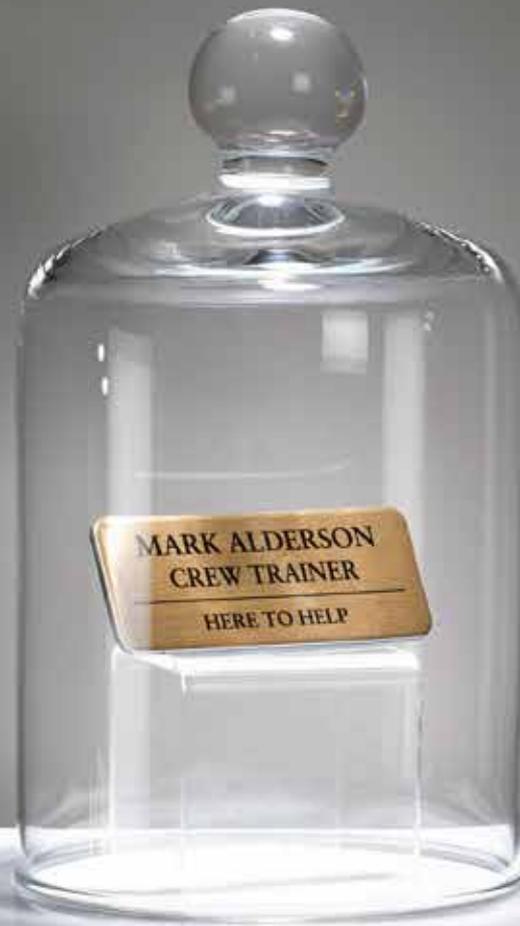


## Work shift

**Ryan Avent** on the social and political evolution needed to cope with automation



### WAITING STAFF

c. 2017

In the early 21st century, all restaurants employed people to take orders and process payments. Name tags made service more personal.

**Alain de Botton** speaks to Matthew Taylor about how capitalism could be better shaped to meet human needs

**R Douglas Fields** explains how rage overrides reason

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## “NORMS WILL SHIFT REGARDING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THOSE NOT IN WORK”

RYAN AVENT, PAGE 10

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# “REFORMING WORK AND THE SYSTEMS AROUND IT IS VITAL”



**MATTHEW TAYLOR**

*I am about halfway through the time allotted to the independent Review of Modern Employment, which the prime minister asked me to chair and which our Trustees kindly allowed me to combine with being RSA chief executive. The most intensive part of the process – a series of 10 awaydays around the country – is yet to come, but we have developed some interesting initial ideas to test as we go out and about. Given the focus of this edition of the Journal is on the future of work, I am using this column to float one of those ideas.*

It is important to start with the context for the Review's work. A number of things became clear early on. First, that the UK has a very strong record in job creation and that a high employment rate is vital to enabling economic security and opportunity. Second, too much work in the British economy is of poor quality, badly paid, insecure and with few opportunities for progression. Third, that there are few simple solutions to the latter weakness that don't threaten the former success. Fourth, that the picture of work here and across the world is complex and fast changing, and becoming more so all the time.

None of which is to say that improvement isn't necessary and possible. As Ryan Avent and the RSA's Benedict Dellot argue here, reforming work and the systems around it is vital. The divide between the labour market winners and losers has contributed to public disillusionment with the governing establishment and strengthened the lure of populism. And with technological change promising even more disruption, and extending insecurity to new tranches of workers, it is even more important to explore the future work we want and how we will enable it. It is also important, as Shereen Hussein argues, to think about the types of work that are likely to expand – most obviously caring roles – and ensure they offer greater fulfilment and opportunity.

The Review is using three challenges to structure its thinking: the need to tackle exploitation; to try to bring greater clarity to what is often a confusing picture of rules and rights; and to explore the underlying incentives that shape our labour market. Our final report will combine specific measures that we would like to see implemented now with medium-term shifts necessary to better align incentives with national priorities.

Over the years I have had some good responses to thoughts floated in this column. So at the risk of annoying the other Review members and government minders (who, to be fair, have so far been very supportive), I'd like to explore an idea with Fellows, many of whom have engaged in the RSA's recent work in this area.

