used as a management tool: all of these aspects of modern working life demean and undermine the self-respect of the average working British person. And all the while, the current government thinks up new schemes to remove or trade away rights at work; and when the worst happens, to treat people who need help with suspicion through punitive sanctions.

In response, we need better arguments for progressive politics which explain why small government and liberal freedoms are not enough for the realisation of a good society. So let's go back to the start, decide first what it is that we value, and then shape our world accordingly.

This approach matters because of whom we are trying to communicate with. The public are not engaged by arguments just about efficacy. Of course whether a policy works is necessary for public support. But it is not sufficient. We need to demonstrate that politicians have ideas that come from their own experience that they feel to be right too. Of course our ideas will be tested in the media's furnace to make sure they are strong enough. But unless the public can see our motivation, they will be sceptical of a political class that looks like it wants power above any particular purpose. Policies that explain our values make stronger, winning arguments.

I believe that we can strengthen our political discussion by understanding the moral passions that drive us and articulating them more clearly than we do now. Knowing what we stand for helps us communicate with those whose support we need. And will help us deliver for them once we've won.

# 2

## THE MORAL VALUE OF DIGNITY

Picture the scene. A 50-year-old man arrives at a job centre. He lost his job in heavy industry some years ago and has spent his life since living on government benefits. The economy moved on past his skills, and there is no work listed in the job centre website that he can do. He speaks to the staff, who inquire about his job search efforts, but have little to suggest by way of help. They are unsure how he should find work. He's a proud man, and too embarrassed to admit to his family that he spends most of his day watching television, slumped in a chair.

Or picture this situation. Parents with disabled children meet to discuss the state care for their young ones, most of who have no more self-awareness than a baby of less than a year old, though they are 7, 8, or 9. The parents are panicked because the municipal government (which is charged with covering payment for their children's care) is on a cost-cutting drive. A government official tells the parents that the problem is, "with the advance of medical science, these children have lived too long".

Or this one. A single mum with a young child goes to see her member of parliament. The flat she lives in is provided by her local authority. The walls of her child's bedroom are mouldy, often wet to the touch. Her child has asthma and sleeps in the living room in winter when the damp is worst. They have applied to move, but there is a housing shortage. She tells her MP she feels like a bad parent for letting her little one live like this.

These are the quiet realities of life in Britain. Not immediate crises, or terrible disasters, but nonetheless these scenarios pose a challenge to us: what is wrong here? Clearly, something is. In addition to many other faults – the ineffective wasteful use of state funds, the ill-treatment of the vulnerable, and the medical ineffectiveness – my view is that the moral question at issue is dignity. That the ability to take pride in existence, and our desire for that pride and dignity for those we care about, steers our moral perception.

We could criticise these scenarios on other grounds – that the man's underemployment is economically inefficient, that the government official's response is rude or discourteous – but in addition we make a specifically moral judgement about scenarios such as these. We think there is a wrong being done.

These scenarios are all ones that I have learnt about from my constituents

or experienced during my time in politics. Politics, in my view, is influenced by moral judgement. The commentary that follows is designed to shine a light on the moral value that I think is pervasive and important: our need for dignity.

This is not a new insight. George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* from 1937 describes the human judgement inside the mere statistics on unemployment:

"When a quarter of a million miners are unemployed, it is part of the order of things that Alf Smith, a miner living in the back streets of Newcastle should be out of work. Alf Smith is merely one of the quarter million. But no human being finds it easy to regard himself as a statistical unit. So long as Bert Jones across the street is still at work, Alf Smith is bound to feel himself dishonoured and a failure."

All who have known the depression of unemployment recognise this threat which becomes as significant as the material disadvantage. The shame of being useless.

Dignity isn't just about a lack of work though. Let me recount one of the most extreme examples of indignity I can think of. In Rajasthan, India, women from the lowest social caste are still expected to work as scavengers, cleaning out faeces and scum from the drains of their social 'betters'. A report from the International Labour Organisation describes the fate of one woman:

"Born in the colourful state of Rajasthan as a Dalit, the lowest of the castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy, Anita had few employment options other than what her parents had done and what her community expected her to do – manual scavenging."

This occupation consists in the removal of human excreta by hand in public streets, septic tanks or closed gutters and sewage. It is characterized by the dramatically unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, which continue to exacerbate the practice of untouchability and marginalization of Dalits.

In this setting, Anita began to work in different households, physically cleaning their dry latrines. The usual payment for her efforts was a single roti, a piece of Indian flatbread."<sup>1</sup>

Discrimination passed down through the ages keeps women out of any chance of a 'normal' life. These women are looked upon as a lesser kind, a lower sort of human being. Their indignity arises because, somehow, sections of Indian society still accept classification of people that are, despite constitutional protection, in reality seen as and treated as 'untouchable'.

Consider too this example of the place of rape in South Africa. A BBC news report from 2009 cited a study from the South African Medical Research Council that found one in four South African men admitting to having raped someone.<sup>2</sup> One in 20 said they had raped a woman or a girl in the last year. The study included rural and urban areas and all racial groups. This means that an average family from the survey group would be likely to have someone within it who has raped someone. The researcher said about her



results:

"The absolute imperative is we have to change the underlying social attitudes that in a way have created a norm that coercing women into sex is on some level acceptable."

Some men treat women as objects to be used, violently if necessary, for their own purposes. They are damaged physically, mentally, and may never live without fear again. But the perpetrators (according to the researcher) are convinced that their actions are part of 'a norm'.

Back in the UK, Home Office statistics reveal that two women a week are killed by someone they are in, or were in, a relationship with.<sup>3</sup> Domestic violence ends the life of two women in Britain per week; surely a moral crisis also here on our doorstep.

Wouldn't you think most people would quickly condemn these horrific situations, existing right now, around the world? And that therefore the only barrier to ending these practices is political will and the tools to enforce change?

My argument is designed to show that this is a necessary pre-cursor to finding the political will for change. And that politics without a shared moral perspective is weak and fragile. Mere political agreements are thin, and require moral foundations to produce real change.

And it's not just extreme moral situations. Everyday scenes such those I've described above inspire moral comment. Public discussion does not just relate to objective facts about efficiency and the proper use of public funds. People have a view about the rightness and wrongness of situations they encounter in their lives and choose to express it through the media or direct to the politicians that represent them.

We need a clear understanding of what these moral judgments are, and how they have legitimacy. Describing the reality, or the sociology, of our values is not enough. If political values are anything substantial, if they are truly universally acceptable, they must rest on a conception of the good that is much more well-founded.

There is, however, a contrast here between articulating a 'conception of the good' and attempting to moralise. I am not part of any group of politicians – either Conservative or just conservative - hailing a bygone era of moral upstanding that no longer prevails. I do not think that 'things' in general were better, from a moral standpoint, at some earlier time in history. The argument I want to make is just the opposite. What I think is needed in politics is not narrative about our past, but an analysis of the conception of right and wrong that we do, in fact, share now.

I once took part in a debate in the House of Commons in which my recollection is of a Conservative MP giving an excellent description of the conservatism I reject, particularly in relation to moral value. He said that as a conservative, he believed that the status quo needed no argument. Rather, it is change that needs to be argued for. The status quo, he implied, is valuable

just by virtue of being the existing state of affairs arising from our past.

