

Political Literacy and Civic Thoughtfulness

Henry Tam

Editors: John O'Brien and Simon Duffy

THE NEED FOR ROOTS





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About the Author

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He has been invited to speak on democratic and communitarian issues at events held around the world from Strasbourg to Washington. His other roles have included being Head of Civil Renewal for the UK Government (2003-2010); Director of the Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy at the University of Cambridge and Visiting Professor at Birkbeck, the University of London.

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Foreword

In the fourth publication in our series, *The Need for Roots*, Henry Tam follows to its roots the nature of community and the disciplines of civic thoughtfulness and political literacy that are essential to bring a real community to life.

His paper is timely, but also challenging, for he argues that we are now living in a time when social progress is in reverse; and progress has ended because we have become politically illiterate. Today most of us leave politics to *others*, while perhaps indulging in cynicism about both politics and politicians. Unsurprisingly this has made it even easier for ugly forces to emerge: scapegoating, meritocratic elitism and a politics of fear and hate.

It is interesting to see how the modern understanding of politics has reversed its older meaning. Today politics means a field of action, far from our communities, where most of the actors are professionals, working on or around the tiny stage of Westminster. Its events are then presented to us as *the news*, as things that are happening elsewhere, and presented to us through the highly selective lens of *the media*. The idea that most of us could become involved in this kind of politics is obviously laughable; we are conditioned to be its spectators, not the actors.

Yet, in its original Greek meaning politics simply meant community life, the life of the *polis*. Although the Greek word *polis* is often translated as city that is misleading. It really means the people, the we, the community that makes up the *polis*. Politics was then just the practical business of getting along together and taking shared responsibility for the whole community.

Tam takes us back to the root meaning of politics. He asks us to open our eyes and accept the fact that we do share responsibility for our community life. Whatever our beliefs, whatever our faith, ideology or state of disbelief, we simply do have a shared responsibility for the world and for the communities to which we belong. We can choose to recognise these facts and we can choose to act out of our awareness of these facts.

We are political animals, who need each other in order to be fully who we are, and from this follow certain principles. Tam integrates these different principles into his model of *synetopia*,

playfully reminding us of More's *Utopia*. Synetopia is not nowhere, nor is it just somewhere, rather it is anywhere that we choose to act as if we have a shared responsibility to act *together*. Tam reminds us that before Party, before values, before policy, must come a commitment to treat each other as fellow citizens. Accepting this turns out to be both demanding and elevating.

For the readers of the *Need for Roots* series who are interested in politics, the welfare state and the role of the citizen then Tam's account is useful on at least three different levels.

First he offers a framework for thinking about the constitution of our communities and our ways of organising to achieve welfare. Instead of arguing about policies we need to ask more fundamental questions about how decisions are made, who makes them and how we are involved in them. He shows that this is not just a matter of applying formulaic terms like *democratic* or *participatory*. Instead Tam explains that all communities need some capacity to listen, to engage and to understand and that is only by these means that they can advance the common good.

Second his analysis poses a set of questions to ourselves. Are we personally acting from a sense of share responsibility for our community? How are we involved in discussion and action? We cannot expect a decent politics to emerge without becoming one of those who are willing to help create that politics.

Finally he offers us a very practical way forward. It is perhaps time to take much more seriously Tam's notion of political literacy. Tam's essay shows that political literacy can be framed without any reliance on a particular ideological framework, and it can still be critical and engaging. Political literacy goes far beyond just teaching children *civics* and describing how system *work*. Instead it asks us to pose questions about how power is used or misused, how interests are organised or overlooked and how justice thrives or is stifled.


It is a pleasure to share an essay that so effectively gets to the roots of our modern dilemmas. Synetopia provides the keys to community life and can be used to restore our communities, society as a whole and the welfare state in particular.

Simon Duffy

The Problem of Political Illiteracy


People's ability to read and write, or do basic arithmetic, have long been recognised as vital measures of their development. More recently, concerns have been extended to their competence in looking after their own health, managing everyday finances, and fitting into a job environment. But political understanding remains conspicuously absent from the educational agenda. Even as the debate goes on about whether PSHE (personal, social, health and environmental) education should be made compulsory in schools, the subject of politics is left under a cloak of invisibility. Adult education fares no better. There are plenty of courses on offer for anyone interested in learning a language, IT or vocational skills, creative and decorative arts, or famous events in history. But politics is rarely an option.

Most politicians merely pay lip service to the importance of political literacy. Few support it being taught beyond describing government institutions, explaining electoral processes, and recounting major political events from the past which are no longer controversial. Any attempt to critically review current policy proposals or dissect political speeches is liable to be accused of being biased. If only there were wider acknowledgement that what constitutes bias is not if one happens to disagree with what is said, but if it has been put forward for motives unconnected with the robustness of the reason and evidence relating to the claim in question.



Inevitably, when many citizens have little understanding of politics, it becomes much easier for cunning debaters and slick propagandists to confuse and deceive the public. Since the late 1970s, concerted campaigns have told people that everyone would be better off if the rich were taxed less; the ‘bloated’ public sector needed to be cut or privatised; prosperity could only be guaranteed if large corporations could act without being bound by ‘red tape’; and if anything should go wrong, it would be because ‘traditional values’ were being harmed by threats to old gender roles, religious customs, and the influx of foreign people.

When those rare electoral opportunities come along for substituting policies that enrich the privileged few by ones that serve the wider community, vast numbers of people have little idea what political options are really on offer. Many do not know which party has put forward what policies, or what those policies may do. Some think that because their current MPs seems likeable enough, they should vote for them even though those MPs have generally followed the party line in helping to enact policies those voters abhor. Amongst older voters, some succumb to a manipulative nostalgia that tells them social ills were primarily down to ‘new’ things being allowed to take roots – be they migrants or ‘unconventional’ relationships. Amongst younger voters, many cite politicians’ neglect of youth concerns as a key ‘reason’ for why they would not even bother to register to vote. Across the board, some think that protest is a more effective alternative to voting, even though the latter can prevent the party with the unwanted policies from getting the majority to enact them in the first place. Others think that governments will do what they want irrespective of the electorate, so it is better to have little to do with governments, except perhaps support those who say they will shrink government and cut taxes. Last but not least, there is the ultimate rejection of democratic choice – the perception of all politicians as the same. Against all evidence, many people come to believe that there is no significant difference at all regardless of who can get to form a government, and they disengage altogether from all political processes. At the extreme, some dangerous minorities even turn to paramilitary and terrorist activities to pursue what they want because democracy is a ‘sham’.



Some may say that this is all inevitable. Politics is too complicated and most people just do not have the time or inclination to study competing proposals or analyse rival claims to work out what they should support. Indeed, that was one of the main arguments deployed for much of the 17th and 18th centuries against extending the franchise beyond the wealthiest few. And throughout the 19th century, with the on-going contest to give more people the vote until that was finally achieved for all adult men and women in the early 20th century, there was the constant warning that the masses could not be trusted to use their vote sensibly because they were ignorant and easily distracted.