As a means to test the appetite for better work, not just in government, but in civil society and among the public, I am thinking of promulgating a statement of intent a few weeks before the Review is launched. The wording might be something like 'we believe all work should be fair and decent, with scope for fulfilment and development'. Although every substantive word in that statement is up for debate, the critical question is whether as a nation – as employers, employees, investors, consumers and citizens – we want to give the quality of work in the British economy as much emphasis as we have rightly accorded its quantity. This could be seen as a gimmick or simply fall flat, but if a wide range of people and organisations did sign up, it would provide vital impetus for the Review's recommendations.

It was the prime minister's decision to appoint me, but I wouldn't be leading the Review if it wasn't for the RSA. The work of the Society's researchers on self-employment, the sharing economy and technological change forms an important background to our considerations, and the ideal of better work is one which strongly aligns with the RSA's mission. So if we do launch a good work pledge, I will be hoping RSA Fellows will be in the lead promoting it. What do you think? ■



## EDUCATION

## CULTURE CLASS

A £2.6m investigation into the impact of cultural learning on disadvantaged children, Learning About Culture, has just begun.

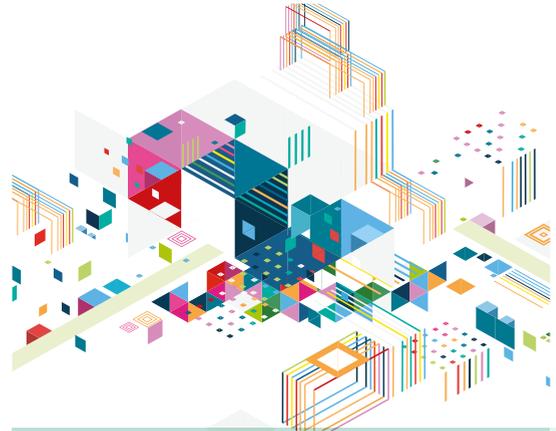
In partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the RSA will run a series of large-scale randomised control trials to evaluate how cultural learning activities affect educational attainment and non-cognitive development, sometimes called 'soft-skills' or 'character'. The projects tested will involve partnership working between cultural organisations and schools, with children learning in and through the arts. As well as testing for impact, the trials will observe the implementation of projects in order to understand how they are making a difference.

The programme is motivated by the RSA's desire to ensure more children have the opportunity to develop the knowledge, life skills and cultural capital to live fulfilled lives. Over the next two years, in parallel with the scientific enquiry, the RSA will conduct a qualitative research programme, examining what benefits schools attribute to engagement in cultural learning and the conditions that support its impact.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport awarded a grant of £850,000 for the programme in November 2016, and Arts Council England and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation are providing support.

The EEF and the RSA bring complementary strengths to the project. The EEF's track record in providing robust evidence for improving educational outcomes through its Teaching and Learning Toolkit and its close relationship with the Department for Education ensures credibility within the education sector. The RSA's position as trusted, critical friend to education and the arts, and its 28,000-strong Fellowship, including many leaders in education and the cultural sector, enable it to convene a broad coalition to engage with the programme and turn its findings into stronger practice.

*To get involved, contact [Mark.Londesborough@rsa.org.uk](mailto:Mark.Londesborough@rsa.org.uk)*



## EMPLOYMENT

## AGE OF AUTOMATION

How will artificial intelligence (AI) affect the quantity of work available in the future? Will jobs and tasks that have been automated be replaced? Will empathy, creativity and authenticity be the last refuges for human workers? These are just some of the questions being addressed by a new RSA study to be published in the spring.

The project, called Age of Automation, aims to provide clarity about the fate of low-skilled workers in a new era of advanced AI and robotics. While academics continue to disagree about the scale and nature of jobs that will disappear, the RSA's research takes the debate one step further by exploring the impact of these new technologies on recruitment, pay, career progression, workers' sense of purpose and consumer prices. By analysing the wider implications of technology, the RSA hopes to understand the opportunities as well as the challenges.