Not all in the Conservative party would think of their values in precisely this way. Some think of themselves as 'reformers'.

But in calling myself a progressive, I am opposing precisely this conservatism. I think that the status quo requires an argument for its preservation, just as well as any option for change. People should not be bound by history.

The perfect example here is the recent debate on same-sex marriage. By the opponents of the legislation, a great deal of weight was put on how marriage had been defined in the past. By the supporters of the legislation, history may or may not have been a relevant consideration, but if it was, it was only one amongst many.

A progressive argument in favour of social reform can explain that, in a good society, family life is supported and treasured. But we make this argument in opposition to those who hark back to a 'historical' idea of the family, valuable on the grounds of tradition.

We do need a strong sense of our values. But this is no excuse for moralising, or imposing the judgements of one group in time on us all.

It is possible to stay clear of complete moral relativism, whilst stating that a good society certainly enables its members a significant amount of personal freedom to do as they choose.

# 3

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE, CARE AND RESPECT

Our morality describes things that we really truly care about, perhaps more than anything else. But what are these things? What matters to us so much we confuse it for a universal truth?

My short answer to this question is 'love'. Moral value can be defined as that which is preferred, wanted, desired in human relationships. It is the kind of relation which is wanted between people. And that sort of relation is, in fact, one of care, of love, of respect. Humans wish for and are capable of caring for each other regardless of any reason other than that they do.

We can often be instinctively compassionate. If someone falls down, people rush forward to pick them up. If someone is homeless and sleeping in the street, it feels wrong because we do not want another to suffer. We do not want them to be lonely, hungry or cold.

But why do we care about other people?

Our human imagination enables us and equips us with the thoughts about how others might feel in pain or deprivation. And so our relationship to the person suffering is one of care and one in which I suggest we respect their human dignity. We want to restore them. We feel ourselves to be in an unbalanced relationship to the other person, worried about them, wanting to change their position. We wish them respect and for their place as an equal to be recognised.

And it's because we care for others that we can imagine their suffering. When we see someone in pain, 'laid low' by their suffering, we want to bring our relationship back into balance. This is especially the case with extreme poverty. It can feel shaming to be poor. The impact of illness, too, is not limited to the damage to health but also demotes the status of the person - if, for example, they are unable to look after themselves.

The 'right' thing for us to do depends on its value to human beings; whether an action is the kind of behaviour that will bring about better relationships and promote our dignity as human beings.

Understanding our moral values allows us to say what we really care about. In our human compassion and love for each other, we are promoting human dignity. This, I think, is the nature of our morality. The source of our morals is in our desire to promote the quality of human relationships. Where people live together well, individuals and communities of people do so in

dignity.

There are two important aspects to understanding of the moral role of dignity. The first is that described above: its nature is to be understood in terms of the quality of human relationships. We find a society to be better, more desired, where its participants care for each other's well-being, where they have regard for one another. If there are relationships of care, we take the view that this is, on the whole, a good thing.

As Adam Smith opens *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

"How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we see it or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner."

Suffering, poverty, illness and undue disadvantage can damage human dignity. So then, it is worth asking: what does it feel like experientially to live in a world where people are treated with care, love and respect for one another?

The crucial point here is that we need to not only consider some objective, third person conception of a good society, but also the subjective position of individuals within that society. How a person feels about themselves and their position in life can depend on their relationship to others, and feelings are most certainly shaped by the values of the society a person resides in. However, the dignity of a person is also essentially their own. Who else could it belong to?

Not only is dignity a quality that a person possesses, but it is a state that the individual is best equipped to recognise. If we want to find out whether a person feels pride in their accomplishments, feels unburdened by prejudice, feels autonomously capable of living a decent life, we had better ask them. No one else has the authority to say.

Our ability to realise personal autonomy, real freedom, or what I call dignity, depends on social relationships and the wider world. And this implies important consequences for politics and government.

I have a strong sense of the truth of this position from my direct political experience. It is this that made me think so much about pride and dignity. When you meet someone who faces the shame of unemployment, you can see that it affects them physically. When you meet a mother or father who feels that they are unable to protect their family, the worry and embarrassment is written on their face. Their eyes cast down and you can feel the shame and the sadness.

I find it hard to imagine any thinking, caring person meeting people in this state, and not find experience wanting to help. You do not need to have dedicated your life to a caring profession to have a sense of solidarity with a person in distress, depression or oppressed by their inability to stand on their

own two feet and get by. You just need to be a 'normal' person with a fairly normal emotional connection to your fellow human beings.

As Hazel Blears MP wrote in her 2004 pamphlet *The Politics of Decency*:

"My starting point is that human beings are capable of being decent, loving, collaborative and kind...the vast majority are good people, capable of extraordinary feats of generosity."

Are these brave words for a politician, when presented daily with evidence to the contrary by aspects of the printed press, or even the practical realities of their surgery? Or rather the strongly held conviction of a politician reflecting on experience?

In a book about football on Robben Island - the South African prison built to detain the political prisoners of the anti-apartheid movement - Professor Chuck Korr and Marvin Close tell the following story about prisoner Sedick Isaacs. Sedick was a young teacher and activist when he was jailed. Prisoners on Robben Island were forced to work breaking stones in the prison quarry.

"In his first few days on the island, Sedick found life in the quarry almost impossible. Slight in build and distinctly unathletic, he struggled desperately to meet his daily quota of broken stones. However, help was at hand, and it revealed to Sedick a growing sense of unity and selfless solidarity among the prisoners on the island. He would turn around from hewing out a rock from the quarry to discover that the amount of stones in his pile had suddenly multiplied. The stronger, fitter men were keeping a running, daily check on those who were older, weaker, or just plain ill. Wherever humanly possible, they hit their own targets and then surreptitiously helped other comrades to attain theirs."

The consequences of not hitting the target for prisoners were severe: withdrawal of meal tickets, for example, meaning serious hunger. The punishment for undermining the prison regime would have been equally harsh. So the prisoners were making sure that those who could not cope with the harsh regime were protected, at physical cost to themselves and potentially much worse, including solitary confinement. No rewards were likely in return for this kindness. Yet they demonstrated care for each other nonetheless.

Sometimes it is easier to see good represented than describe what makes it so, but this example is, in reality, the moral feeling I have tried to describe. It is an inspiring example of the human capacity for care of others. I would find it hard to accept anyone who described the behaviour of the prisoners here as anything other than utterly morally admirable.

The question is, where does it come from? What makes this behaviour happen, and what prevents us from treating others like this?

How governments, markets and society promote or hold back these fellow-feelings is the policy debate I think we must have.

In the following chapters, I will look at work and the economy, public services and the wider role of government and ask what questions we should

ask about our moral preferences in relation to the practical choices that affect us all in society. Considering our moral values, alongside the many other views on a problem, is inherently important. So getting it right matters.

Society, the market and the state all affect our feelings, our sense of self, and the moral rights and wrongs in the world. Their processes and functions persuade or dissuade us to live up to the better angels of our natures. How this works, I hope, can help us put our hopes and aspirations into practice.

# 4

## THE DIGNITARIAN STATE

**W**hat can the state do to rebalance government intervention in favour of dignity and autonomy, especially in the case of public services?