But what is notable is precisely that alongside the struggle to widen the franchise during the 19th/early 20th centuries, there was a sustained drive to enable the disempowered majority to learn why and how they should secure a greater say about the decisions that affected them. Reformists who wanted democratic cooperation to replace authoritarian controls recognised their cause could only be effectively advanced if education played its part. In Britain, in rapid succession, learning providers such as the Working Men's College (founded 1854), Cooperative Women's Guild (1883), Ruskin College (1899), Workers' Educational Association (1903), Cooperative College (1919), National Council of Labour Colleges (1921), were set up.


The development of political awareness rose accordingly. Policies that helped a wider range of people came to be enacted because political parties were conscious that serving the elite minority would no longer ensure they hold political office. Up until then, the wealthiest 0.1% of the population were amassing an ever larger share of the national income (reaching over 11% by 1913). But with the greater democratic sensitivity of governments dependent on an electorate fast approaching universal suffrage, the tide began to turn. The Liberal Government in early 20th century began to level the playing field for citizens irrespective of their parents' wealth. It brought in free school meals; workers compensation for suffering from accidents at work; pensions for those over 70; sick pay and increased support for those who could not get a job.

In case anyone thinks that it was the outlook of a kinder age that shifted politics, we should remember the wealthy establishment

actually fought hard against these changes. In the words of Lloyd George: “the partisan warfare that raged around these topics was so fierce that by 1913, this country was brought to the verge of civil war.”

And 1913 marked a turning point. Thereafter, the share of Britain’s gross income taken by its richest members fell continuously over the next 65 years.¹ The share going to the rest of the nation went up. Exploitation and deprivation were treated as priority problems to be addressed by public policies. After the Second World War, the British public were grateful to Churchill’s leadership in the war, but most could see that what the Labour Party was offering would provide better protection for all against disease, squalor, unemployment, poverty and lack of education. Consequently, the election of the Labour Government led to the establishment of the NHS and other public forms of collaborative support for the general population. Workers became less susceptible to pressures to accept abject employment terms or sink into destitution. With more people getting jobs with better pay, more goods and services were purchased, and the economy improved for everyone.

Unfortunately, as the standards of living were rising through the 1960s, and politicians on all sides seemingly reaching a consensus about enhancing public services for the common good, complacency began to set in. Instead of going to classes or meetings to discuss political issues, there were now more consumer goods to explore, leisure and entertainment opportunities to enjoy, and holidays to plan. By the 1970s, the ethos of learning together about what political changes should be pursued on the grounds of strategic desirability and tactical feasibility was fast dissipating. Some people thought they could leave politics to the politicians; some focused on single-issue campaigns; some adopted militant tactics to press for what they wanted; and others embraced the drop-out culture. With this fertile ground for civic dislocation, a new plutocratic alliance (variously termed the New Right, neo-liberals, neo-conservatives) emerged to sow the seeds for a mindset revolution. It won power with Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Reagan in the US in 1980. Thereafter, the public realm was suspect; private dealings were inherently superior. Government



institutions that enabled people to work together must be shrunk; businesses must be deregulated. Collective provisions were attacked despite their success; private charities were hailed not as a useful supplement to but as the ideal substitute for the welfare state. The easing of tax ‘burden’ on the rich must increase; the support to prevent hardship for the less well-off must be cut.

The decline in income inequalities that had continued steadily since 1913 stopped in 1978. Subsequently, it rose once more, and by 2011, the richest 10% of the population had regained as large a share of the national gross income as they last managed in 1919, namely 39%.² Meanwhile, despite warnings from leading economists about the counter-productive impact of austerity measures, politicians who insisted on prolonging their deployment were elected to form another government in 2015. Such a turn of event was possible because many people across the UK paid little attention to the real implications of the policies put forward by different political parties. Instead, large numbers bought into xenophobic propaganda and fervently blamed the deterioration in their quality of life on immigrants and the ‘overbearing’ European Union.³

The widespread commitment to civic education in late 19th and early 20th centuries shows that political illiteracy is not inevitable. If economic prosperity and social stability once bred complacency, the breakdown of democratic cooperation and consequent societal ills mean we live under radically different circumstances now. And if citizens are truly to take back control of their society, and not just end up being manipulated by self-centred demagogues, we need to focus on an effective way to advance political aptitude.

Why Focus on Civic Thoughtfulness

Politics is above all about interacting with others constructively in deliberating what should be done for the wellbeing of society and its members. To participate in it effectively, one needs to be able to engage with others with the appropriate attitudes, the capacity to reason together, and the readiness to share decision-making responsibilities. These are the elements that constitute civic thoughtfulness.

The connection between cerebral capacity and social cooperation has been observed in all species that pursue their shared goals through group actions. In humankind, this has evolved to the level of complex political organisation. In essence, as one intelligent mind can cope with life's problems more effectively than the thoughtless reactions of a brute, and two minds are better than one, a multiplicity of them collaborating to examine and determine how to move forward give as reliable a guide as can be hoped for. This is not to say that a group must always be correct, only that the errors made by one or by many will only emerge if no one is shielded from critical scrutiny by others. Through the open and reasonable exchange of ideas and questions between thinking agents, wise choices are consolidated and false claims are amended. Problems arise, however, if some people thoughtlessly take up one position and become hostile to anyone disagreeing with them without taking others' feelings or reasons into account.

For democratic politics to work, much will depend on our ability to act thoughtfully in relation to each other. Let us turn our

attention to the three core elements of civic thoughtfulness and see what they entail:


- Empathic thoughtfulness
- Cognitive thoughtfulness
- Volitional thoughtfulness

Empathic Thoughtfulness

Empathic thoughtfulness relates to how we perceive others emotionally. Our attitudes towards each other are reciprocally linked. We are generally well disposed to those who appear to be well disposed to us. We do not trust strangers readily, but are willing to adjust accordingly if there are signs that they may view us as potential friends rather than implacable foes. We need the moral imagination to understand how others would feel in situations that would evoke similar feelings from ourselves. We are filled with admiration when someone does something kind and helpful for others. We are sympathetic at the sight of someone in pain. We view with contempt anyone who deliberately inflict suffering on others without any remorse.

Such dispositions will come as no surprise to anyone. But there are circumstances that can derail them. We may not know all the relevant facts. We may have been manipulated into developing negative perceptions of an individual or a group of people after hearing repeatedly misleading stories that put them in the worst possible light. Brought up in an environment of neglect or abuse may leave someone with raging hate or callous indifference towards others from an early age. In all these cases, a person's attitudes towards others can rightly be described as inappropriate.

The development of empathic thoughtfulness involves us learning to see others as fellow human beings able and ready to



reciprocate our feelings. Since we would like to be viewed with respect and treated with due consideration, we need to accept it as our responsibility to regard others in a similar manner. This sense of mutual responsibility is not to be confused with selfless altruism that calls for one-way giving to others irrespective of the recipients' attitudes; nor should it be misinterpreted as a selfish quid pro quo that trades in crudely defined monetary values. What it enjoins us to adopt is a constant sensitivity to the needs of others as we would want others to demonstrate towards us.