Benedict Delloit, RSA associate director for Economy, Enterprise and Manufacturing, who is leading the project, said: "Existing research theorises how many people will be made redundant based on what is possible, but the diffusion of technology takes time and is dependent on how businesses behave. We will survey employers to determine their appetite for the technology and how they would deploy it."

Cultural attitudes to technology will also be taken into account. Regulation will have a part to play too, with ethical and legal questions limiting the speed of change.

"The research leads back to a fundamental question: what kind of labour market do we want to create? We could try to shield workers from technology, which may protect low-skilled jobs, but could keep us on a low-productivity, low-pay path for years to come. The other option is to make technology work in our favour, opening up the space for jobs to be more human," said Delloit.



## OBITUARY

### **DR DAVID GUY CHARLES ALLAN (1925-2017) FRHistS, FSA, FRSA, RSA HISTORIAN**

After joining the RSA in 1954, David Allan quickly realised that the archive would prove of great importance. Awarded a PhD for his research into the Society and its influence on 18th century economic and social policy, he encouraged many others to wander 'along the unfenced road' of the RSA's influence worldwide when he established the RSA History Study Group in 1962.

Dr Allan lectured and published widely. He wrote the biography of the RSA's founder, *William Shipley* (first published in 1968); co-authored the story of another founder member, *Stephen Hales, Scientist and Philanthropist* (1980); and with Professor John L Abbott he published *The Virtuoso Tribe of Arts and Sciences: Studies in the Eighteenth Century Work and Membership of the London Society of Arts* (1992). Dr Allan is also recognised as an authority on the history painter James Barry and his murals for the RSA's Great Room.

Aware that there were still many nuggets to be unearthed in the RSA's rich history, David Allan established the William Shipley Group. Generous with his time and knowledge, he continued to share his passion and develop projects and papers until the last few months of his life. His contributions and support will be sorely missed.

*Susan Bennett MA  
Former RSA Curator/Archivist  
Honorary Secretary, William Shipley Group for RSA History*



## INTERNATIONAL

### **THAI CULTURAL HUB**

The RSA is exploring the development of a civic and cultural hub in Bangkok, Thailand, in collaboration with Susannah Tantemsapya, founder and executive director of Creative Migration and the RSA's Connector in Los Angeles.

The aim is to create a groundbreaking new institution that brings together citizens to co-create authentically Thai responses to the challenges of the 21st century. As a platform for enlightened debate and multidisciplinary collaboration, the hub would also foster new ideas, networks and talent.

Tantemsapya, a dual citizen of the US and Thailand, has been gifted a 19th-century building for the project that was first owned by Chaophraya Thammasakmontri, who is considered to be the father of modern education in Thailand.

At the first open house event, hosted in November 2016, RSA Fellows and more than 80 potential Fellows – ranging from artists to academics and innovators to politicians – shared their ideas on how such a hub could best support social change in Thailand. Following positive feedback on the project, the RSA has increased confidence in the demand for such a hub at a key moment of change in Thailand.

The RSA is now seeking funding from investors, both globally and in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region, to support a one-year pilot programme from November 2017. "It's exciting to be collaborating with the group that's helping the RSA break new ground," said Chris Oestereich, the RSA's Connector in Thailand, who helped organise the event. With so much trepidation in the world, it feels good to be part of an effort to create something positive."

For further information contact [global@rsa.org.uk](mailto:global@rsa.org.uk)



## POLICY

# SELF-EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH

National insurance needs to be overhauled so that it responds to the growing number of self-employed entrepreneurs and the realities of running a business, according to a new report published by the RSA. *The Entrepreneurial Audit* argues that pension enrolment and paternity pay should be extended and universal credit modified in order to help the self-employed not just to survive, but to thrive.

Self-employment accounts for nearly half of all jobs created since the economic downturn of 2008; the RSA report argues that it may not be long before freelancers, sole traders and micro-entrepreneurs outnumber the public-sector workforce.

As the debate rages on about whether this trend signals a rise in precarious work or an entrepreneurial renaissance, the report examines a variety of policy areas, from tax and regulation to welfare and pensions. The report finds that government should be more willing to intervene to boost skills, enhance earnings and ultimately lift living standards.