There are many examples of politicians who would argue that the state is, necessarily, the problem. The large role played by the government in our lives crowds out the action that would otherwise be taken by self-organising groups. It is thought by some that government and civil society are opposing forces, and that the presence of government undermines collective work that people might otherwise do for themselves, voluntarily.

Along with government's role in providing services, I think the case can be made for an activist state, intervening in markets in the name of upholding our moral preference for dignity and community.

Yet, we should not be without criticism of the state itself. In a world where government procures public services, taxes and redistributes, the role it itself plays in influencing the culture and realities of life is large.

### Government versus the individual

The current Conservative-led government in the UK has attempted to make the case for the government versus the individual. The prime minister, David Cameron said in 2010 in response to questions about his 'big society' policy:

"The big society is about a huge culture change where people...don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for the answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves."

The use of 'instead' in this phrase implies that there is a zero-sum relationship between problem solving arising from government and individuals. He continued:

"It's about liberation – the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street."

While Cameron's definition here is not precise, his argument appears to be that there is a straightforward exchange to be made between power resting in an elected government, and power resting with individual choice.

Let's consider this claim. Do governments 'crowd out' the making of

choices and the use of power and influence by individuals? Would life be freer if government were in some sense 'smaller'?

My answer here is in two parts. Firstly, I think we should recognise the difference between rhetoric and policy. I would question whether purveyors of this social theory do, in the end, live up to their words. I am not sure the policies delivered necessarily match up with the idea set out above.

Secondly, I think that the relationship between the power individuals have, and that which their government has, is more interconnected than the zero-sum picture given above by Cameron. The relationship between the power of a state and the power of individual people within it is complicated. States can empower or they can undermine, and it is key to the protection of human dignity that governments improve and achieve the former.

### The priorities of the state, not the size

Recalling the post-war history of the UK, for some time from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, a consensus held across political parties about the role of government. Perhaps this related to the general acceptance of a political economy that asserted the possibility (at least) of government redressing flaws in the market, especially at times of bubbles or shocks.

But then in the 1980s, the consensus broke down. Former prime minister, Margaret Thatcher led calls to "roll back the frontiers of the state". The 1979 Conservative manifesto stated: "The State takes too much of the nation's income; its share must be steadily reduced."<sup>4</sup>

So, while it's a fairly commonplace analysis of Thatcher's view of government that she was in favour of reducing the role of the state, levels of public spending during that period do not necessarily support this. Between 1979-1985' spending against GDP did not fall below 44 per cent, though spending did fall sharply in the next four years to 39 per cent by the time she left office.

Margaret Thatcher was a monetarist, meaning that she prioritised economic management to control inflation. However, the fall-out of this was, given a floating exchange rate, an appreciation of the value of sterling. This increase in currency value caused serious problems for manufacturers attempting to sell British products abroad.

The government's economic management of the economy impacted the lives of those who worked in or near productive industry. And so it cannot be said that the government withdrew its influence from their lives of those people.

I believe that those who say we need less activist government – an end to the nanny state – are covering up their real argument: not whether the state should be smaller but what its priorities should be. Margaret Thatcher's appetite for privatisation did not transfer to shrinking armed forces or police powers, for example. She made an economic argument disguised as an



argument about the size of the state.

Further, there are many in politics today who use the rhetoric of the small state, but who at the same time argue for state intervention.

For example, consider the use of 'stop and search' powers by police officers. Police forces spent a long time lobbying the government to remove the monitoring of the ethnicity of those stopped and searched. They called it 'red tape', unnecessary bureaucracy. From the perspective of the police this was 'too much government', an interference by the state in their policing role. However, the situation from the perspective of the citizen who might be stopped is quite different. Without monitoring to prevent abuse of stop and search powers, it is the police who have too much power. The actions of the state here empower a group of people (those who might be stopped) in the face of a possible abuse of power by a particular arm of the state (the police).

Consider also how we feel at the time of disasters or crises – floods or fires, failures of child protection, threats to national security. No one expects government to stand idle. At those times, the state's role is demanded, as it was after the financial crisis in 2008.

Government 'interference' does not, as a matter of course, imply a restriction of freedom. Whether or not the net result of government action favours freedom is dependent on the existing distribution of assets, including money, talents, abilities, skills and so on. What capital – including human and social capital – an individual has access to will determine their freedom. How government increases this is a practical question. But I do not think any politician should argue against government action as an impediment to freedom just as a matter of course.

## A government for dignity

The capital an individual has access to determines the freedoms they can enjoy. Government's role is increasing the ability of each to become all of the things they might wish to be. Another way to express this is in terms of autonomy, or protecting or restoring dignity. We can describe this as rebalancing deficits of social capital, enabling all to flourish. The question then is: how?

Nothing changes your perspective on the role of a policy and politicians more than human crisis. Whether a faraway disaster brought close by television or the vulnerable constituent brought to your surgery in desperation, any politician with moral feeling just wants to help. The act of putting yourself between another person and that which could harm them is, in my view, the reason that most politicians signed up for the job.

So the lessons above about government's relationship to crises must be understood if the moral motivations that drive politics on a day-to-day level are to be articulated and debated.

## Understanding human needs

'Need' can be controversial, in some ways. A criticism is made that too many governments have focussed on 'needs' rather than rewarding and incentivising contribution. We are told by some that politicians must choose whether to offer support on the basis of need, or prioritise reward for hard work. I believe this misunderstands completely the role of the state. In fact, its role is to make sure people have what they need in order to work for the things that they desire. Government is there to provide a platform on which its people can stand. To quote in full Neil Kinnock's brilliant phrase describing this very idea:

"Why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Why is Glenys the first woman in her family in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Was it because our predecessors were thick? Does anybody really think that they didn't get what we had because they didn't have the talent or the strength or the endurance or the commitment? Of course not. It was because there was no platform upon which they could stand."

American psychologist Abraham Maslow opened up a new front in the understanding of human motivation. He described human beings' hierarchy of needs. He said that we are motivated by a pyramid of desires, the most basic at the bottom, and only with these fulfilled are we able to move upwards through to self-actualisation.

There is perhaps a helpful connection between his insights and the work of the post-war British government led by Clement Attlee. A crucial political issue of the time was post-war rationing. Access to food and basic necessities was foremost in the public's mind, and the then president of the board of trade (Harold Wilson) as long ago as 1949 used nascent public relations techniques to celebrate the end of rationing, by being photographed tearing up a ration book. But, Wilson also saw the need for government planning, and said at the time: "Certain controls over the location of industry and other things necessary for a policy of full employment...should be a permanent feature of our system." Once government could be sure basic needs were secure, it should turn its attention to longer-term human achievement.

In society, the government has a role in securing both the basic physiological and safety needs, and also working up the hierarchy towards self-actualisation and empowerment needs. Tackling not just the most fundamental deprivation, but also the poverties of ambition and self-expression, as described by Kinnock.

The role of the state is both to protect against the threats posed by the absence of basic needs fulfilment, but also to be the promoter of higher order needs. This is coherent, in my view, with Amartya Sen's understanding of human capabilities. And considering Maslow's analysis of our needs, there appears to be no inconsistency between a requirement that the state provide

for the basic fundamentals in life, and also empower us to build ourselves and fulfil our aspirations. Good governments can do both.

The question then becomes how should the government act to truly empower people in their everyday lives? Or, to put it another way: what should the real life of the state look like?