Empathic thoughtfulness requires us to appreciate what we would seek from others if we were in a comparable situation. For example, some claim that since “I pulled myself out of poverty by sheer will alone”, no one else deserves any sympathy or concern when left on the scrapheap of a callous economy. But not everyone gets a chance to go down a rags-to-riches path. One must recognise both similarities of predicament and differences in circumstances to realise what would be an appropriate attitude to adopt.

And just as viewing others negatively when they hold no animosity towards one is wrong, so is viewing others positively when they regard one with disdain or hate for no good reason. What one should do is to understand why others should bear such ill will, and explore if those unfounded attitudes can be changed. If they persist, then one should be guarded and view those in question with due caution. In recent decades, concern with the development of inappropriate attitudes has tended to be dismissed as meddling and “politically correct”. But the thoughtlessness that breeds through the spread of unfounded negative attitudes towards others has been one of the main causes of community tension, social fragmentation, and a resurgence of racism.


Cognitive thoughtfulness

Cognitive thoughtfulness is required to explore what warrants belief and guide us in resolving conflicting claims. Simply imposing a set of authorised answers from above or leaving the contest of rival claims to intensify without resolution will not provide a sustainable solution. If beliefs were merely ideas people entertain in their own heads with no connection with others' experiences, it might be feasible to leave people to indulge in whatever notions they conjure up. But beliefs are what people act on, what they take as building blocks for larger theories, and what they refer to in devising practices. They impact on those who hold them and others around them.

As beliefs are interpretations about experiences of the world that is open to everyone, their reliability and coherence can be checked objectively. Thinking about them systematically in one's own mind is only part of the process, and one has to engage with the ideas and arguments of others in order to test their strengths and ascertain what may need to be revised. Ultimately, apart from those who suffer delusions of infallibility, we can all see that errors and illusions are most likely to be exposed when they are susceptible to open scrutiny.⁴

To be cognitively thoughtful, we need to be able to pursue cooperative enquiry that enables us to reflect on any adopted belief or proposed claim with reference to the extent to which informed participants deliberating under conditions of reasonable and un-coerced exchanges would concur. Any provisional consensus reached would in turn be open to possible revisions subject to examinations carried out in the future. The acceptability of any belief and claim then rests with the likelihood of that claim surviving the critical deliberations of ever expanding circles of enquirers.

Tests for reasoning skills covering, for example, logical analysis and textual interpretation, show that such skills require training if they are to develop. But beyond such skills, one's cognitive thoughtfulness needs to be robust enough to deal with rhetorical




misdirection, disguised false information, and manipulative propaganda. It has become commonplace for extremists to dress up their lies as the ‘truth’ the establishment seeks to conceal, while politicians who shun those extremes are branded as all holding similar views when many of them support significantly different policies. Much has to be learnt regarding what issues of bias or competence should be looked at in relation to different media organisations, how contested subjects are covered on the internet, and what counts as expertise to be trusted and what are mere tools of vested interests in academic and think-tank output.

Culturally, the rejection of unquestionable dogmas has produced two reactions both of which are inimical to the development of cognitive thoughtfulness. One is the casual relativist outlook that suspends critical assessment of contrary claims on the basis that everyone is entitled to hold one’s own views, as though it is of no consequence what people believe, or whether there are reasonable grounds for them to hold any given belief. The other consists of a yearning to return to the times when some traditional beliefs are rigidly accepted by everyone, which in practice translates to some people gravitating towards authoritarian assertions that would stigmatise any non-believer. Both these trends undermine rational deliberation, and their shortcomings need to be exposed.

Volitional thoughtfulness

In addition to being thoughtful about the feelings of others and the input they may have in evaluating what is to be believed, we should involve others in making decisions that will affect them. Impulsiveness or laziness may divert us from thinking what others may prefer when we are considering taking one action or another. But experience tells us that even with the best will in the world, if we do not actually share our decision-making with others, it is possible that we will not only risk violating the interests of others, but we may also be putting ourselves in a worse position.



We are all familiar with the experience of disempowerment when we are told that someone else has made decisions that impact on us but without allowing us a say in any meaningful way. Just as we would not wish to be so excluded, we must be ready to include others when the occasion arises. This involves the development of a better understanding of the notion of autonomy, which has too often been taken as a licence to act by oneself without being linked to anyone else. But there are many instances in life when one's actions influence to varying degrees the lives of others, and it is critical for one to have the awareness of those situations and the know-how to deal with them.

It is a common mistake to suppose that involving others can take the form of merely asking others if they agree to a fully worked up proposal. When presented with what appears to be a *fait accompli*, people seldom accept that they truly have a free choice. To close off a token choice by pre-empting it altogether with a prior decision is even worse. By contrast, when people are genuinely involved in deliberating together the options and working towards a shared decision, they take ownership of the outcome and are far more prepared to deal with its implications in a constructive manner, even if they do not turn out as well as they had hoped.

The development of volitional thoughtfulness needs to cover the ability to recognise barriers, especially in the form of pressure to concede to letting others choose for oneself. Power inequalities all too often segregate society or organisations into the privileged decision-makers and those who have no choice but to live with the former's decisions. This can be seen in government institutions, businesses, schools and community organisations. People need to understand why and how power relations should be structured to enable all concerned to access information, put forward their suggestions, question proposals, and share in decision-making.

The tendency to reject collective working, or blindly following charismatic authoritarian leaders, if left unchecked, would lead more and more people to discard the concerns and perspectives of others when deciding what actions to take. Recognition of co-dependence as a feature of life at every level should be accompanied by a practical understanding of how inclusive decision-making should be managed, especially in complex organisations. Failure to see why procedures such as

simple majority vote, requirement for unanimity, referendum, binding mandate, may be appropriate in some circumstances but disastrously counter-productive in others, has besmirched the ideal of democracy and harmed the prospect of cooperative working.

Thoughtfulness-based Political Education

We can teach engineering students how to assess the efficacy of any given motor without getting into any direct endorsement of a particular brand of car or tangled up in lawsuits with individual manufacturers. We can guide music students on how to evaluate the quality of different compositions without limiting our praise to a single composer or falling out with any music business. Similarly, we can help people learn more about how to make judgement about political arguments or respond to policy proposals without attaching ourselves to a political party. Indeed, since political parties change positions over time, and have a range of policies at any given moment, there will always be diverse assessment to be made.

The challenge is to integrate the three elements of thoughtfulness into the nurturing of political understanding. In the following sections, we will expand on how each of them can be taught through a set of critical issues to help citizens become more competent in identifying and advancing the relevant objectives for the common good in their everyday life as well as when they encounter political contests.