Report author and RSA associate director for Economy, Enterprise and Manufacturing, Benedict Dellot, said: "Governments past and present have tried to do right by the self-employed by leaving them to their own devices. But this laissez-faire approach, epitomised by corporation tax cuts and broad deregulation drives, has been found wanting.

"It's time for government policy to take a more hands-on approach, with more investment in training and business support, and fair welfare coverage that acts as much as a safety net as a springboard for progression."

To download the report, visit:  
[www.thersa.org/entrepreneurial-audit](http://www.thersa.org/entrepreneurial-audit)

## COMPETITION

# DESIGN AWARDS

University students and recent graduates anywhere in the world can now enter the 2016-17 RSA Student Design Awards, which challenge participants to tackle pressing social, environmental and economic issues.

Each year the RSA works with cross-sector partners to develop project briefs that reflect complex practical problems. There are 12 briefs in this year's competition, focusing on issues such as how to: promote intercultural understanding ('Beyond Borders'); create opportunities for lifelong learning in an ever-changing digital age ('Learning for Life'); and move towards a more sustainable future in our goods and services ('Rework' and 'Circular Futures').

Over the past six months, the RSA Student Design Awards team has delivered face-to-face briefing sessions with students around the world, and supported participants through skills workshops and online resources. Solutions to this year's brief will be judged in a rigorous two-stage process culminating in interviews with finalists. The winners will receive practical and financial support to develop their careers. This year's Awards include over £45,000 in cash prizes and paid industry placements, including at Waitrose, GlaxoSmithKline, the UK government's Policy Lab, Kinneir Dufort, PRP Architects, the Chartered Institute of Marketing and NCR.

Results of the 2016-17 competition will be announced on 1 June and celebrated at a ceremony at RSA House on 21 June. David Constantine MBE, recipient of the 2010 RSA Bicentenary Medal, will present the awards, and the 2017 winners will join a roll-call of renowned alumni, including Apple design chief Sir Jonathan Ive, fashion designer Betty Jackson CBE and Nike innovation leader Richard Clarke.

Rebecca Ford, UK manager of the RSA Student Design Awards, said: "The RSA Student Design Awards, which have been running for 93 years, challenge young designers from a huge range of backgrounds to apply their skills in new ways. This year's briefs ask students to apply design thinking in the context of social and economic innovation, sustainability and international development. The range of student responses challenges society, governments and industry to think more openly about what the next generation of designers can do."

The deadline for entering this year's Awards is 8 March 2017 at 4pm GMT. Visit <http://sda.thersa.org> and follow @RSADesignAwards for updates.

## EVENTS



### INCLUSIVE GROWTH COMMISSION – FINAL REPORT LAUNCH

How can we ensure that we have an economy that works for everyone? Commission chair and J P Morgan's chief market strategist for the UK and Europe, **Stephanie Flanders**, is joined by an expert panel to present a roadmap for an economy where all can benefit from greater prosperity.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Tuesday 7 March at 1.30pm



### UTOPIA FOR REALISTS

From a universal basic income to a 15-hour workweek, from a world without borders to a world without poverty – are we naive to dream big? One of Europe's most prominent young thinkers, **Rutger Bregman**, calls for a return to utopian thinking.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Thursday 9 March at 1.15pm



### THE POPULIST REVOLT AND THE FUTURE OF POLITICS

Several decades of greater economic and cultural openness in the West have not benefited all of our citizens. Founder of *Prospect* magazine **David Goodhart** visits the RSA to explore the political and moral intuitions that are sharply dividing Brexit Britain, and offers a proposal for a new political settlement.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Thursday 23 March at 1pm



### HOW TO ACHIEVE MORE (BY DOING LESS)

**Tiffany Dufu**, launch team member of Lean In and chief leadership officer of Levo, reveals the individual and economic cost of 'emotional labour' and explains how both men and women can forge greater gender equality at home and work.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Thursday 6 April at 1pm

