

Beyond 2015: Shaping the future of equality, human rights and social justice (12 and 13 February 2015)

Session 5: Where do we want to be? Future studies – how do we want UK society to look in ten years' time?

Comment by Ryan Shorthouse, Bright Blue

I am going to focus on politics, in particular on centre-right politics and how Conservatives might conceive of a better future and a fairer society. I run a centre-right Conservative think tank. Of course the Conservative movement has many fragments, the libertarian movement that ascended since the 1970s and a socially Conservative and pragmatic section. I represent the modern liberal fragment. I think there are key principles that hold across the Conservative movement, and those principles are what Conservatives would like to see in a fairer society.

Before I go to those principles, I must say that Conservatives have a funny relationship with the future. Of course there is a tendency amongst some to glorify the past, to think that society has gone to the dogs and the world was a much better place in the past. I disagree with that. Life has got better for most people. Secondly, there is a statement from Michael Oakeshott, a Conservative philosopher. He said that there are two types of societies you might want to create – the enterprise and the civil association. The enterprise association is where we create laws and rules to achieve some end goal that society wants. Whereas the civil association does not prescribe what the future is, it just has a robust legal framework in which people can pursue their own vision of the good life. The problem Oakeshott had and Conservatives have with the enterprise association, is that we can have a tendency to treat humans as means rather than end points, as means to a future better society rather than as individual agents who should be respected.

Having said that, I think there are three core principles that Conservatives would like to see which might create a fairer society in the future. The first is a move towards individual freedom – economic and social – a desire for more individual agency. As Michael Gove says, somewhere where more people can become authors of their own life story. Individual freedom and agency are at the heart of a centre-right vision. Second, that reward that people receive is more linked to effort:

that we have a more contribution-based society where resources and success are linked more to desert rather than luck or need. I think that stands at the heart of a centre-right vision. The third point is that individual freedom and value is not enough, that we need others and that the civic space for institutions between state and individual should be nurtured, and that more people should have and benefit from strong and diverse social relationships.

First on individual freedom, we know that the centre-right since Thatcher's day has long prized freedom, lower taxes and deregulation for example. People are given the freedom to enrich themselves. In recent years this libertarianism has crept into social policies. For example, gay rights and same-sex marriage recently. And you can see amongst young people a growing political identification of being economic and social liberals. This emphasis on freedom entails enabling people no matter what their sexuality, their religious belief, their gender; they should be able to pursue the life they want. This is compatible with goals such as diversity and equality which is the focus of the conference today. As I have said, there has been movement on gay rights. You can see from Conservatives currently in government that there has been movement on gender as well. Female ministers are trying to address this problem of gender stereotypes preventing people from pursuing the life they want. It is not just the state that gets in the way, but cultural and traditional norms too. Initiatives to make sure girls see STEM subjects, science, technology, engineering and maths, can be pursued by girls and are not just masculine subjects. Equally, there have been changes in parental leave, so it is not just seen as the women's responsibility to look after children, that men and women should share that task, it is up to men or women whether they want to look after children at home. So Conservatives want individual freedom, pursuing the life you want, regardless of gender, race etc. in order to thrive, and they will tackle the Government and cultural barriers to achieving this. The Conservatives are different from Libertarians in having a richer philosophy. There is a positive view of liberty which is associated with Isaiah Berlin's belief that freedom is acquired rather than something you are born with. You get it from others and you are given the tools to pursue a free life through socialisation, especially through parents in the early years. Conservatives' vision is for more people to have freedom and also the

tools to be able to live an autonomous life where they are held responsible for the decisions they make.

Conservatives prioritise parenting and education, which they believe are the most important ways you can increase individual agency and responsibility. You have seen an investment in better parenting by this government. They believe that parental background is one of the strongest influences on how children develop. So the Government has invested more money in family intervention projects. Second is high quality early years education. We know that with skill formation, the earlier you start the better you will progress. The brain is most malleable in those early years, so they are critical for building the cognitive and social development that children need to thrive. So you have seen an investment by this government in childcare to boost the quality and affordability of pre-school care and a vision to make sure that everybody can get the best possible start with robust early-years education. Although it is improving it is still a low-status, low-paid profession. Education matters much more to Conservatives. It gives people autonomy and responsibility over their lives. You have seen a push for increasing standards regardless of what your background is, for all children in the core academic subjects. For example, I would say that no child should leave school at 16 without having the basic qualifications at GCSE level, and that may mean we should have more mixed age classrooms.

On reward being linked to effort, Conservatives dream of social mobility. It is a belief that luck plays a role in determining life chances and of course if people fall on hard times they need support, but we should have a society which is more based on effort and people getting what they deserve. For example, to have more contributory based welfare so if you put more in, you should get more out. On immigration too we have seen a hardening rhetoric, and some people on the centre-right are trying to oppose that and say that most immigrants benefit society and contribute a lot more than they take out. And we should be rewarding that and the immigration cap is arbitrary and discriminatory. Restricting the benefits that migrants can receive for a certain period of time has a lot of popular support because you should only get something out once you have put in, hence the time-delay. Even at the bottom of the labour

market, there is a push from Conservatives to create the living wage and the minimum wage. It is not right that two-thirds of people in poverty are working households: there I am pushing for Conservatives to make sure that reward is linked to effort in pay, and that businesses pay an adequate amount.

Finally, I think relationships matter to Conservatives. As the philosopher Roger Scruton said, real freedom and value comes from looking out from yourself and towards others that you are responsible for, and respecting and loving others. So relationships matter. Beveridge identified five 'giant evils' in society – squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease – and went on to propose widespread reform to the system of social welfare to address these. One should be added – loneliness and social exclusion. Relationships matter. They reduce poverty and allow you to navigate the modern world. You need family and friends to pick up your child because you are still at work, for example. There is a lot of evidence that people are more likely to get jobs and stay in jobs through the social networks they have. There are lots of public benefits too, such as social integration. Poor social networks lead to a loss of about £6 billion to the UK economy. I think we need policies that strengthen networks, so more social networking.

I think we should also try to bring people of different ethnicities and backgrounds together through nation building. I don't agree with a universalist view of the world. I believe there is a unique British culture and the way to strengthen ties is by increasing that sense of Britishness. We should do that more as long as it is done in an inclusive way. Thirdly, I have said we should build a contribution-based society where people from different backgrounds and ethnicities are rewarded and acknowledged for the contribution they make, rather than the colour of their skin or their sexuality or gender. That is what the centre-right and Conservatives want for a fairer society: more freedom and individual agency, a contribution-based society where reward is linked to effort, and a society where relationships and civil space are nurtured so nobody is lonely or excluded.