Empathic Thoughtfulness & Mutual Responsibility

To be empathically thoughtful, people need to learn to see others as fellow members of society, with whom we share a mutual responsibility in giving the respect and support we want for ourselves. There are three issues that should accordingly be explored:

- Shared Mission: understanding common objectives
- You-and-I Mutuality: understanding the need to share fairly
- Nimble Membership: understanding the role of being a member

Shared Mission

Politics has too long been reduced to a simplistic account of private gains and losses. At every election, or whenever the latest budget is announced, commentators queue up to present how much money various categories of people will gain, and how much others will lose. There is hardly any attempt to show what social benefit will be secured through the public money spent, or what threats and damages to general wellbeing will be avoided as a result. This is entirely against the spirit of politics, which is concerned above all with the civic pursuit of a shared mission, without which people will either see no point in agreeing to binding conditions or suspect that they may be merely used for the benefit of others.



Of course policies do have direct implications for individuals. Some may receive more support than others, and some are required to bear a proportionately greater burden. But how these trade-offs work out over time or how they relate to the overall stability and cohesion of society cannot be judged purely in terms of the finances of the individuals concerned. It is sometimes asked why those who have become rich should pay for those who are poor. The question is in fact inseparable from questions about how society allows some people to obtain more wealth for themselves while others are left with barely enough to live on even though they work more than one job or are told that their qualifications are worthless. Blatant robbery is outlawed, but how should the law deal with arrangements that place many in such a weak position that they have no choice but to agree to work for a wage that would not even pay the basic necessities. Is that kind of divisive system good for society, or should it be reformed?

In parallel with learning the value of social benefits and how it is enhanced or depleted by different types of policy, people must also acquire the skills to unpack rhetoric that gave the false impression of there being a shared mission. When those in leadership positions use the language of ‘we’, ‘our country’, etc, citizens should ask what it is that is actually being promoted for society’s wellbeing. Throughout history, in the name of combating internal threats or preventing invasion from abroad, citizens have been asked to consent to leaving it to a few to do whatever they deem best for the country. But when that happens, shared missions are soon pushed aside by secret missions, and the people will not be allowed to question those in charge.

Every attempt in the past to leave the fate of the people to the divine wisdom of monarchs, the nobler minds of the aristocratic ruling class, the indubitable principle enshrined in a sacred text or ideological doctrine, or more recently, the unsurpassable guile of business corporations, has been found wanting. As for simply aggregating individual demands, it is problematic because some of those demands may cut across the needs of others, and they may overlook how certain goals that will benefit more can be achieved through cooperation.

The formulation of a shared mission should be connected to the actual challenges society faces. Leave people to deal with


the matters they can effectively deal with on their own so long as it does not pose any harm or threat to others. Beyond that, everyone must be aware of the many problems that we can only tackle by working together. The uneven economic utilisation and distribution of resources; the unintended consequence of business activities in pollution and climate-change; the threat of terrorist and military attacks; the spread of disease and sickness; the intensifying need for care for an aging population – all these issues call for concerted efforts to tackle them. The ability to recognise this and see through attempts to divert attention to scapegoats is essential.

It is tempting to dismiss the call for solidarity in joint action as idealistic, but it is in fact naïve in the extreme to suppose that any society can ever succeed without it. Those that seek to function by imposing submission breed dissent that will destroy their foundation. Those that profess a common purpose but fail to engage everyone in its pursuit will disintegrate through the spread of indifference. Only those that provide the structure for people to identify specific common concerns and collaborate to carry out their genuinely shared mission can flourish.

You-&-I Mutuality

We should begin by rejecting the false dichotomy that offers either a ‘No One but Me’ individualism or a ‘Only We Matter’ collectivism. The former, in an anarchistic or libertarian guise, supposes that one can join in or pull out of society whenever it suits one. If everyone follows the same approach, no society can endure as rule breakers simply declare they no longer want to sign up to the rule that now inconveniences them. The latter invokes ‘we’ as some kind of absolute prerogative that can override everyone’s autonomy, when in fact a small clique set themselves up as the will of the people.

The relationship between the members of any society can only be sustained if it is based on genuine mutuality. People have to agree



to rules and procedures, and to entrust certain issues to be dealt with by specific experts and decision-makers. But they will only abide by the outcomes if they are confident that what are put in place respect their interests equally, and their support for others will be reciprocated.

This does not mean that everyone must have exactly the same responsibilities or the same rewards. It means that the criteria for assigning different responsibilities and the rewards or penalties for fulfilling or breaching them are designed to serve the goals that are important to everyone and will be applied to all without exception. As for the rewards and penalties, there must be no privileging of some positions with disproportionate rewards and no disadvantaging of certain types of non-compliance with excessive penalties.

We are often told that if people were given an exactly equal share of their country's (or their organisation's) resources, it would destroy motivation and we would end up with many taking advantage of the genius or hard work of others. But mutuality does not imply equal division of resources. Many worker-run or cooperative enterprises have demonstrated how people can work out for themselves the appropriate differentials to reflect both the contributions and needs of all those who together make the enterprise a successful one.⁵ More widely, the collective insurance of a social security system provides a safety net that protects everyone equally from economic turbulence.

And while the populist media often stir up public demands for harsher punishment for all kinds of offence, deliberative engagement of people in thinking through crime, punishment, and their implications for the wellbeing of society, has consistently led to a more thoughtful differentiation of severe punishment for crimes with vicious intent and little repentance, a focus on rehabilitation for offenders who seek a real chance to be respected citizens, and detection and warning techniques that are more likely to deter than pointlessly harsh treatment after the event.

Those who seek unwarranted benefits for themselves or vindictive penalties for others threaten reciprocal relations and undermine social cohesion. People need to learn that arrangements for regulating rewards and penalties will apply to themselves (and all those close to them) as well as others, and

should accordingly be scrutinised for their capability to prioritise, adjudicate & enforce without bias.

Nimble Membership

Every society relies on its members collaborating to secure what is in their common interest. It is vital that it is capable of managing its membership adroitly and effectively. A society that does not have enough members to meet its objectives, has too many that it cannot meet their needs, or worst of all, cannot make up its own mind about who should or should not be accepted as a member, is heading towards a crisis.

Instead of allowing prejudices to be fanned, or needs for help from additional members to be ignored, we should have a nimble membership approach that can adapt to changing circumstances. Such an approach should be responsive enough to address four key issues:

First, what is the status quo membership? Different nations still debate who residing in them should be granted membership (citizenship). Some accept that those born in it will qualify, while others maintain that it may not be enough. Similar questions can be raised about business people who make money in one country and move its profits elsewhere. To what extent should membership benefits such as protection under the law be granted, but membership obligations such as tax payment be suspended? And conversely, are some members, because of having been born elsewhere, made to meet all the membership obligations but denied the standard membership entitlements?