## PAST HIGHLIGHTS

The *Evening Standard's* **Melanie McDonagh**, director of RUSI **Malcolm Chalmers**, the *Economist's* **John Prideaux** and LBC's **James O'Brien** reflected on the US election result; economist **Tim Harford** explained the connection between chaos, innovation, creativity and resilience; social psychologist **Jonathan Haidt** outlined why both the left

and right are too entrenched in dogmatic perspectives; acclaimed author and essayist **Pankaj Mishra** discussed the origins and future of the current 'age of anger'; author and neuroscientist **Daniel Levitin** outlined how to spot 'alternative facts'; academic and cultural critic **Sarah Churchwell** and political scientist **Matthew Goodwin**

reviewed a year characterised by populism in the US and Europe; head of innovation at DfID **Tamara Giltsoff** joined a panel to reveal innovations in frontier technologies in the aid sector; and Red Cross chief executive **Mike Adamson** featured on a panel deliberating how to live longer with better health. The 2017 Albert Medal was awarded to campaigner

and activist **Peter Tatchell**, who presented a moving summary of a life spent enacting transformative social change.

■ *Events producer Abi Stephenson has selected the highlights above from a large number of public events. For full listings and free audio and video downloads, please visit [www.thersa.org/events](http://www.thersa.org/events)*

# WORKING HISTORY

*Addressing the challenge of automation will take more than creative policymaking; it will require a seismic shift in how society perceives the role of work*

by *Ryan Avent*  
 @ryanavent

It is amazing how quickly we come to take monumental advances in computing for granted. Today, when people using Google's Chrome browser visit a foreign-language website, the browser offers to translate the page. Those accepting the offer are provided with a translation in little more than a moment, and it is of startlingly good quality. Translations improved dramatically in 2016, when Google began using a new system built on machine learning; overnight, quality improved by more than it had in the previous 10 years. The advance earned a fanfare in the press, before becoming part of our everyday lives, scarcely noticed: this technological breakthrough that had eluded computer scientists for decades.

High-quality, instant translation has the potential to change the world. One can imagine a moment in the not-so-distant future when ubiquitous earpieces connected to software in the cloud will allow people to communicate in foreign countries with the ease and fluidity of native speakers. It will also send tremors across the global economy. Business models will change, as publishers of media content suddenly find themselves participating in a truly global market. And the many thousands of people now employed doing good, skilled work as professional translators might

RYAN AVENT  
 IS AUTHOR OF  
*THE WEALTH OF  
 HUMANS AND  
 SENIOR EDITOR AT  
 THE ECONOMIST*

find themselves out of a job. Yet that scarcely begins to capture the changes that loom ahead, because the techniques that allow Google to provide near-instantaneous, high-quality translation are increasingly allowing engineers to build systems with all sorts of human-like capabilities: from operating automobiles on busy city streets, to assessing when a shape on a hospital scan is likely to be cancerous. A great age of automation looms ahead of us.

Assessing the potential for job loss due to automation is not simple. In a paper published in 2013, Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne, of Oxford University, analysed the nature of the tasks involved in different lines of work to gauge their 'automatability'. They reckoned that 47% of jobs in the US are at risk of computerisation in the next few decades. A paper published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2016 looked instead at the potential for automation of tasks within jobs, rather than of occupational categories as a whole, and concluded that while many workers will see their jobs change as certain tasks are automated away, only about 9% of jobs are fully automatable.

But even the smaller estimates of future job loss to automation represent millions upon millions of jobs across the rich world. What's more, technology continues to improve. Tasks that seemed beyond the reach of computing a decade ago, such





### THE ACCOUNTANT

Before machine learning came into widespread use, every company had an accountant to manage its finances. They would use handheld calculators to make quick calculations and kept up to date with the latest regulations through newspapers such as the *Financial Times*.



as automated driving, are now realities. If advances in machine intelligence continue to progress faster than anticipated, we could very soon face a serious labour-market crisis. The way in which that crisis unfolds, however, depends upon how we react to it.