# 5

## THE REAL LIFE STATE

George Orwell writes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*: “Even when I am on the verge of starvation I have certain rights attaching to my bourgeois status. I do not earn much more than a miner, but I do at least get it paid into my bank in a gentlemanly manner and can draw it when I choose. Even when my account is exhausted the bank people are still passably polite.

This business of petty inconvenience and indignity of being kept waiting about, of having to do everything at other people’s convenience, is inherent in working-class life. A thousand influences constantly press a working man down into a passive role. He does not act. He is acted upon.”

We need to pay attention to the real-life state. Not just the contents of policy pamphlets or debates in parliaments, but the reality from the perspective of those the state is supposed to serve. From decisions taken by senior leaders, through to the attitude of government employees working directly with the public day to day, the weight they place on moral values and preferences influences the experiences and perspectives of the population they are there to serve.

Society is more than just a set of rules. There are also the perspectives, socially shaped, of the people within it. Those public servants must make sure the state is genuinely empowering – not just in theory, but actually. There is no point designing pseudo-markets in public services or democratic ownership models if they, in reality, do not fulfil the realisation of empowerment for people.

The examples that follow give some more detail about how reforms set out in theory only work if the practice is right. In essence though, the key to a real-life ‘dignitarian state’ is attention to detail. Government services have to be responsive and personal, but much more than that they have to demonstrate the moral values we espouse. They have to constantly strive to create a society where human relationships are valuable. Where the way we treat each other reflects the respect we have for each other, and the dignity we recognise in every person.

We should ask everyone who spends public money to listen and change.

There are truly fantastic, dedicated, friendly people working for the state. But there are also people whose tone and manner seem to show disrespect,

or even a dislike, of the people they are there to serve, perhaps it is because they are overworked or undervalued. Too often, maybe this is because they are poorly managed.

The change we need in our state operations will only be brought about if we make sure that systems change attitudes that exist in a minority of public sector staff. Consider the last exchange you had with a government employee. Was it friendly and respectful? Did they take ownership of any problem? Were you listened to? Stress, disempowerment of staff, falling living standards all take their toll on the people who work for government. So, sadly, there are still too many examples when public servants treat the public as though they should be grateful they are getting anything at all. This has to end. The state doesn't necessarily undermine or disempower. But it will, if the people at the front end don't live up to public service values in practice.

## Reclaiming public service reform

If politics stems from our moral choices, and government – at the least – can set the context for us to live out our moral choices in a practical sense, then we need to consider how it could do this. How is it that the state can intervene in society to enable us to live according to our moral values? Or at least, could the state act to shape our lives so that we can act more in accordance with the things we value?

Labour's policies, realised from 1997 to 2010, made many positive progressive changes to Britain. Though they are not always a feature in the press, positive outcomes with the NHS, record achievements in schools, and the rescue and then success of city economies like Liverpool and Manchester tell their own story. The dissatisfaction with the Tory approach to the business of government puts these achievements in relief.

The state was able to perform its public function sufficiently well so that public satisfaction with its services improved. The NHS is a key example. Yet to portray Labour's public sector reform as complete misses another perspective that I know well from listening to my constituents. Ask yourself this: how many times have you spoken to someone who has to be polite some feedback on their last encounter with the state? If this happens when you are out campaigning with your local councillor or member of parliament, hopefully they step into the breach and offer to take up the case and complain to whichever department or arm of the state has sinned. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Job Centre Plus, the local council and health trusts: all are at the sharp end of providing customer service to the public, and in my experience, too often fall short of standards expected.

And often, this is not a matter of policy. Rather, we need to consider policy from the viewpoint of the public's experience of that government policy.

A good example is tax credits. From a policy perspective, tax credits – reverse tax if you like – changed the way we looked at benefits. Unlike lifting

the personal allowance, handing money from government back to those who need it lifts people out of poverty, without wasting it on those who earn plenty.

But HMRC have administered tax credits in a manner that has been unhelpful at best and rude at worst. They overpaid people – by an average of 10 to 14 per cent, according to a select committee report - then had to claw these funds back. This will have caused distress and uncertainty for the families involved. The very group that the government had already decided were in need of extra support were given a difficult time.

The letters I see from HMRC still astound me even now, with their use of jargon, their inability to explain clearly what decisions have been made and why, and the alienating impact on the recipient. HMRC sees the process and not the person. My constituents are too often just lines on a data set.

In the recent recession, I've met too many people who, having tried to enquire about what possible support may be available from the Benefits Agency are treated as though they are a potential fraudster. Of course we need rigour in our benefits system - without which social security is hard to defend - but it must be delivered with thought for the individual.

In my view, if it was the rules at all, it was more often the behaviour of the state more than the rules we made that made people question whether Labour stood up for 'people like them'.

I think we as politicians need to set the standards we expect of public servants. Large companies regularly review whether the behaviour of their staff lives up to the corporate values of their company. They try to establish norms at work to make sure the practice of their operations lives up to the ethos of the company. If global multinationals can, why not the state?

Politicians, by and large, have a strong sense of mission. Especially in the case of progressive politicians - they see their core reason for acting as improvement and change. The language of policy making begins with moral ideas. But at some point, in order to be successful, this language must become practical reality. The practice of government – the management of the state – is like a huge corporation.

Why don't we express our universal, progressive moral values in the day-to-day life of the state? In my view, there is a serious disconnect between the political expression of values in parliament and the action of the state at the person-to-person level. Progressives can no longer afford this. The real-life of the state undermines our argument for government action if the public don't like the attitude of the state that greets them.

## Management consistent with our values

So how can we make this happen? Altering governance structures sadly is not enough. Democratic accountability, whilst important, is too much after the fact. In order to alter the behaviour of staff on the front line, there must

be change in the culture of management. In my view, only high quality, responsible management in the name of universal principles like fairness and decency can make real our aspirations for the activist state. I firmly believe that the vast majority of public servants, given the option, could provide a friendly, person-centred service, given the right culture and the right support. It's bad management that holds them back.

Politicians should assert that the state's behaviour matters all the way through the public value chain. So management of these services needs to be done in a manner that is consistent with our values. Dignity, and a respectful, helpful attitude from the state needs to be made real and lived out by every part of our governments. Civil service managers must become experts in helping staff understand what is expected of them. Not just in the processes they complete but in the attitude they present to the public.

Take for example the National Pensioners' Convention's Dignity Code. They set out with clarity what is expected in everyday English. It is easy to understand and straightforward to live up to, given staff with the right values that are managed well. The next state is for senior managers to then take responsibility for targets that test whether these standards are met. As independent scrutiny out-with politics is the vogue, why not give public sector regulators responsibility to inspect, Ofsted-style, against standards set by parliament for the decent treatment of the public they are there to serve?

The alternative – leaving it to chance on how the state treats the public while we craft ever more complicated policy levers – is a huge risk. Whenever the state disregards the people it is there to serve, this makes the Conservative party's argument for them. They can say: "See how you were treated by the government? There is too much government, the only relationship of respect is that of the commercial transaction." Defending public services is only possible when we treat the public as we would wish members of our family and our friends to be treated. Only then can we really hold up an active government as a statement of our progressive values.

## Targets

If we need an interventionist state, based on a government for dignity, how could that happen? To date, public sector change has often been brought about by using targets. And in politics, targets matter. It's pretty hard to get elected without saying what you will do if you win. The public are rightly sceptical of those who are unclear about their practical priorities.

