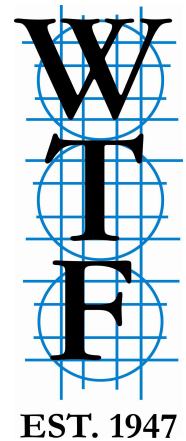


Dispatches from the Front Line

*The Council of the William Temple Foundation meet to conduct the affairs of the Foundation, but also to discuss leading issues of the moment, linking them to our longer term research agendas, and report back some of its discussions to a wider audience via our website. We are calling this contribution **Dispatches from the Frontline** because many council members are directly involved in the life of those sectors of the community – churches, faith groups, estate communities, small towns and villages as well as large cities, NGOs, charities, businesses, public services, academic institutions – that are most affected by fluxes and uncertainties impacting the British economy and society at this time.*



Dispatch Number 1 - Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession?

The discussion (May 13th 2011) responded to a paper given by Chris Baker on the theme of Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession? – also the title of an inaugural conference for the Centre for Faiths and Public Policy (CFPP) in March 2011 (www.chester.ac.uk/cfpp) and http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/spiritual_progression_in_economic_recession. CFPP is jointly resourced by the Foundation and the University of Chester.

The Council had a number of questions and reflections on this topic which we choose to express as matters of concern rather than matters of fact.

1) Is this really the collapse of the welfare state as we know it?

The UK welfare state as a one-size fits all institution, providing universal and comprehensive social security, is clearly undergoing ‘a state of transition’ (see Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, despite the promised severe cuts to public spending, GNP spending on the welfare state at the end of the current five year cycle is still likely to be above 40 percent. Does the cutting back of the Big State really mean the emergence of the Big Society, and if so what does it look like?

2) Will de-monopolisation work - is there really a rebalancing of the political in favour of a civic economy

The Localism Bill promises a six-stage movement from Big Government to Big Society, including diversification of public services and increase in local control of public finance. But will the Big State retreat sufficiently from the public sphere to allow the Big Society to reinvent and reinvest the subsequent gaps in social care and public provision? And what about the Big Market? Will the disciplines and targets required by competitive market forces will be any less stringent and constraining than those set by central and local government? Does the rhetoric to de-monopolise really work, or will there be, de facto, the creation of new market and voluntary monopolies/cabals to replace those previously operated by the state.

3) The Fragmentation of Infrastructure – is the Big Society in effect the Archipelago Society?

The withdrawal and breakdown of infrastructures in both society and the Church means layers of support are being stripped out, thus begging the question of how the shift to the Big Society is to be

actually resourced. Will the necessary linking capital be there to facilitate knowledge, resources and experience to new social enterprises and community groups? If there is not the investment in sufficient linking capital, then there is a danger that different social groups will become introverted and the Big Society will become a series of archipelagos of bonded forms of social capital. Those communities with existing high levels of social capital will probably be able to develop services sufficient to look after themselves. Those localities on the edge of economic and social viability, with possibly less reserves of social capital, will either be largely forgotten, or prone to new forms of service dependency. These services are increasingly provided by the market rather than the state (although these locations may be too risky an investment for some private contractors).

Do we need a more nuanced debate on the importance of a mixed economy of social welfare provision, that sees value in both localised and nationalised interventions in social care and community flourishing; but that also moves away from the current one-sided discourse that says; 'State AND MARKET = bad, community/enterprise = good'?

4) Where is the common vision for the Big Society?

The National Health Service is the current battle ground for ideas and allegiances on the nature of a reformed welfare state. For all its many faults and shortcomings as well as its strengths, it has traditionally served as a national point of reference; should it continue to be an external and common point of experience as a contrast to the complexity, localism and fluidity of the Big Society? Without some sense of a common ideal or vision for society, the Big Society will quickly become the Small Society. If the NHS loses its place as an iconic beacon within the national consciousness, is there a functional alternative waiting in the wings?

There is also the evidence from the recent Populous survey commissioned by Searchlight which (in the spirit of Zygmunt Bauman and his work on neo-tribalism) identifies six newly-emerging identity-defined groups in society. At one extreme lie liberals and multiculturalists. At the other end are both active as well as latently-hostile groups. These tribes can be clustered around three main groupings which the survey claims will define the new politics of identity:

Liberals 24%

Mainstream 52%

Hostile 23%

If this is in any way correct, namely a new identity politics overlaying the old left-right politics, then this too has implications for the potential 'Balkanisation' of some British cities and parts of British society. Robert Putman's observation that in context of growing diversification of religious and ethnic identities, characteristic of modern societies, people tend to hunker down in their own communities and not engage with other, similarly raises questions about the strength of the social foundations the Big Society can expect to be built on.

5) Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession - The romanticisation of faith?

Along with the bifurcation of the current policy debate along the lines of 'State equals bad, local community equals good', there is also a tendency to romanticise religion as the panacea for the ills of

the world; and from within Christian theological circles, to romanticise the role of the church, and in the spirit of Ruskin and Chesterton, valorise the redistributive power of local communities. The critical analysis of the individual materialism, social injustice and consumerism associated with the neo-liberal and globalised political economy from the likes of Graham Ward within the Radical Orthodoxy tradition is often acute (*Cities of God*(2001), *Politics of Discipleship* (2010)). However, the shift from diagnosis to proposing solutions is considerably less convincing because this theology wants to revert to romanticised versions of a Christian theocracy (or at least some version of a renewed Christendom model).

6) How should the Foundation respond to these matters of concern?

- a) Take regular soundings and intelligence from various churches in the NorthWest so that we can check our rhetoric against the reality of what is being thought and done at grass roots level.
- b) Remember the importance of the words ‘creating enterprise’ and ‘imparting significance’ as more nuanced descriptions of what is occurring in marginalised communities and the nature of faith groups working amongst them – the rhetoric of ‘empowerment’ is not dynamic or adequate enough to describe present contexts.
- c) Observe the continuing resonances and overlaps between reported benefits of belonging to religious and spiritual groups and the findings of the secular wellbeing literatures.

Join in the debate: temple@wtf.org.uk

Visit our website: www.wtf.org.uk

Chris Baker, Director: 01729 830144 (h); 01244 511074 (w); 07779 000021 (m)