Secondly, there is the issue of new members being brought in. Under what conditions should additional members be considered, and what criteria will they need to meet? What offers and requirements will form the terms to be presented to new members? Not addressing these matters thoroughly and transparently can destabilise any society. A country may be short of workers for certain roles because the government of the day

refuses to allow them in, or it may be damaged by an influx of exploiters who buy up valuable assets and leave existing members vulnerable.

Thirdly, the criteria for exit should be carefully considered and settled. This applies to voluntary requests to leave (can members just leave? Do they have to give notice? What can they take with them?), and to involuntary exclusion (sent to prison, exiled from a country, deportation of those with temporary membership, etc).

Lastly, group-wide alterations to membership are often overlooked until they arise. When may a political unit dissolve itself, join through a merger or a federated arrangement with one or more other units, or disengage from a larger group to form a new smaller one? These changes affect all who work in the affected businesses, and have vast implications for those living in countries that may undergo restructuring of sovereign powers (e.g., Scotland leaving the UK, the UK leaving the European Union, or Scotland joining the EU after becoming independent from the UK). The neglect of these issues, leaving public debates to be shaped primarily by the manipulation of anger and frustration, with little reference to what would actually change as a result of alterations to different aspects of membership, has been a main cause of the current political turmoil in the UK.





Cognitive Thoughtfulness & Cooperative Enquiry

To be cognitively thoughtful, people need to learn to understand how cooperative enquiry with others provides the basis for assessing what claims and beliefs are warranted, and determining when provisional judgements should be upheld or revised. There are three issues that should accordingly be explored:

- **Educative Collaboration:** understanding how to learn with others
- **Testing of Claims & Assumptions:** understanding the need for on-going re-examination
- **Open Access to Information:** understanding the scope of information sharing

Educative Collaboration

How citizens are educated is critical for the democratic development of any society. For too long, we have been side-tracked by the suggestion that insufficiently structured learning must be dealt with by traditional, authoritarian style discipline and rote learning. While some facts are important to learn, in this pervasively computerised age, it is even more important to understand how reliable information can be located, how disputed claims are to be compared, and why

collaboration is the only guarantee against falsehoods being perpetuated.

Any individual seeking to take in information in isolation inevitably gets stuck in the solipsist trap of not knowing if the information is valid or not. If everything is judged by oneself alone, there is no way to tell when one has judged correctly. It is only when people habitually share and cross-check ideas with each other, and with those outside, that continuous learning can be sustained. Without educative collaboration we run three risks that can seriously undermine our society's wellbeing.

First, individuals who are told to concentrate on looking for the truth by themselves may come to dismiss the need to seek others' input. They can come to think that their own sense of certainty may suffice when, under any objective scrutiny, their beliefs can barely stand up. And even if they happen to be right on some occasions, their attitude reduces cross-fertilisation and cuts down opportunities to build long-term partnerships that strengthen collective learning capability.

Secondly, instead of regarding the pointing out of misinterpretations or flawed evidence put forward by others as a mutually helpful exercise, it can come to be seen as inherently antagonistic. Some may under such circumstances become rigidly defensive when constructive criticisms or probing questions are put to them. Some may be reluctant to offer alternative views lest they are perceived as an attack on others. This kind of debate culture where only one side or the other is correct has been highly damaging in distorting public understanding of what the process of enquiring for answers really involves.

Thirdly, lacking encouragement and support to engage in cooperative enquiry, people feel more and more remote from the interactions that underpin the advancement of knowledge. Expert opinions formed through intense collaborative learning come to be seen as no more reliable than fringe assertions made without wider scrutiny or backed by recognised evidence. When people are prone to dismiss well-researched findings in favour of loudly proclaimed (but barely substantiated) declarations, society becomes more susceptible to being misled.

By contrast, societies that invest in educative collaboration are more likely to reap the benefit of accelerated learning because people are more disposed to share and check each others' ideas for necessary revisions and possible improvements. Moreover, the critical understanding developed through the open and thoughtful exchange of interpretations and arguments builds intellectual relationships and bonds of trust so that the applications of ideas are readily tried out, and more cooperatively adapted in the light of feedback gathered from as wide a circle of participants as possible.

Testing of Claims & Assumptions

Educative collaboration cannot be sustained without continuous critical revision. Some may think that the two things would always go together, but history has given us plenty of contrary evidence. Totalitarian states throughout the 20th century supported group research in the development of modern weapons but forbade any challenge to those doctrines they declared unquestionable.

This split thinking can be found in many contemporary societies too. It usually happens because those in positions of power accept that educative collaboration can add to their knowledge and capability to do more of what they want, but they are not willing to concede to subjecting certain 'traditional' beliefs to critical examination. Those beliefs may be derived from certain interpretations of religious texts or customs, and they can be invoked to close off demands for new thinking. And when those blind spots become permanently shielded, all kinds of false assumptions and misguided claims are sealed into the system, causing permanent errors.

It is precisely because dogmatisation can be so damaging that it must be guarded against with the continuous testing of all claims and assumptions without exception. This does not mean

that everything is doubted all the time to the point that there is no accepted basis for any action. The overall direction of a government and its everyday operations require reliance on a wide range of claims and beliefs. Continuous testing only demands that none of these is perpetually excluded from scrutiny.

Provided the examination is scheduled with reference to the emergence of new evidence, fresh arguments, altered circumstances, then in time all claims and assumptions will get their turn in being tested for their veracity.


Once a test has been passed, then the claim in question should be granted provisional validity, which means that it should be acted on and generally accepted unless there is a robust case to cast doubt on it immediately to the extent that its veracity is suspended. It is no less dogmatic to refuse to have any particular claim questioned as it is to insist on questioning a claim irrespective of it having passed all the tests it has been subject to. It is a notable technique of those who want to disrupt the work of others for their own gain to spread doubt about claims which are in fact well founded (e.g. climate change, inoculation).

However, the validity is nevertheless provisional. And the precaution against vexatiously repetitive questioning should not be taken to mean that any claim can be declared as beyond all future revision. Even the shared mission of a society must in the light of changing circumstances be open to deliberative re-examination by citizens to see if different factors need to be taken into consideration, and thus requiring alterations to the aims and objectives of their joint enterprise.

Open Access to Information

Although there is a general presumption that there should be open access to information in society, citizens should learn more about four types of reason that are often offered to block any request for information in practice.






First, there is the argument that it would be too costly in terms of time or money to provide the information. Technology has rendered previous excuses relating to the difficulties of searching for and sharing such information largely redundant. But there may be information the government has not captured (because the necessary research has not been commissioned). In such a case, we do need to understand what a cost-benefit analysis should look like, rather than accepting either that it must be too costly or that access must trump costs. More widely, the issue of how information of interest to citizens can be more reliably generated and accessed relates to matters such as the provision of a free and robust library service, and university-based research that will investigate matters of concern to citizens in general (and not just commercial sponsors) and make the findings public.

