

## **Left brain, right brain - human nature and political values**

**Matthew Taylor, RSA, 29 October 2009**

(Please check against delivery)

Thank you all for coming this evening. And I would like to thank Tim and Jenni in advance (after all, I may not feel like the thanking them after they have responded).

Tim is a trenchant critic of what might be called neurological reductionism and Jenni writes brilliantly about the problem of modern democracy and society so between them they can demolish both the content and form of my speech.

The aim of these annual lectures is not simply for me to get things off my chest (if they were I would probably choose to talk about the ineptitude of the West Bromwich Albion front line, or why it is that with 3 million unemployed Thames Water never has people working on its road works at evenings or weekends). The purpose is to explore the kind of issues on which I believe the RSA should be focussing at least some of its energies.

In my first lecture I talked about pro-social behaviour. Leaving Downing Street and being acutely aware of the problems of political leadership and social change, I explored the ways we the people must adapt if we are to fashion the future we say we want. I argued that to close what I called the 'social aspiration gap' tomorrow's citizens needed, in aggregate, to be more engaged, more self reliant and more other regarding (or altruistic).

In my second lecture I focussed on how our common sense idea of how we operate as social beings had been challenged by thirty years of research in neuroscience,

behavioural economics and social psychology. This research, I argued, challenged three ways we tend to think about ourselves: that we do the things we do because we consciously choose them, that our actions are always rational and self interested, and that there is a clear boundary between the self and the world it occupies.

I want now to bring these ideas together. In the main part of the speech I overlay the idea of pro-social citizenship on to insights into human nature exploring three particular spaces for new thinking and practice. In my concluding remarks I want to return to the themes of my recent article in Prospect magazine asking whether our emerging account of human agency invites a new perspective on political ideology.

Politics is also my starting point. The idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with our democracy has become a truism, especially in the wake of public outrage over MPs' expenses. On entering office Gordon Brown made restoring trust in politics one of his key goals. Even the keenest spin doctor would find it hard to describe what has happened since as mission fulfilled. But what really is it that is wrong with our system of democracy and what needs to be done? My answer begins with the observation that democracy can only be as successful as we, the people, make it.

How well suited are we to be good democrats? We have over recent years come to understand more about the idiosyncrasies of our mental processes. Some of these appear to compromise our ability to make wise and fair democratic judgements. We are a bit confused about the medium and long term. If people are asked to choose between £50 now and a £100 in a year many will take the 50 quid. But if we are asked to choose between £50 in five years and £100 in six years we all choose the £100. We

tend to be risk averse tending to feel more strongly about losing something we have than gaining something we don't. We get confused by the relationship between absolute and relative quantity. For example we will travel across town to save £5 off a £20 shirt but wouldn't make the same journey to save £5 off a £100 coat.

There are problems too with our objectivity. Naturally enough we are much more inclined to understand the failings of those close to us than of strangers. We tend to think our own successes are a result of our qualities and our failures down to circumstance. But we tend to think the reverse of others. To take a trivial example, 90% of us claim to be above average drivers.

And there are problems with our judgement. We are not very good at predicting what will make us happy, nor even at describing what made us happy in the past. In particular, we tend to overstate the benefits we will gain from buying and owning consumer goods.

Now, we don't think like this because we are bad or damaged, it is simply how we have evolved. For example, for the vast majority of our existence as a species on earth there wasn't really much need for a capacity to plan for the long term.

Short term, innumerate and self centred. On the face of it we don't look like we are particularly suited to being good democratic citizens. But, of course, this isn't the whole story. Traditional accounts of human cognition are dualist. Plato spoke about a charioteer riding the two horses or reason and passion. Jonathan Haidt, in his wonderful book 'The Happiness Hypothesis', replaces Plato's horse with the elephant

of our automatic brain and its conscious rider. I am with Freud in suggesting three elements. Think of human behaviour as analogous to a mounted elephant walking through a forest. The elephant is the automatic part of our brain, the physiological and genetic predispositions we have as human beings, the rider is our conscious brain, the part that makes decisions and plans. The trees in the forest are the social context, blocking some routes drawing us to others. The elephant may want to go a certain way but the skilful rider can redirect it, while paths cleared in the forest encourage it down certain routes.

But the drivers of human behaviour aren't hard to describe just because they are complex it is also because humans as a species are uniquely reflexive; we think about thinking. We can choose to adjust for our mental biases, just like the rider of an elephant might make allowances for its tendency to lean left or right.