### **AN ABUNDANCE OF LABOUR**

Technological progress in areas such as machine intelligence and robotics promises to create an economy in which capital (machines) is increasingly capable of substituting for human labour at a reasonable cost. As the scope for substitution grows, the number of workers whose labour is not strictly necessary to the operation of the economy will rise. The political and economic institutions now in place across most advanced economies, which emerged during the industrial revolution, are not well equipped to handle this dynamic. Welfare states are designed for a world in which most adults spend much of their life working, and in which the money earned from working is most adults' prime income stream. For the majority of people, cutting back on hours worked or leaving the workforce entirely means accepting a substantial decline in income and the possible loss of critical benefits. It is simply not a realistic option.

In this world, steady improvements in the capabilities of machines paradoxically end up hurting many workers and, potentially, the economy as a whole. Because leaving work or reducing one's hours is unacceptably unpleasant for most people, those who find themselves displaced by technology must seek new jobs wherever they can find them. But because machines will increasingly stand ready for deployment as substitutes for people, displaced workers face two options: they can specialise into the type of work (typically demanding a high level of skill or talent) that machines cannot do, or they can compete with machines on price. The better machines get, the larger the role the second

## **“LEAVING WORK IS UNACCEPTABLY UNPLEASANT FOR MOST”**

adjustment mechanism will play; workers will increasingly find that obtaining new work means accepting a reduction in pay.

A society that is committed to keeping everyone working amid the sort of technological change we can expect in future is one in which human workers will stave off replacement by machines by accepting ever-reducing wages. The economy that results from such choices is one that grows more slowly than it ought to, because firms frequently choose to use cheap workers when they might instead use more advanced technology. It is also one that is increasingly unequal, because the glut of workers seeking employment at any wage allows owners of capital and intellectual property to capture most of the gains from growth.

If it is hard to understand how an economy could function like this; consider the status today of many developing economies. David Autor, an economist at MIT, describes how Nissan operates plants all over the world in which it produces the same sorts of vehicles. In its plants in Japan, where wages are high by global standards, robots do much of the work. In India, in contrast, production is far more dependent on human labour because wages are much lower. India's economy uses less capital per worker, and is less productive and poorer than Japan's. In other poor and highly unequal societies, large amounts of labour are absorbed by the households of the rich, who take advantage of the glut of people available for hire at low wages to employ cooks, valets and doormen.



In the past, economies have been able to respond to major technological shifts by retraining and relocating workers to take better advantage of the new employment opportunities generated by new technologies. As a result of the industrial revolution, societies shifted from providing no universal public education at all, to universal public primary and secondary education, and accessible and affordable university education. It is certainly possible that significant new investments in education could reduce the magnitude of the adjustment facing governments today and extend the time they have to manage it.

But there are two hard constraints on an education-based solution to underemployment caused by technology. One is that it is much harder to boost the educational attainment of a highly educated population, which most rich economies now have, than it is to boost the attainment of a poorly educated population, such as existed in early industrial times. Second, an education solution is running a losing race against the clock. While societies seek to educate and retrain their workers, technology continues to get better. More and better education is desirable for many reasons, but at best it will delay the need for a broad restructuring of society in response to rapid technological progress.