And once you are seeking re-election, delivery is an absolute political necessity. I recall a member of parliament once describing to me his "what have the Romans ever done for us" leaflets. He had to remind to his voters that at the previous election he said what he was going to vote for – smaller class sizes, more nurses – and that he'd done it. Future pledges alone were not enough. We needed credibility too.

However, it's not controversial to suggest that simple targets have their flaws. Back in 2010, in his paper 'The birth of the relational state', Geoff Mulgan questioned whether we ought to shift from a delivery state to a 'relational state'. Objective targets, which do not consider the subjective perception of government by the individual, are limited. If the state is to maintain the support of its public it must care about the quality of its relationship with the public. Over the past three years, progressive thinkers have developed this investigation: relationships that the state has with the public are now at the heart of the discussion about how progressives would change government, including a further detailed discussion from IPPR in November 2012, in their worthwhile collection *The Relational State: how recognising the importance of human relationships could revolutionise the role of the state*. What matters is the real life of the state.

Let's take an example in detail: the National Health Service.

### Quality challenge

To argue for our model of healthcare – the NHS and all it stands for – quality of care is crucial. If people think the public sector can't take care of them properly, they'll look to the private sector to respond to their needs.

If the NHS treats people without dignity or care, it is highly damaging. Of course, it is problematic to the person concerned. For those with acute, rather than chronic conditions, this may be a one-shot treatment event and so, the NHS can't make it up next time.

But there are wider sociological impacts of poor quality in the NHS. Firstly, consider the language used when the Health Service was founded: 'comprehensive'; 'promoting good health'; available 'irrespective of means, age, sex or occupation'. These are moral causes, and when the NHS comes up short, it does not meet our moral aspirations.

From a political perspective too, failure of quality gives way to those who would like to undermine the moral principles of the NHS in favour of a market system. If the NHS cannot meet the expectations of those it serves, it sends a message out: only the market can be truly responsive to your needs. Our analysis of moral values helps us be clear then that all are entitled to good care – no matter what their income or location. But we need to perfect the practice as well as the theory.

So, if this is the challenge, how can it be met? In government, Labour attempted both to address historic underfunding of the NHS, but also to address questions of standards: waiting lists, inequality of treatment availability, poor buildings, and so on.

Let me leave the question of funding and standards for now, except to say that I take it as evident that maintaining levels of funding and clarity on standards expected are necessary to a well-run health service. And that the fiscal challenges created by global economic turbulence and the current



Conservative-led government should not be underestimated. However, I believe that there is an additional question that we must address in order to fulfil the moral aims of the NHS, and that this is the question of quality.

I think we need to understand our moral perspectives on the state. What happens when the state makes a person feel good about themselves and the community through its actions? I would suggest that we re-shape the NHS in order to protect and promote dignity.

What would this mean? I suggest that the NHS must increase the extent to which its treatments and services are centred around the person being helped. They must respond to the specific needs of each individual and be appropriate to their development and empowerment.

Let me give some specifics of how that could be done. Firstly, there must be increased attention to detail. In our data-rich age, supermarkets and online stores pay attention to our actions and our purchases, they map our habits and tailor their services and communications to how we, in reality, live our lives. We condone this monitoring, in my view, because it's useful to us.

Even if the idea of this data collection has opposition, we are all now accustomed to the consequences of it. The NHS needs to catch up in its understanding of the people it serves, and remember to pay attention to them. From consistently holding and using the correct courtesy title for a patient, through to tailored, specific communication, the NHS has a long way to go to improve the attention it pays to its public.

Treating people as individuals, not as mere parts in a process, is at the core of a dignitarian health service.

Secondly, we are only beginning to address the NHS's capacity to empower and develop capabilities. Good health is the foundation on which other successes in a person's life are built. Take mental health as an example. Highly debilitating chronic conditions, as depression at its worst can be, fundamentally undermine a person. Their sense of self-worth is eroded and they care little for themselves. This can have all kinds of negative consequences, including poverty, further illness, or even worse.

If we could re-shape the NHS to value the opportunity cost of poor health as much as we do fixing a person when things go wrong, we would approach communities of people in a very different way. To refer to the moral value discussion earlier, this would address health 'inequality' and protect 'rights'. Both those conceptions are very useful frameworks for understanding where we are trying to get to, and can be used to campaign for the change we want to see.

## Whole person care

The consequences of what I have described are easy to say, but not altogether straight forward to organise. We need to treat patients as a unique individuals and pay attention to the specific barriers they face, rather than a

series of tasks to be fulfilled: replace hip, find care package, stop him smoking - the treatment of which each has a separate funding mechanism, target and accountability structure.

Andy Burnham has rightly pointed the Labour party in the direction of 'whole-person' care, where the state integrates its health and social care services around the person who needs help, rather than expecting families to navigate around complicated systems. He gives the example of Torbay, where this process is already under way:

"The best advert for the people-centred system in Torbay is that more people there die at home than in any other part of England.

When I visited, they explained that they had never set out to do that – a target had not been set – but it had been a natural consequence of a system built around people. A real lesson there for politicians."

Now, the ability for each to have a good death is a difficult subject that many have wrestled with. But that taking a person-centred approach seems to have stopped Torbay residents dying needlessly in a medical environment, but rather in the comfort of their own surroundings seems to me to be a moving victory for dignity. The public servants who help us at the end of our lives deserve very great respect. It is not a job I could do. To know that some are able to bring about the most peaceful and respectful death a person could want is inspiring for the capacity of the NHS to do good.

In their 2011 book, *Intelligent Kindness*, John Ballatt and Penelope Campling unpick the forces that might cause healthcare professionals to treat their patients not only poorly, but unkindly. They, as I have done, focus on the quality of relationships between individuals, saying:

"Kindness challenges us to be self-aware and takes us to the heart of relationships where things can be messy, difficult and painful...Kindness is natural – we see it all around us. It drives people to pay attention to each other."

So what gets in the way of kindness? In the first place, the work of health professionals is extremely difficult. It is both technically complex and emotionally wrought given the pressure from emergencies and risks if mistakes are made. Also, there is the physical distress that can come from the practical difficulties of lifting, cleaning, and otherwise manipulating human beings, and human material. It's a common understanding that professionals often cope by creating distance and by not engaging with the people they are treating.

What's more, Ballatt and Campling find that there are structural reasons that can work against kindness. Fragmentation in health services disassociates health staff from seeing the whole person. In other words, where a team of people providing a service are narrowly focused on one particular task, they are unable to look beyond the job in hand to the individual's broader health. Not only this, but tension can arise between different parts of the health service, as staff perceive patients to have been 'dumped' on them by others.

Little wonder that, at times, staff members are at risk of becoming angry with the patients.

Structural changes in the NHS no doubt take their toll, and whilst it would be naive to believe that protecting staff from any change is possible, I wonder if we can do more to recognise the destabilising effect politically driven change processes can have on the culture of the health service. To quote Ballatt and Campling again:

“The plethora of (often incompatible) performance management paradigms is unlikely to fall away completely any time soon. The challenge is to find ways to promote the intelligent kindness required both to mitigate the potential for damage in these methods and to improve patient experience, efficiency and effectiveness.”