Back to democracy. Surely, democratic processes should involve overcoming the problems of applying prehistoric instincts to the complexities of the modern world? Instead it should mean working together to make good decisions despite our limitations. This, I think, is where the core problem lies. Instead of democracy being understood and arranged as a realm in which we think past our mental predispositions it offers to be a sphere where we can pander to them.

In his last campaign speech before the 1932 election, Roosevelt said: 'I believe that we are at the threshold of a fundamental change in our popular economic thought; that in the future we are going to think less about the producer and more about the consumer.' FDR was right.

The redefinition of citizen as consumer has three distinct but mutually reinforcing dimensions. Consumerist politics requires that mainstream politicians promise to deliver rising disposable incomes year on year. Consumerism has also become the dominant language around the provision of public services. But the third dimension may be the most problematic. This is the way the democratic process itself has taken on the language, norms and techniques of consumerism. The customer is always right, is echoed in the motto of triangulated politics; the voter is always right. Or, as we should say in our electoral system, the voter in the marginal constituency is always right. Worcester woman is always right.

The problem is she probably isn't. I have described some of the reasons to suspect this have been provided by behavioural economics and social psychology. Confirmation is to be found in polls of public opinion. Take these findings. Most of us think more power should be devolved to the local level. An even bigger majority says public service standards should be the same everywhere. Patient satisfaction ratings for the NHS are higher than they have ever been but more than half of us think the NHS is in crisis. We agree that we need to change our lives to counter global warming but admit we have no plans to do so ourselves. In the phrase of Ben Page from MORI, the people of the UK demand Swedish welfare provision on American tax rates.

It is hard enough for politics to reconcile different interests and preferences in society but, now, a combination of the complexity of modern life and consumerist expectations mean that politicians face the challenge of reconciling conflicting interests and preferences in the same people. Generally, it is a challenge they duck.

We have an economy and a public sector mired in debt. We have ambitious carbon reduction targets but no realistic account of how we are going to meet them. We are the fifth richest nation in the world but suffer high levels of child poverty. All this may be cited as evidence of how politicians have failed to face down the superficial and contradictory demands of voters.

If we wanted people to see democracy as inherently about dilemmas, and trade offs, balancing interests within people, within society and across time, what might we do?

Here are some suggestions.

First, devolve more power because it is easier at the local level for people to relate to issues and see trade offs, and to see how their behaviour shapes those trade offs.

Second, every year the Government should host at least two high profile national citizen juries on major policy questions such as assisted suicide, drugs policy or how to allocate places in the best schools. These should be proper juries with their proceedings filmed and on the web and with the Government committed either to implementing the recommendations or explaining why not.

Third, require all policy advice to ministers to be published in full. Believe me if there was a policy out there that had only upside it would have been implemented long ago. Every policy has disadvantages. It's about time the politicians came clean about this. And because the mass media plays such an important role in encouraging unreasonable attitudes in the public, the advice should be released early to

broadcasters, newspapers and bloggers committed to a code of conduct on accurate reporting.

Lest you are worried at my inconsistency, I freely admit there are probably downsides to these three proposals too. My point is this; the problem with our democracy is less about the performance of politicians and the workings of our constitution and more about the content of the democratic conversation. Proper processes of democratic deliberation in which we either participate directly, or which we can acknowledge as legitimate, would help us be less petulant, wiser and more responsible task masters for our beleaguered representatives. And it would make democracy a place for learning. A place, where instead of constantly impugning our opponents, we might find that rare and transcendent moment in political discourse - when we come to agree what it is we disagree about.

A second area which could be informed by new insights into human nature is public service reform. The spending squeeze which we face over the next decade is an opportunity radically to rethink.

Regardless of their precise origins, we can think of public services as representing a common agreement that there are aspects of each other's lives and the overall fabric of society for which we share a common responsibility. Yet this ethos is too often lost behind the vast bureaucracy, the cloying traditions, the vested interests, the institutional boundaries and the idiosyncratic public whims that govern the shape of our modern welfare state.

Thus we end up with a health service in which – like all health services – a fairly high proportion of treatment has little or no efficacy, a police service most of whose activities are only marginally related to the things which make us behave well or keep us safe, and a schools system in which the question of whether children are actually happy in school or enjoying learning is considered at best a side issue and at worst a distraction from the process of grinding out exam results.

The question that underpins a new approach is this. How can public services turn themselves outwards so that instead of simply managing problems presented to them they help prevent those problems and give people themselves the capacity to meet their own needs individually and collectively? How can the welfare state be as much about social productivity as about social security? Here again our strategy can be informed by insights into what makes us tick as social animals.

Take the example of schools. Children spend roughly 20% of their waking hours in school. We now demand that schools achieve more and more in that time, not only higher standards for all but other objectives like instilling citizenship and an enjoyment of sport and culture, mitigating social inequality, even helping children find well-being.