### **PROVIDING PROSPERITY**

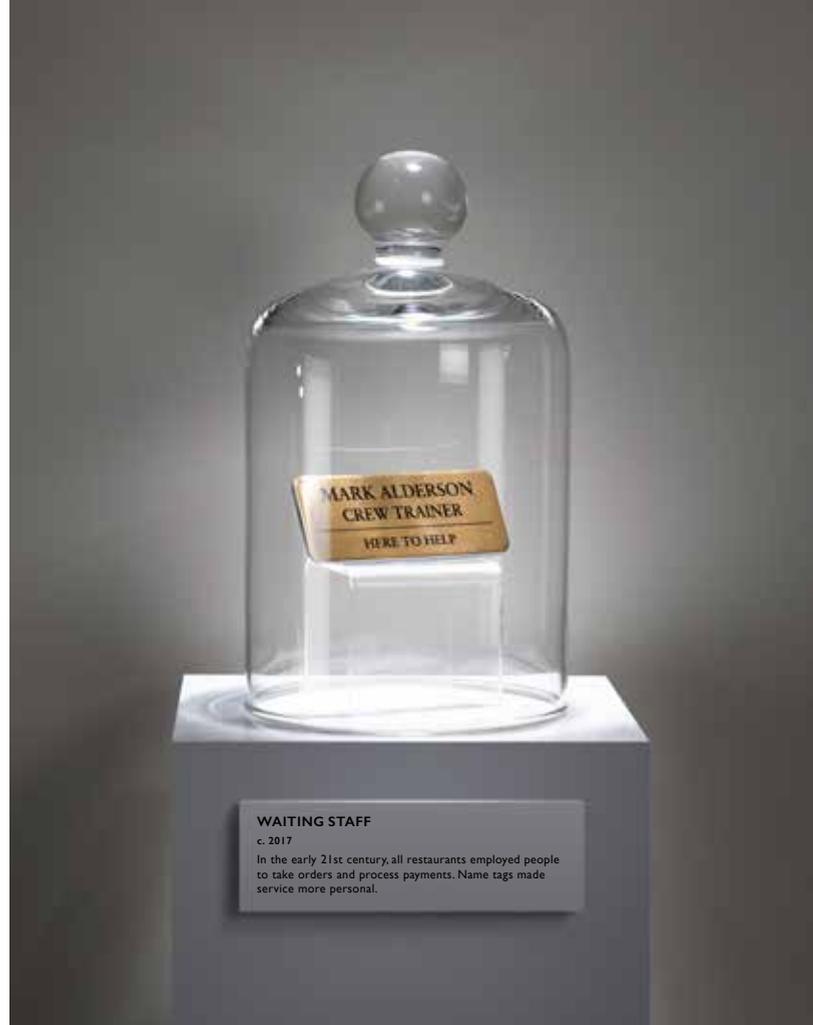
Building an economy that benefits everyone under these sorts of technological circumstances means solving several different problems. The first is the highly unequal distribution of income. If we are willing to assume the existence of a magic wand that can wave away political difficulties, then this problem is not so hard to solve. We could introduce new and highly efficient taxes, on land, for instance, and then redistribute the proceeds. Societies could pay all citizens a universal basic income (UBI), which would provide a basic standard of living to all people whether or not they sought

employment, or provide generous and non-expiring unemployment benefits alongside good wage subsidies for low-income workers, which would encourage people to stay in work if they could, while spreading the gains from growth. Alternatively, societies could move toward systems of social ownership. Governments could take stakes in firms and either distribute ownership rights to all citizens, entitling them to dividend payments, or hold the stakes in a sovereign wealth fund, the dividends from which could be redistributed as income payments to citizens.

The aim of such programmes would be threefold. First, they would allow workers to scale back the hours they work without facing impoverishment. Second, because people could opt out of work as technology improves, such measures would maintain the incentive for firms to deploy new labour-saving technologies as they become economically attractive, the better to keep economies growing and becoming more productive. And third, they would distribute the gains from growth broadly, thereby helping to maintain the public legitimacy of the system.

But, while helping people supplement or replace their income as their labour becomes unnecessary is a critical piece of the puzzle, it leaves other problems unaddressed. A second difficulty facing society might ultimately prove the more confounding: how should those freed by technology from work spend their new leisure time? On the face of things, this might not seem like much of a problem. Who cares what people do with their free time, after all? If a quarter of the workforce is rendered unnecessary by technology, then why shouldn't those individuals be free to spend their days however they like, even if that means hours spent napping in front of the television, or days lost in drugs and alcohol?

There is a strong case to be made for societal agnosticism regarding the use of free time. What, for one thing, is the point of technology if not to free us to do as we like? >>



And, for another, if efforts to keep an idle few from abusing drugs prevent many more from indulging in satisfying lives of leisure, spent working at hobbies and crafts or peaceful reflection, well that, too, represents a failure of society to make good use of the technological tools available to us.