Secondly, there is certain private information that should not be made public. The challenge is to distinguish information that is purely private, from information that is relevant to the pursuit of important public objectives (e.g. tracking down a murder suspect, preventing the spread of a dangerous infectious disease). And there are times when whether the information is actually going to be relevant cannot be established until it has been obtained. A further complication arises when claims are made relating to commercial confidentiality or patented designs. It is not impossible for conflicting claims to be weighed. Citizens serving on jury experience how such conflicts can be resolved.

Thirdly, it may be claimed that the information in question should be censored because it is misleading or offensive. Undeniably, there are cases where limits on information circulation are necessary to prevent harm, but the onus must be on those who want to block particular information to justify their position. It is not enough to say that any information is false or misleading to withhold it. With the help of educative collaboration, and the commitment to test claims and assumptions, the veracity of any serious assertion should be checked, and where appropriate, its lack of evidential support or untenable logic should be made known. For example, it should be explained why a ‘miracle cure’ is baseless rather than forbid any reference to it when that may just generate misguided interest in it.



Fourthly, there is the argument that the information needs to be kept secret as otherwise it could lead to undesirable consequences in the wrong hands. This calls for scrutiny arrangements that will take into account the balance of harm between disclosure and restriction for the parties directly involved, and the impact on society in the longer term. The mere claim that national security may be threatened is not sufficient to conceal the information. Independent scrutiny is essential.

It is easy to be complacent about the need for scrutiny, or to allow arrangements in support of them to be presented as bureaucratic. But in fact there is a need for a plurality of scrutiny bodies that are independent of those with executive authority to regulate information flow. Between them they can take on particular roles in assessing the potential harm, the implications for different information gathering and dissemination processes, and the intent and probable impact of permitting or forbidding the information in question. The consequences, for example, of some group set up to promote prejudices being offended by information about tolerance and mutual respect, are qualitatively different from those of people offended or intimidated by information that hate-mongers may want to circulate to stir up social tension.


Volitional Thoughtfulness & Citizen Participation

To be volitionally thoughtful, people need to learn to engage others in the inclusive practice of citizen participation so that choices and actions that affect others are decided on in genuine partnership with others. There are three issues that should accordingly be explored:

- Participatory Decision-Making: understanding decision-making with others
- Impartial Distribution of Power: understanding power relations
- Accountability for Action: understanding how to attribute responsibility

Participatory Decision-Making

Giving people a vote while leaving them to be manipulated by those with the largest campaign budgets or those most skilled at stirring up anger and hatred, is not democracy. But many people in positions of authority have tended to dismiss the deliberative engagement of others in decision-making as time consuming, ill-informed, and ineffective. The accumulated evidence in many fields (e.g. education, commerce, health, economic development, government) has shown that when people are given the opportunity to have an informed say, bad decisions are reduced, mistakes are minimised, efficiency is increased, and satisfaction with outcomes is consistently higher.⁶



There are important lessons on how to avoid clumsy and counter-productive attempts to ‘involve’ people in making decisions without any understanding of what works and what does not. These range from asking people to vote for bureaucratic positions that no one has asked for and few know anything about;⁷ to packing disgruntled people into a large room, talking at them at length, before asking them to give their views on the limited options on offer. Other flawed practices include circulating dense documents or inviting comments on proposals without any relevant context; or holding a referendum on highly complex issues while expert opinions are discarded, and lies are widely circulated without any formal adjudication.

For participatory decision-making to work, four components need to be in place. First, all those affected by the decision should have the opportunity to express their concerns. Under conditions of openness and equal respect, everyone who has a relevant point to make should be given a hearing, and no one who is abusive or seeking to dominate discussions should be allowed to disrupt proceedings.

Secondly, participants should be enabled to hear from and question witnesses, experts, and anyone else currently assigned a specific responsibility to deal with the issue under discussion. This is to ensure relevant consideration is given to what possible solutions there might be.

Thirdly, participants should be encouraged to contribute any suggestion of their own, discuss with each other how conflicting positions can be resolved, and explore the implications of mutual concessions and support, before prioritising the options they are willing to support.

Finally, responsibilities and resource implications are to be agreed for carrying out the decision and for reporting back on their impact in practice. The feedback will then form the basis of a review of the decision, and inform whether further changes need to be considered.

Efforts are required to ensure marginalised voices are not ignored. Attention is needed to identify, and if necessary train up, facilitators who can be both firm and empathetic. Tension and conflict have to be sensitively resolved, not suppressed, to bring about consensus. Where large numbers are involved, representative

selection or proportionate election may have to be used to obtain groups wherein meaningful deliberations can take place; but in such cases, the representatives will need to engage through participatory approaches those who have elected them.

Impartial Distribution of Power

To provide incentives to those who have to undertake harder tasks, or to establish the authority for those charged with overseeing the delivery of strategies, it is necessary to grant more power to some involved in running a country or key parts of it. But the concentration of power in some must be only for generally agreed objectives, and none should be allowed to use that power as a basis to accumulate even more power to the extent that they become a threat to others.

The only way to prevent any social grouping – large or small – from being usurped by a powerful elite is to build in a process to review the balance of power and redistribute it impartially on an on-going basis. Such a process has to be underpinned by a network of arbitration backed by the collective power of all citizens. The network should include levels of appeal mechanism but no individual or teams of individuals can take it upon themselves to override the final arbitration.

Any attempt to secure greater power (in terms of arms, wealth, status or any other form of resource) must be assessed to see if it is merited and necessary. In some cases, there may be short term or emergency reasons why a few have to be given substantial power to deal with a pressing problem. But in such cases, the transfer of power must only be temporary, and reversed as soon as possible.

There will be occasions when it is argued that there is a call for significantly greater power and for it to be on a virtually permanent basis because the challenge in question is a long-term one. If the argument is valid, then the power balance should be reviewed to ensure that the few who are entrusted with much

more power will nonetheless not be able to use it to threaten or repress others.


It is likely that such reviews will lead to a redistribution of power involving a mixture of channelling of power or resources to those who would otherwise become too vulnerable through their relative lack of power; and strengthening particular arbitration agencies so that neither attempted threats nor bribes are likely to infringe on the impartiality of those agencies acting on behalf of all citizens.

History has shown that if the power gap between people widens inexorably, it will increase the scope and temptation for the powerful few to impose their will on others, and weaken everyone else's ability to stand up to such an encroachment. It has also shown that it would be a mistake to think that untenable power gaps can only be removed by dismantling all power structures. Government institutions can only operate with formal power relations. But such relations can be democratised and sustained with the help of dedicated and thorough review and redistribution of power.⁸

Accountability for Action

Societies become dysfunctional if not all their members fully understand what they are expected to do; are equipped and motivated to carry out their duties; or are conscientious enough not to breach their obligations. Free riders may think they can leave it to others to do what needs to be done and they just sit back and reap the benefits when these come through. Exploiters may try to deceive and manipulate others to do what serves their own interests at the expense of others.