No easy way forward there. However, the idea of a dignitarian state helps us as politicians recognise:

- That patient experience truly matters, and that for those who believe in the solidarity of collective healthcare, the best argument for our philosophy is the lived relationship between patient and caring professional
- That a professional's ability to be kind will be shaped by their own feelings of security and good management
- That our targets and quality measures must be intelligent enough to measure, or at least describe, this very valuable perspective on the state

# 6

## WORK AND IDENTITY

I want now to turn from the government's role in public services to the government's intervention in the labour market. In chapter two, I described the nature of moral choices, and their relation to our dignity and autonomy. These values are inextricably connected to our identity, both as an individual and as a society. I have suggested that the reason that moral choices are important to us arises because of the relationship of self-respect we have to our self and the relationship of mutual respect in which we stand to others.

We have a shared identity, a 'code' within which our values make up part of who we think we are. What we care about matters because of our self-identity, and vice versa, who we think we are influences what we care about.

In this respect, work matters. The employment a person has implies not only their income, but their identity. In English we usually say "I am a teacher" rather than "I work at teaching" or "I am employed as a teacher". Our job determines who we are, not just what we happen to do. Our work colleagues are part of our community; their views and opinions shape us and give us a sense of our place in the world.

Our world as an employee or business-person comprises an 'honour world', as Kwame Anthony Appiah's described it. We share values, aspirations and expectations with those that we share our place of work with. There is more to the world of work than a transaction, labour for cash.

However, 'classical' or traditional economic theory says that people work because they are paid to do so. They need wages to pay for the necessities of life, and beyond that, the goods and services they wish to have. According to traditional economics, workers are motivated by the compensation of pay. The price of labour is the result of a straightforward negotiation between worker and employer. As Adam Smith wrote:

"The common wages of labour, depends everywhere upon the contract usually made between those two parties, whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little, as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower, the wages of labour."<sup>5</sup>

According to this understanding of work, employment is not central to our

identity. Our motivation in working is to charge a price for our labour that allows us to pay for other things that we want. It is a simple exchange.

If this is the case, we can describe a mathematical function expressing for any given hours of work, how much cash a person would require to do the job. In diagrammatic format, this function gives us a person's 'utility curve'. Essentially, it demonstrates a possible set of choices available to a person.

Labour market economists derive the price of labour – wages – from the interaction between an individual's utility curve and the number of hours available for them to work in the day. A utility curve expresses numerically a range of options that a person is indifferent towards, and economists calculate the interplay between the price of labour and the choice-set individuals have before them in order to predict how many people will work, given a particular wage level (or vice versa).

Individuals in these models are assumed to be rational choosers. They are an incredibly powerful tool for us to understand how people would choose under specific circumstances, given all the information needed to work out their own preferences and the price of work.

I think the problem with stopping at this analysis is that it omits, or at least underplays, the moral and sociological reasons that affect employment choices. This leaves us with an incomplete political understanding of one of the great challenges we grapple with: unemployment.

I don't wish to be understood here as giving succour to those who quickly condemn people without work as feckless or an 'underclass' of some kind. Politicians are often far too quick to pass judgment on groups they perceive as being part of a problem. David Cameron, recently described Britain as having experienced a "slow-motion moral collapse". What does this mean? He did not discuss that. Had he investigated moral values and found us wanting? He gave no evidence, and made very little argument in favour of his view. I fear that for some politicians, moralising is just part of their political position. This is not the aim here. I am attempting to do better than that.

Still, nor is unemployment just a function of the wider economy or conscious choices made by rational actors. We cannot afford for our moral perspective on work to be simplified, or rely on 'moralising' political rants that owe more to Victorian popular culture than to a thorough understanding of moral philosophy or psychology. Yet, I think we can legitimately describe it as a moral shame. But why?

## What is unemployment?

Returning to the classic economist's understanding of employment, this model assumes that people are motivated to work because they want the things which money earned affords them. Wages earned are set at the point negotiated between employer and employee, given the number of people wanting to work and the hours available to them. Wages are the

market-clearing price of labour. If there are more workers than job opportunities available, then the price of labour should fall until everyone who wants to work has a job.

On this basis, some have argued that governments should do very little to promote employment except remove barriers to work, such as requirements for employers to pay tax on employees wages paid. It is argued that those who wish to see an end to unemployment (or underemployment, where workers cannot get all the work they want) ought to support very minimal government intervention in the labour market.

Before considering this argument, let me say more about when unemployment occurs. Let me differentiate between different types of unemployment.

I'm using these labels to unpick the different ways in which unemployment

## TYPES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

**Frictional unemployment** is the time period between jobs when a worker is searching for a job, or transitioning from one job to another, caused by the time it takes workers to search for a job, and occurs even when wages are flexible and there are enough jobs to go around. Frictional unemployment will always be present, and it being at a slightly higher level is not necessarily a bad thing as it may lead to better matches between jobs and workers, which in turn could lead to greater productivity and higher incomes.

**Structural unemployment** is unemployment resulting from a mismatch between demand in the labour market and the skills and locations of the workers seeking employment. Even though the number of vacancies may be equal to, or greater than, the number of the unemployed, the unemployed workers may lack the skills needed for the jobs; or they may not live in the part of the country or world where the jobs are available. This type of unemployment can sometimes be due to a sectoral shift, which is a change in the composition of demand among industries or regions and is often caused by technological change or new international trade agreements.

**Cyclical unemployment** occurs when there is not enough aggregate demand in the economy to provide jobs for everyone who wants to work. This is explained by demand for most goods and services falling, and so less production is needed and consequently fewer workers are needed, wages are sticky (ie inflexible in the short run) and do not fall to meet the equilibrium level, and mass unemployment results. It can be caused by real GDP changes, monetary and fiscal policies and the effect of uncertainty in the markets (this uncertainty causing employers to hold off on recruitment).

can occur. They are not intended to be definitive or exhaustive. However,

exploring the different circumstances under which unemployment occurs demonstrates that the immediate causes are not always similar or straightforward.

The impact on the individual and community of different circumstances under which unemployment occurs will feel distinct in each case. The end result of each of these types will differ because the cause is unconnected. So our understanding should be different.

Firstly the impact on the economy will be different. Consider the following possible economic costs of unemployment:

1. If the government replaces the income of someone who does not work for a living, the value of this transfer payment falls on other taxpayers. In total across a population of those without work, these payments may become a significant ongoing cost to the state.
2. The opportunity cost (or, the benefits that could have been realised) had the person worked.
3. Any extra costs associated otherwise with the relatively low income of the individual or people concerned. For example, if they fall prey to a substance addiction, or commit a crime in order to gain income in response to their lack of work.

Now, if we want to decide what action the state should take about unemployment, we are better placed to do so, given that we have unpicked how the problem has arisen. We can then take decisions about where and how the state should intervene in the labour market.

In the case of frictional employment, it is possible that temporary shifts in employment patterns allow workers to find jobs that are better suited to them outweighing the three possibilities above. In the case of structural unemployment, unless it's addressed by the government, it is highly likely that these costs will outweigh any other growth that has resulted alongside the unemployment (eg shift to a more productive sector) so it's possible to make a straightforward argument that government should seek to deal with this. In relation to cyclical unemployment, there is much economic literature in the role of government and central banks on the macro-economy, and whether tools such as interest rates and the control of the money supply can be used to stimulate economic growth and, or, employment. These are all vital questions that deserve a great deal of consideration.

