



Common Ground for the Common Good Dinner

Wednesday 16th November 2022

Discussion Paper

About the Jubilee Centre and this Discussion Paper

The Jubilee Centre is a pioneering interdisciplinary research centre, based at the University of Birmingham, that focuses on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing. Launched in 2012, the Centre promotes a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life. The Centre is a leading contributor on policy and practice in this area, and through its extensive range of projects contributes to a renewal of character virtues in both individuals, communities and wider society.

Since its inception, the Jubilee Centre has been concerned with how civic virtues – alongside moral, intellectual and performance virtues – feature in public life and how the development and expression of civic virtues can support a commitment to the common good and, ultimately, to flourishing communities. These concepts have formed the basis of a series of four webinars, hosted by the Centre as part its Civic Virtues Through Service to Others project, that brought together policymakers, academics, journalists and others to discuss civic virtues and the common good

This paper is offered to provide some reflections on those webinars that we hope to discuss at the Common Ground for the Common Good Dinner on the 16th November. An important goal is the desire to identify fertile ground upon which a politics of the common good might be grown – and we hope to discuss such ground further at the dinner.

Common Ground for the Common Good

The current political climate is frequently characterised as being more fractious and divided

than ever before. Political events, a lack of shared values and economic disparities have fostered as polarisation that has encumbered the political landscape of the United Kingdom and which has obstructed the potential for compromise or consensus. In this the UK is not alone; societies across the West appear to be 'coming apart', in the words of Charles Murray, and there is a lack of agreement about how such divisions should be addressed.

Recent experience, however, may provide some cause for hope. It is generally acknowledged that, despite its many negative impacts, the Covid-19 pandemic led to a renewed sense of community in important ways that, for a time at least, prioritised togetherness and collective responsibility over polarisation and difference, the value of working with others over a politics of division.

At the same time, and interacting with recent policy initiatives such as localism, devolution and levelling-up, there has been a re-ignition of interest in a politics of the common good that celebrates community empowerment and the potential of an active, informed and morally responsible citizenry. Though not overlooking different varieties of a politics of the common good, this recent interest invests in the core principle that real communities are forged when people come together, in spite of their differences and in a spirit of mutual understanding and well-wishing, to solve common problems or seize mutual opportunities. The thread that runs between these initiatives and instances of common good politics is a sense of solidarity and togetherness that runs counter to the dominant culture of individual entitlement.

Though precise perceptions of a civically engaged society may differ according to political traditions and ideologies, it behoves those of us involved in the pursuit of the public good to find common ground and work towards a politics of common good that emphasises the flourishing of our communities and recognises the importance of civic virtues for a healthy and stable democracy.

Achieving a Politics of the Common Good

At the heart of our vision of the common good sits a set of civic virtues and the Aristotelian ideal where individual happiness and virtue is predicated on being an active and contributing member of the community. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues defines civic virtues as the positive and stable character traits that enable citizens to participate in the public life of their communities, whether locally, nationally or globally. Important civic virtues include civility, neighbourliness, service to others, volunteering, community awareness and tolerance. However, a good citizen also possesses important moral and intellectual virtues such as honesty, integrity, gratitude, judgement, reflection and curiosity.

While there is space for human flourishing in political discourse, a politics of the common good – as separate to simply individual flourishing – can only be realised if political parties find a shared ground upon which to build a collective vision that can, at the same time, celebrate positive forms of community and engender more vibrant and civically engaged communities. Such a politics needs to develop a theory of the proper role of markets and the state in the development of civic virtue too; community cannot merely be a sideshow to the main theatres of debate in the modern political economy. A politics of the common good must have a view about which forms of state and market can best meet the social and political needs of citizens so that they reinforce, not undermine, the growth of moral communities.

A number of policy agendas over the past twenty-five years – Democratic Renewal, the Big Society, Levelling Up – have included a commitment to recognising the power of communities, to citizen empowerment and to local participation. However, these have not always gained the traction desired and policy has too often been limited by changes in governments and priorities, meaning that policies directions are not always sustained. Long-lasting recognition of the power of the common good for democratic life today, and indeed the foundational importance of civic virtues and an active citizenry for flourishing communities, will only materialise if sufficient common ground is found through cross-partisan dialogue and consensus.

Some Questions for Consideration...

- Upon what ground can consensus regarding a politics of the common good coalesce, and what cross-party shared vision might underpin this?
- Do the main political parties in the UK share the same vision of societal flourishing and if not, what are the areas of divergence?
- What forms of both the state and the market are most conducive to developing a common good politics, and which might politicians from across the spectrum agree on?
- How might laudable goals regarding the importance of civic virtues, morally responsible citizenship and a commitment to the common good be translated into actual practical policies and initiatives?
- How can positive forms of community and citizenship be celebrated and shared more widely, and how can less positive forms be redressed without collapsing into a deficit or blame model?
- To what extent is it appropriate to design a civic engagement agenda into policy or must this be cultivated organically at a personal and communal level?