But research into how we learn shows that emotional receptivity is crucial to learning. If the signals they get from the rest of their lives suggest learning is irrelevant or that education isn't for people like them, they are unlikely to succeed. If researchers describe a test in a way which implies that one group of students (say women, or African-Caribbean students) is likely to under-perform this leads to that group scoring

significantly less well in the test than if they had not heard the description. A commitment to learning in communities and families is a more important variable even than socio-economic status in influencing educational outcomes.

Teachers working in communities that lack commitment and confidence about learning are like factory workers trying to make a great product when they only control a fifth of the conveyor belt.

But how would it be if schools started with a different question; how can we use the amazing human, social, and capital resources of our school to help to instil a culture of learning in the community we serve? We know it works. In desperation at failing to connect with a group of pupils, some schools have made a real effort to engage their parents and wider community. Where it is done boldly it can be a turning point. For example, cabinet minister Liam Byrne has from this stage cited the example of St Benedict's School in his constituency. The school had tried every method to address the systematic under performance of Bangladeshi boys but it was only when they engaged – engaged and taught – the boys' parents that suddenly things shifted. The children started getting the same messages at home as at school and the boys were soon top of the class.

But the responsibility for schools turning outwards to become a beacon for learning in their community cannot rest with schools alone. The RSA has been working with three secondaries in Manchester to develop what we call an area based curriculum. The schools are supported by a facilitator who builds bridges with local institutions. The aim is to ground more of the pupils' learning in thinking about the city in which

they live. So far it seems to have worked, engaging pupils and teachers alike. The long term aim is for the wider local community to own the school curriculum, helping to design it, to support it and deliver it, not just in school but in everyday life.

We hear a great deal about personalising public services but we need also to think about re-socialising them, using them to generate new capacity and stronger norms of engagement, self reliance and altruism. This, for example, is the aim of Southwark Circle a new service in which older people pay a small membership fee to receive a combination of support and advice when and how they need it plus access to social activities, much of this provided by community volunteers. In North London, Barnet Council wants to provide every person with complex needs their own life coach to help them be more independent and access services. These life coaches will not be traditional council employees but drawn from the local community.

Public service policy makers, managers and front line staff need to get out of their institutions, loosen the chains of bureaucratic accountability and use their considerable resources to shape the social context which frames the decisions we make about our health, our education and our duties to our local community.

There is a final area which I think looks promising as we apply insights on human behaviour to closing the social aspiration gap. This relates to communities.

Community is a tricky word. It combines imprecision with warmth, being so widely used and misused to have become almost meaningless. But despite the imprecision there are some things we can say about it.

Communities can shape attitudes, behaviours and life chances. This claim is based in part on decades of research based on theories of social capital but also on explorations of social norms. An example is a recent study of the residents of Binghamton in New York State. The researchers were looking for evidence of what they termed pro-social attitudes. One ingenious way they measured this was by dropping addressed envelopes [I don't know if you remember addressed envelopes] in the street and seeing what proportion got picked up and posted through the right door. The research team found that the key characteristic of those in the most pro-social neighbourhoods was not that they were rich or poor or any other objective social status but simply that they individually felt they had good networks of support. The researchers argue that neurological, adaptive and cultural processes reinforce each other so that the more you experience pro-social behaviour the more likely you are to display it yourself.

Communities may be complex and have fuzzy boundaries but that doesn't mean they don't have definable and measurable characteristics. One way of seeing these is through the painstaking process of social network analysis, based on the detailed mapping of the relationships between members of the community and between this community and others.

Through this we can see that there are certain characteristics of social networks which make them more or less likely to be resilient. Networks are more resilient if they contain several hubs, by which I mean people or organisations connected to lots of other people and organisations. If one hub is lost (because someone moves away or an organisation closes down) there are others to take their place. Networks are also more

resilient if there are diverse connections between the members. These help make each person less dependent on a few links and also reduce the distance between people who are not directly connected. Third, both online and face to face networks are more resilient - in the sense of being more open and adaptable - if they have good links not only between people in the community but between people and networks outside (what social capital theorists call bridging capital).

Using these rules of thumb, researchers can draw up instructive social network maps. This is indeed what the RSA is doing in its Connected Communities projects, working with residents of New Cross in London and Knowle West in Bristol. Social network maps can then become a kind of self diagnostic tool. Members of a community can see its core characteristics at a glance. More powerfully still they can see how they might act to make a community more resilient. This could involve strengthening the links of people at the fringes of the community, investing in organisations which have the potential to act as hubs, identifying missing bridges to the outside and exploring how to put these in place.