Yet, these cost-benefit analyses are not enough to express all of the aspects of unemployment that matter. To repeat, there is a large amount of academic economics dedicated to understanding the labour market. My aim here is not to summarise this, rather to indicate the kind of questions that are considered. This research on unemployment as an economic phenomenon develops our understanding of this social problem.

But work and worklessness inspires much political discussion. At times of economic downturn and increased unemployment, it can become the dominant political question. And we cannot escape the broader perspectives that form part of the public debate on work. Unemployment inspires passionate political opposition, because there is a moral instinct enlivened. The view that there is something wrong with people being left without work arises from somewhere.

## Moral 'cost' of unemployment

As I have described in the first section, though, however compelling arguments from economic efficiency may be, this is not enough to support political opposition to unemployment. I think this for two reasons: firstly, the nature of our understanding of our economy, and secondly because a reliance on purely economic arguments does not describe our entire human perspective on work. We also have moral preferences and moral choices to make.

Firstly then, economic 'facts' are disputed. I have stated above the 'costs' as I see them, but it is open to empiric proof whether or not these are short-term or long-term costs, or if, in addition, there are short-term or long-term benefits. What might appear to be a cost today might be a long-term investment tomorrow.

Our understanding of a particular phenomenon in the economy can take some time. In so far as economics is a science, we should remain open to the possibility that allowing unemployment turns out to be more economical than intervening. I could offer a thousand pieces of evidence that unemployment is more costly in the long term, but if economics is science, not dogma, I should be open to the thousand-and-first study showing proof of the opposite.

The problem is, with regards unemployment being 'worth it in the end', I'm not neutral at all.

And secondly, what about our moral perspective? What is wrong with unemployment?

In the first chapter, I explained that for me, our understanding of the world is one thing, but without moral choices, our understanding cannot motivate us to act. We make choices based on 'right' and 'wrong' judgments. In turn, 'right' or 'wrong' moral judgments arise from an assessment of circumstances and the resulting impact on a person's dignity, especially in relation to how they stand to others.

For two reasons then economic explanation of why unemployment is wrong is just not enough. Firstly, whatever facts there are about how the world works, there is in addition our perspective, perceptions, or, our lived experience, of those facts or that scenario.

To explain, here is an insight from philosophy. Thomas Nagel is a



philosopher, currently at New York University. He has written highly influential work in the field of philosophy of mind and ethics. His contribution to philosophy of mind centres around a paper he published in 1974 called 'What is it Like to be a Bat?'

Philosophers since Plato have debated the nature of reality. One of the central questions philosophy is trying to answer is: what is there in the world? In the context of philosophy of mind, the point of debate is whether there are mental phenomena. In other words, in addition to the physical things that exist in the world (atoms and objects and so on), could there also exist mental things: thoughts and feelings collectively making up consciousness?

Physicalists' answer to this question is no. To quote philosopher David Papineau, the theory of physicalism "claims that everything is physically constituted".<sup>6</sup> They do not agree with the possibility of mental phenomena entirely separate from the physical entities that make up the world.

On the other hand, dualists contend that there is, in addition to the physical, mental substances, entities or phenomenon. They argue that the mind, in so far as it thinks, is a thing made up of properties that are separate from physical properties. The physical and the mental necessarily have different qualities; therefore, they are different things.

Nagel's contribution to the debate is enlightening about the nature of consciousness. He argues that consciousness implies subjective perspective:

"The fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism... We may call this the subjective character of experience."

The relevance to the moral perspective on unemployment here is that the conscious experience of work and unemployment adds something to the description of the situation. If we only seek to understand economic phenomena through data that is objective rather than the subjective lived experience, we have an incomplete description.

It is only by the understanding of feelings and perceptions people have about their lived experience that we can express politically what matters. Economics is often jokingly referred to as the 'dismal science'. I believe we should add a bit of life to it. We should take account of what it is like to be in a place in society, subjectively, rather than merely a view of the economy that describes objective facts about the make-up of society. Lived experience matters.

This point should not to be confused with the importance of behavioural economics. Behavioural economics is a subsection of this discipline that describes the actual behaviour of agents in an economy.

Rather than the traditional approach to the subject that deduces rational assumptions about the way rational agents will behave given incentives, behavioural economics researches the actual behaviour of people in the real economy. This part of the discipline can provide new insights, especially where, given psychological patterns, we know that human beings just don't,

in reality, act rationally.

But this is still not enough for me to describe the whole picture. Behavioural economics is still attempting to get to an objective 'God's eye view' of the world. Even if this is possible, it is missing out on the subjective 'what it is like to be' qualities that also exist.

To quote Nagel again:

"...every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view."

As I described above, our moral perspective, our feelings, our emotions count for something, and need to be understood. Our feelings and our passions are our motivation. They drive us forward, as Hume described. It's possible that economist's view of unemployment (or in truth any aspect of the market under inspection) could therefore be incomplete, unless we take account of the perspective of the individuals involved.

However, perhaps it's possible to understand these 'moral' preferences in the usual terms of economics. Some economists have attempted to create models to analyse the labour market, including people's identity preferences. For example, George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton have written about how the inclusion of identity in utility functions (the understanding of a person's preferences) changes previous economic conclusions about the labour market.

This analysis is helpful in getting us closer to understanding the impact of moral preferences on employment. After developing theoretic models of how group identity may influence work preferences, and what impact this has on choices made, they argue:

"A person's sense of self is associated with different social categories and how people in these categories should behave...simple extension of the utility function could greatly expand our understanding of economic outcomes. In a world of social difference, one of the most important economic decisions that an individual makes may be the type of person to be."

In other words, there is economic evidence that identity and the place of a person in a group has consequences for their choices in the labour market.

Now whilst this is a helpful exposition of why identity matters for outcomes, their model relies on pre-existing factors about our society that they are able to incorporate into the theoretical framework. They are taking identity – of gender, social class or race – as a given and seeing how loyalty to that identity impacts economic consequences.

There is, however, a prior question to be answered. What is it that makes identity and employment linked like this?

As explained above, we can try to understand what it is like to be a person faced with choices about their work. There is another perspective for us to understand.

Can we understand moral perspectives on unemployment?

I have argued above that a straightforward economic understanding of

unemployment, while important, lacks the perspective of the individual on their situation.

So, identity, moral values and employment are deeply connected. As described by Appiah, our self-respect and esteem comes from the pride we take in our identity. As I described earlier, our moral preferences arise from our values, or the things we want. One of these things is the self-respect of belonging. As Appiah has written:

“Morality itself requires us to recognize that every human being has, other things being equal, a fundamental right to respect that we term dignity... Dignity is a form of honour, and its code a part of morality.

However you come by your honour – whether by success that led to esteem, or by recognition of some salient fact about you – you can lose it if you fail to meet the code...if you yourself meet the standards you have self-respect, and if you fall short, you will have contempt for yourself, which is shame.”

This for me is how unemployment connects with our moral preferences. To quote the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt on self-love:

“Loving ourselves is desirable and important for us because it is the same thing, more or less as being satisfied with ourselves. The self-satisfaction to which it is equivalent is not a matter of being smugly complacent...Rather it is a condition in which we willingly accept and endorse our own volitional identity.”