To prevent the above from happening, an accountability system is needed to ensure people fulfil the responsibilities they have agreed to take on, and intervene appropriately when they are not. No society can function well with some agreeing to rules to bind



others, but discarding them whenever it suits them personally. Everyone must know at the outset the basic guarantees of citizenship, the duties that come with them, what can be earned as extra, and what may be lost if particular orders or rules are not complied with. The instructions and regulations should be simplified to aid understanding and avoid costly new layers of legal or quasi-judicial interpreters emerging to slow down, and often confuse, the accountability process.

Transparency and proportionality are critical ingredients as political leaders can be corrupted by exploitative influence that diverts accountability attention from the most serious violations committed by those with the greatest power, to relatively minor infringement attributable to those with little influence. Many are familiar with how resources are cut from investigating wealthy tax evaders, and diverted to tracking the much smaller amounts defrauded by benefit claimants.

It is also important to improve understanding of the basis for ascribing responsibility for what happens under different circumstances. The only legitimate grounds for responsibility denial are mistaken identity, ignorance or irresistible coercion. In all other cases, from risk-taking to duress, the person who causes the undesirable consequences, must account for the actions in question with sufficient justification or accept the penalties. A well-governed society needs to anticipate the deployment of standard excuses (e.g. “I only did what I thought was for the best”); investigate possibly legitimate claims of non-responsibility (e.g. “It was someone else who gave the order without me knowing”); and weigh up relevant extenuating conditions against the violations in question (e.g. “They threatened my family”). Group accusations in particular must be openly scrutinised so guilt can be pinpointed and maligned smears can be exposed and punished.

Finally, the guardian of probity must themselves be guarded against too. And experience would suggest that rather than having one all-powerful team or agency that no one else can hold to account, it is far more reliable to have a plurality of agencies that can provide checks and balance to each other. Furthermore, independent panels of professional auditors or judges and ordinary citizens should also be given a role in reviewing the work of those who routinely hold others to account. Without

third party oversight, there is a serious risk that over time those with the power to hold others to account may become totally unaccountable themselves.



The SYNETOPIA framework for Political Lifelong Learning

In Sections 3–5, we have looked at the three key elements of civic thoughtfulness, and three areas for critical learning under each of them. This gives us nine elements to be covered for any plan to enhance political understanding so that citizens can better assess how well society is governed and what options are worth pursuing:

- S hared Mission
- Y ou-and-I Mutuality
- N imble Membership
- E ducative Collaboration
- T esting of Claims and Assumptions
- O pen Access to Information
- P articipatory Decision-Making
- I mpartial Distribution of Power
- A ccountability for Action

The acronym, ‘synetopia’, means ‘the cooperative place’, which is what in essence a political society should be. A tyrant who forces everyone to do as he commands has no room for politics. Politics has no place either where individuals have gone off in different directions with no shared rules. It is when people recognise that they have to live and work together under laws that they cooperate to formulate and agree to abide by their enforcement, that

politics comes into operation. And that only bears fruit if people understand how democratic cooperation is meant to work.

What we have set out is an outline of the issues that citizens need to have a sufficiently good grasp of so that they would not ignore what should have their close attention, avoid being misled by false arguments or deceptive rhetoric, and give their considered support to those options which would most likely serve the common good.

It is up to not only schools and universities, but all educational institutions, and indeed parents, community organisations, and public bodies concerned with promoting democratic practices, to provide accessible opportunities to citizens of all ages to learn to deal with these issues, and raise questions when dubious claims or excuses are made in relation to them.

Apathy and withdrawal from politics are fuelled by the lack of awareness about what approach may yet improve on present conditions. By contrast, irresponsible voting (risking handing power to people who have no compunction about sacrificing the common good to advance their personal ambitions) or violent protests stem from misguided reactions that channel anger and frustration to entirely wrong targets.

The synetopia framework provides a basis to enhance political literacy by highlighting a set of key issues and how they are to be addressed, without referring to any party political platforms or specific public policies. Using it to raise civic thoughtfulness will help more citizens think through political challenges more effectively and respond in a responsible manner.

To build on it, we will need to develop learning resources; support teachers and trainers in preparing lessons; organise for learning opportunities to be provided and taken up; and ensure the approach is taken forward as intended with quality assurance. These will need the collaboration of a diverse range of institutions, and more work to make it widely available. But when so many attempts to advance political education have in the past been deflected by concerns with steering clear of accusations of bias, a framework founded on the value of civic thoughtfulness and all that it entails gives us a vital basis to inject cooperative intelligence to revive our ailing democracy.



Endnotes

1. The top 0.1% had over 11% of the gross national income in 1913. It declined steadily to 1.2% in 1978, then from 1979 on it rose again unremittently to around 4% in 2010 and is forecast to continue to rise. The top 10% had around 39% of the gross national income in 1919. And after a similar drop in the years leading to 1978 (staying below 30% for much of the 1960s and 1970s), it rose after 1979 and had by 2011 reached 39% again. Sources: <http://www.chartbookofeconomicinequality.com/inequality-by-country/united-kingdom/> ; <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2015-01.pdf>
2. See previous footnote for sources. Note also that between 1978 and 1991, inequality in terms of the common Gini measure rose by 42%; and according to projections produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), while there will be little change in income inequality in the UK between 2013/14 and 2015/16, it is likely to increase between 2015/16 and 2020/21. Source: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7484/CBP-7484.pdf> .
3. Many have since admitted that they voted 'leave' in the EU referendum not because they really wanted the UK to leave the EU, but as a protest against the Government. And the lack of political understanding is of course also endemic in the US, where a significant portion of the population were frustrated with President Obama for not doing more when they were the ones, whose votes for Republicans or abstentions, were responsible for producing an anti-Obama majority in Congress.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein's Private Language argument remains one of the most cogent expositions of why without the cross-checking by other minds independent of one's own, one cannot have any coherent basis for differentiating between a correct and mistaken claim – since anything goes in the absence of objectivity.
5. Worker cooperatives or partnerships generally have far lower pay differentials across the different levels in their organisations. The Brazilian company, Semco, famously empowered its workers to determine their own pay and profit-sharing levels, and they have been one of the most successful businesses for over forty years..
6. See, for example, the guide to 'Together We Can' resources: <http://hbtam.blogspot.co.uk/2014/08/together-we-can-resources-for.html>
7. For example, when citizens were asked to elect Police & Crime Commissioners, invented by a government to circumvent the existing police authorities, the average turnout was just 15% (2012 figures).
8. See, for example, 'Against Power Inequalities: a history of the progressive struggle': <http://hbtam.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/find-out-more-about-against-power.html>



The Need for Roots Series

The Need for Roots is a series of publications from the [Centre for Welfare Reform](#) which explores the purposes, values and principles that ground and nourish the changes in relationship, practice and policy necessary to creatively support full citizenship for all people. Our aim is to foster the sort of inquiry that will lead to a deeper understanding of core words like person, community, citizenship, justice, rights and service, as well as newer terms emerging from efforts to reform social policy such as inclusion, self-direction and personalisation. Proceeding as if the meaning of these key words is obvious risks them becoming hollow and spineless, functioning as rhetorical filler or tools of propaganda and fit only for reports and mission statements.