This may sound far fetched, or like a kind of benignly intended but dangerous form of social engineering, but of course, social network analysis is a more systematic and goal-oriented version of the on line world now occupied by almost everyone under 30, and more and more of us well past this age.

The reason this is important - not just to the community concerned but to all of us – is that the social norms and networks around us condition our attitudes, behaviours and life chances just as much, I contend, as our genetic predispositions, our conscious

decisions and the exhortations made of us by a hundred and one public agencies. As American scientists Nicholas A. Christakis and James Fowler say in their book 'Connected':

*'social influence does not end with the people we know. If we affect our friends, and they affect their friends, then our actions can potentially affect people we have never met. We discovered that if your friend's friend's friend gained weight, you gained weight. We discovered that if your friend's friend's friend stopped smoking, you stopped smoking. And we discovered that if your friend's friend's friend became happy, you became happy'.*

These are some of the practical ways we might encourage people to be better citizens. But what could new thinking about human nature mean for our broader view of society? One of the most powerful concepts in modern sociology is that of reflexivity, developed and popularised by the author of the Third Way, Antony Giddens. Putting it simply, this is the idea that modern citizens do not see themselves as mere objects of impersonal religious, national or class forces but as subjects of their own lives, each with their own individual story.

Giddens talks about moving from class politics to a 'life politics'. This must enable citizens to work through issues at the intersection of personal life stories and social forces in the challenging context of 21<sup>st</sup> century globalisation. In the absence of the binds of tradition and deference, we must rely on new democratic discourse to work through the challenges of modernity, promoting responsibility, new forms of solidarity and trust in new social institutions.

But the problem is that reflexive individuals, their self centred-ness reinforced by free market ideology and consumerist mass marketing, can all too easily fail to see why they need these new forms of discourse. Can't they just do what they want and leave the rest to the hidden hand of the market or the hapless blundering of the political class?

I believe both the case for a new collective spirit, and the principles that could underpin the development of modern civic and democratic spaces, are to be found in our understanding of human nature. Co-operation and engagement are not things we 'ought' to do but a necessity to help us steer a successful course through the modern world using brains that evolved before the invention of the wheel. We became the social animals we are subsisting in closed homogenous communities with deeply respected and very slowly evolving bodies of knowledge and culture. We find ourselves now living as part of economically abundant, diverse communities in a fast changing global knowledge economy. This moment in human affairs has been characterised as the teenage years of the post enlightenment project; a period of change and creativity but also of self indulgence, confusion and some danger.

As a schoolboy socialist in a 1970s direct grant grammar school the first explicitly political arguments I ever had were about human nature. My vision of the good society rested on a view of people as fundamentally collaborative and benign, something only hidden by the depredations of the 'system'. Working class Tory mates mocked my naivety. To them we were all self interested individuals. Those who

succeeded did so by their own efforts, those who failed or cheated would change only if incentivised or compelled.

Yet for most of the twenty years I have been involved in politics debates about human nature have been restricted to criminality and other social pathologies, as if only bad people failed to conform to the 'rational man' model of neo-classical economics.

Giddens was right that new times require a rethinking of old political categories. New thinking about human nature, combining insights from natural science, social science and philosophy encourage us to revisit and recombine ideas from the left and the right. The left is right that society matters. None of the suggestions I have made in this speech will have much chance of succeeding in a society where inequality continues to grow. But traditional Conservatives are right to believe that growing self reliance and thickening civic binds provide a more powerful, even if slower and messier, route to social progress than the well intentioned schemes of state bureaucracies.

A new politics of human nature encourages us to accept the flaws in our intuitive sense of self, recognising our psychological frailties and acknowledging the social nature of the brain. It requires us to see that the existential mirror of modernity is distorting. I have in the past described the contrast – found in opinion poll after opinion poll – between our undue personal optimism and our equally undue social pessimism. But the individual and personal is not quite the domain of self control we imagine it to be. And if we are creative and ambitious we can exert more influence over the social sphere than we have tended to think possible.

A democracy that celebrates and embeds the need for compromise, trade off and responsibility. Public services with the freedom and the tools to enhance individual and social capacity. Communities working together to build their collective resilience. These are all aspects of what I would term social reflexivity; the process by which we acknowledge our social nature and work together to create the conditions for better lives.

It may not be an easy route to the fulfilment of our amazing human potential. But is there really any other? It is a route that I hope through its lectures, through its research projects and through the actions of its amazing fellows the RSA will help to chart in the years ahead

Thank you

Matthew Taylor

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