He says that our self-love comes from the ability to accept our choices wholeheartedly, and to be content and accept fully who we are. Employment is so highly connected with identity that we cannot solely make an economic argument for full employment. Our motivation to work arises from the kind of person we want to be, and our subjective view on our own self-worth, as well as a view we take of others. It drives families and other social groups to expect employment from the individuals within their group.

Nye Bevan wrote: “Loss of work is also loss of status.”<sup>7</sup>

To be able, through our work, to provide for ourselves helps us to live with dignity. The moral shame in unemployment arises from this indignity. The skill and creative process in employment, and also the ability to live without want because of work, allows us to share in the identity of a person who a success. Pride and the ability to reflect on achievement are a significant motivating force.

And consider this very recent practical example. Participants in the UK government’s Future Jobs Fund – which subsidised employment for those without work - were asked to comment on how they were feeling at the start of the scheme. An 18-year-old man said:

“(I was) feeling a bit low. I was about four and half, five months, unemployed and I thought ‘oh no, this isn’t good’. Most employers I spoke to, it was like if you’ve been unemployed for more than two months, it really puts people off. I knew how to do a job; it’s just the fact that I’d been

unemployed for nearly five months. Almost half a year, which was quite embarrassing really. I know there was nothing out there, but it was still kind of embarrassing.”<sup>8</sup>

For those who the pride of work is lost because of un- or under-employment, we feel anger at the waste of talent and perhaps even pity. I think that this is our moral sense of wrong.

As a politician, it is important to me that this is properly understood and expressed. People are not statistical units, they are not just part of an economic model. Vital though the understanding that the economic models give to us is, to make a political argument for action to prevent unemployment, we need to understand the perspective that work has on us as a moral community.

People, in my view, judge that all should (as in a moral ‘should’) work as a requirement of individual dignity. In an important sense, we are our work, we are our endeavour, and for those left out of the labour market, the impact is wider and deeper than a purely economic (in a simple sense) picture can draw.

Those who share my view believe that government and other campaigning organisations should therefore take a role in enabling all to live out this moral requirement. We should support aspiration and pride. The job of the government is to work out effective channels for this mission. At times, UK politics has assumed that the difference between ‘left’ and ‘right’ is that those on the right back individual aspiration over collective action. That those on the ‘left’ care little for the pride of self-sustainability. I think this a false argument. I think the difference is not individual versus collective, rather, it is intervention versus refraining from intervention.

We must decide what intervention from government in the labour market we should seek to prevent the indignity and moral shame that arises from unemployment.

Job Centre Plus is judged on job outcomes (people moving into work), employer engagement (mainly whether job centres fill vacant posts), and timeliness of processes (for example, holding interviews on time). This is a significant focus on the tasks Job Centre Plus carries out. But it’s not judged on what people actually think of the quality of service they’ve received. So it’s possible for staff to be promoting options that aren’t right for the person concerned.

The Conservatives’ approach to getting people back to work has been an attempt at marketisation. Flaws in their thinking have become immediately apparent as the A4e scandal, and the exclusion of smaller, specific organisations in back to work efforts, have materialised.

So what should a Labour redesign of back to work targets look like? Switching away from outputs (or tasks completed) to outcomes (the change achieved) is necessary but not sufficient. We need to assert what qualities the relationship between the state and its people should be.

The existing customer service target for Job Centre Plus goes some way to describing this. It challenges job centres to treat customers with respect, be helpful and polite and listen. Customers are also asked whether information was accurate and easy to use.

But we need to go much further. In a recession, more people are likely to walk into Job Centre Plus for the first time. This is the moment that the state interacts with one of the most important drivers of ambition and identity: work. We need to do much more than be polite.

We need to restore the loss of dignity involved in job insecurity. To do so, we need personal, specific assistance. And we need to recognise that the right and responsibility of each individual to work means that the state has a responsibility to recognise the unique barriers that face that person. Public servants need to use emotional intelligence, and be empowered to meet the aims of the service in diverse circumstances.

For example, those out of work with significant disabilities need different help than young people caught up in a global downturn hitting a place of low employment. Politicians can state the guarantee for all: a right to back-to-work help, and then empower local delivery, respectful of differences, and interested in the quality of life of those they serve.

For this reason, Liam Byrne's recent progression of Labour policy moves in the right direction: disaggregating labour market intervention to help local government unwind the complex causes of geographically clustered unemployment. People exist in places and cultures that create their identity and give them (or do not give them) the self-confidence to achieve in the world of work.

We'll still need to track what government does of course, but we need a measure that begins with the citizen's view point. We'll need more than ever to be accountable for the actions of the state, but Labour's election leaflets should be written about the satisfaction the public really feel about those actions, not just a production statistic.

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## CONCLUSION

Political judgements can be made for a whole lot of reasons. Whilst we can always be sceptical about electoral pressures, as we must always be cautious about financial and practical constraints, the moral aspects of political choices are often overlooked. Much of the narrative crafted in the heat of political argument is about process rather than values, about who did what, rather than why they made that choice.

Too often in my political life, I have seen distressed individuals upset by an administration. This has arisen because the person was viewed not as a dignified individual but rather a budget line, or a part of a process. I don't believe many in government really want to act this way. So let us commit to reforming not just our policies but the real life of the state.

The actions of the state in the face of a disaster can make or break a person's ability to cope and recover. I've argued here that the same applies to everyday life too – especially working life.

There is more to dignity than this though. Conservatives might think that the ultimate testimony in support of human dignity might be putting each in control of whatever financial assets they can get hold of. Perhaps for them the only relationship of dignity and respect is a commercial one.

I hope I have demonstrated that this is not the case. Dignified relationships between people are characterised by love, care and attention. The role of government then, is to improve the quality of relationships between all of us in these terms. And this applies whether it is government acting to provide a public service, or intervening in a market.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/insight/WCMS\\_159813/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/insight/WCMS_159813/lang-en/index.htm)
- 2 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8107039.stm>
- 3 [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_298904.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_298904.pdf)
- 4 Quoted in N Lawson, *The View from Number 11*, (Bantam Press, 1992).
- 5 A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Chapter VIII.
- 6 <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/ip/davidpapineau/Staff/Papineau/OnlinePapers/Risephys.html>
- 7 A. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, (McKibbin & Lee, 1961) p. 23
- 8 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15892257>

# THE REAL LIFE STATE |

## PUTTING DIGNITY AT THE HEART OF OUR PUBLIC SERVICES

Alison McGovern MP

Politics is the process of making collective choices about the world in which we wish to live together. Competing priorities require principles by which to take decisions. And yet the practice of politics rarely interrogates the moral assumptions our political debate relies upon.

Our political choices are made, in some way, on the basis of the values we prioritise. There is a diversity of 'things' that are valued: efficiency, efficacy, beauty. And one of these qualities is the moral quality of a choice. Political choices are 'right' or 'wrong' in moral terms, as well as other terms.

This pamphlet seeks to understand the moral values we share and explain why the concept of dignity is the foundation of progressive politics. Dignity means enabling autonomous, capable people. Dignity represents people who have respectful, caring relationships to each other. It means not allowing market transactions to exploit undue advantage.

Rather than seeing improving public services solely through the prism of increased spending levels, a state that prioritises dignity would rethink how politicians relate to public servants, and how public servants relate to the people.