THE NEED FOR ROOTS

We have named the series after the title of the English translation of a book by Simone Weil, a philosopher and activist. She wrote in 1943, at the request of the Free French Resistance, to chart a way her native France could renew itself and its citizens after victory over the Nazis. Far more than her specific conclusions we admire her willingness to search deeply in history for the distinctive strengths of her people and their communities, to think in a disciplined and critical way about human obligations and rights and the conditions necessary for their expression, and to risk mapping out in detail how her ideas might be realized in practice (a meaningful effort even though few if any of these specific recommendations were judged practical enough to attempt). As well, we are awed by her courage, throughout her short life, to struggle to live in a way that coherently expressed her beliefs and the insights generated by that effort.

We offer this series because we think it timely. Real progress reveals powerful ways that people at risk of social exclusion, because they need some extra help, can contribute to our common life in important ways. But there are substantial threats to sustaining and broadening this progress to include more people.

We want this series to benefit from the experience of all disabled people, of people who require additional support as they grow old, of people in recovery from mental ill health and trauma. We invite them to consider this series as a way to speak for themselves. In describing its social context we will speak from our experience of the people who have taught us the most, people with learning difficulties and other developmental disabilities, their families and allies.

In the span of two generations the life chances of people with learning difficulties and other developmental disabilities have markedly improved. Family organising and advocacy have redefined private troubles as public issues



and attracted political support and rising public investment in services. The growing cultural and political influence of the disabled people's movement has established the social model of disability as a corrective to an individualistic medical model, declared the collective and individual right to be heard and determine one's own life course and the direction of public policy, and struggled with increasing success for the access and adjustments that open the way to meaningful civic and economic roles. People with learning difficulties have found allies and organised to make their own voices heard, increasingly in concert with the disabled people's movement. Discrimination on the basis of disability is illegal in more and more jurisdictions and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* asserts the right to full citizenship and the assistance necessary to exercise that citizenship. The population confined in publicly operated institutions has fallen dramatically and institutions in any form are losing legitimacy. Social innovators have created effective practices and approaches that assist people to develop their capacities, exercise meaningful direction of their own lives, and participate fully in their communities. More and more people with learning difficulties enjoy life in their own homes with chosen friends or partners, are employed in good jobs, join in civic life, and use generally available public services and benefits.

These improvements in life chances merit celebration, but the journey to citizenship for all is far from over. Governments' responses to fiscal crises have cut public expenditures in ways that fall disproportionately and harshly on disabled people and their families. Scandalous mistreatment, hate crime, neglect, and abuse continue to plague everyday life for far too many disabled people. People whose impairments call for assistance that is thoughtfully designed and offered in a sustained way by trustworthy, capable, committed people are particularly vulnerable to exclusion and deprivation of opportunity. The thrust to self-direction is blunted by rationing, restrictions on people's discretion, and risk management. Authorities turn aside people's claims on control of funding and family requests for inclusive school experiences for their children or entangle them in labyrinthine procedures. Far too few people with intellectual disabilities and their families hold the expectation of full citizenship and too many straightforward desires for access to work and a real home are trapped in bureaucratic activities adorned with progressive sounding labels; so rates of employment and household formation remain low.

There are even deeper shadows than those cast by inept or dishonourable implementation of good policies or clumsy bureaucracies nervous about scarcity and risk. Powerful as the social model of disability and the language of rights has been in shaping public discussion, individual-blaming and controlling practices thrive. Authorities typically moved from unquestioned control of disabled people's lives in the name of medical or professional prerogative to the unquestioned control of disabled people's lives in the name of a gift-model of



clienthood, which assigns authorities responsibility for certifying and disciplining those eligible for publicly funded assistance. As the numbers of people diagnosed with autism increases, more and more families organize to seek public investment in discovering or implementing cures. Most worrying, lives are at risk in the hands of medical professionals. Even in the area of appropriate medical competence, people with learning difficulties are at a disadvantage, experiencing a higher rate of premature death than the general population. The growing power of testing during pregnancy enables what many researchers and medical practitioners call “secondary prevention through therapeutic abortion,” framed as an option that growing numbers of parents accept as a way to avoid what they imagine to be the burdens of life with a disabled person. Medical researchers seek even more ways detect and terminate disabling conditions. Some defences of euthanasia seem to assume that disability makes life an intolerable burden - despite all the evidence to the contrary.

An adequate response to the mixture of light and shadow that constitutes current reality has at least three parts. Two of these are more commonly practiced and the third is the focus of this series of publications. First, keep building on what works to develop, refine and broaden the practices necessary to support full citizenship. This will involve negotiating new boundaries and roles in ordinary economic and civil life and generating social innovations that offer people the capacities to live a life that they value. Second, intensify and sustain organizing and advocacy efforts: build activist groups; strengthen alliances; publicly name problems in ways that encourage positive action; agitate to assure adequate public investment, protect and improve positive policies and get rid of practices that support exclusion and unfair treatment; and educate to increase public awareness of the possibilities, gifts and rights of all disabled people. Recognize that both of these initiatives will need to be sustained for at least another generation and probably as long as humankind endures.

These two initiatives - building on what's working and organising for social change - have two advantages over the third. They both encourage immediate practical actions that concerned people can take today and don't demand making time for study and reflection. Neither questions a commonsense view of history as steady progress: we may suffer setbacks at the hands of today's opponents but our trajectory is upwards and we can act free of the backward ideas of the past. Our culture offers few resources for sober consideration of the shadows that haunt our efforts, the ways we are ensnared by history and enduring human potentials for indifference, tragedy and evil. So it is understandable that we take refuge in the idea that progress is inevitable if we are smart enough, indifference can be enlightened by proper marketing, and tragedy and evil discarded as superstitions.



The third initiative, growing deeper roots, is a call for a different kind of action. *L'Enracinement*, the French title of Simon Weil's book, means something closer to "rooting"—actively putting down roots rather than just acknowledging that roots are needed. Deepening the roots of our work is a matter of conversation, with the words written down by the authors in this series, with one's self in reflection, with friends and colleagues in discussion, with a wider public in debate and political action. We hope that time spent in study will add meaning to our current efforts, foster a better understanding of challenges and possibilities, and generate and refine creative actions.

John O'Brien and Simon Duffy

To find out more about [The Need for Roots](#) project visit the Centre for Welfare Reform's website.

Publishing information

Centre for Welfare Reform

The Centre for Welfare Reform was established in 2009 to develop and help redesign the welfare state in order to promote citizenship, support families, strengthen communities and increase social justice. The Centre's fellowship includes a wide-range of social innovators and local leaders.

www.centreforwelfarereform.org

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The Centre for Welfare Reform and its partners are publishing a series of papers that explore the underlying features of a fair society. The series aims to engage different thinkers from many different traditions in celebrating human diversity and ensuring its survival.