But society probably won't be as liberal-minded about such shifts as one might hope. The introduction of generous benefits – and particularly of those, such as a UBI, calculated to allow people to work less – creates troublesome incentives. 'Necessary' workers might well join 'unnecessary' workers in opting to leave the labour force, creating headaches for people who will no doubt be upset to learn that their favourite paediatrician has quit the practice to be a surf bum. Even if redistribution were to surgically excise the most expendable workers from the labour force, those still in work and paying taxes might reject the social bargain presented to them. Why, they will certainly ask, should they keep working and paying taxes (whether or not they earn enormous salaries to do jobs they love) in order to subsidise the idleness of millions of others?

And then, ironically enough, those receiving government assistance might find themselves just as unhappy with the arrangement. People look to work to shape their identity, to provide their lives with meaning: because they are doing something they love, or because they are doing something that others value, or because they are, through the work they do, helping their family to survive and thrive. Were we able to wish a grand new

redistributive system into existence, it might soon collapse as a result of its failure to address these social issues. Indeed, the political changes we observe today suggest that those whose livelihoods are undercut by broad economic shifts might prefer to vote for the undoing of the liberal system as a whole than to plump for greater redistribution, even if the latter solution offers some hope of improvement in welfare while the former does not.

What does this tell us? For a new social compact to earn broad acceptance, there must be a societal consensus regarding how those not in work should spend their time and how they can prove themselves of value to the community. Society must reinvent what it means to be a contributing member, a member of value, worthy of admiration and respect.

### **INSTITUTIONAL OVERHAUL**

One difficulty we face is that we simply do not know precisely what sort of work might satisfy all these demands. What we can say, however, is that such categories are not immutable. Society values what society values. In the past, for instance, women were often expected to work long and hard hours in the home without pay. Even if society did not reward in an adequate way the work of the women who tended homes and raised children, it nonetheless saw such work as a critical contribution to broader well-being. Social norms can be harnessed to direct the labour of large portions of adults, entirely outside of the marketplace.

## “SOCIETY MUST REINVENT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CONTRIBUTING MEMBER”

Something like that will need to take place in future, alongside broad changes in the structure of the welfare state. As the economic stress from technological change deepens, governments that rely on employers to provide benefits such as healthcare will increasingly provide them directly, while more of the benefit programmes on which people rely will be ‘work agnostic’, including, eventually, income subsidies themselves. As this occurs, norms will shift regarding the responsibilities of those not in work, and new social roles will emerge (or expand). The not-employed might be expected to be more active carers for children and parents; roles that might include more community involvement, as well, just as the homemakers of past generations were often expected to participate in parent-teacher associations or other community groups.

As this occurs, we might well see the emergence of a ‘semi-pro’ category of employment, in which people do work that is economically useful but that cannot provide an income sufficient to support an individual. Semi-pro work could mean running a business that just manages to cover its (non-labour) costs. It could mean teaching: tutoring young people, for instance, or leading seminars in one’s area of expertise, or providing lessons related to a skill one has obtained (such as piano playing or metalworking). It could involve work as an extension of the healthcare industry: helping to check on and care for elderly, sick or disabled people.

These sorts of work might not enjoy the same status as paid labour, and while many of the people involved in such work might find it satisfying and fulfilling, others would surely prefer the ability to find good work in the salary-paying economy. But the evolution of this social niche would solve multiple problems. It would help the jobless to know how to spend their time usefully and in a way that provides some sense of meaning and identity, while also contributing to the broad legitimacy of a welfare state designed to allow people to abandon paid employment.

We then arrive at the last and most critical question: just how will society and its political systems bring such changes about? The answer is: very slowly, and after trying many other approaches.

In most rich countries today, political systems and social norms are built on the centrality of paid work. When the institution of paid work stops functioning as expected, the first (and second and third) reaction from political systems and societies is to repair the institution of paid work. In some cases, those attempts will mean efforts to neutralise the forces that are seen to be undermining paid work, such as foreign trade and migration. When those efforts fail to work as intended, governments will turn to other

strategies. Some will use corporatist tactics to reduce competition and boost firm profits, then apply pressure on profitable firms to operate with bloated payrolls. Some governments will do more to subsidise hiring. Government payrolls themselves might also swell. That is worrying, since the most politically acceptable way to increase public employment will often be through increased military spending in response to foreign-policy crises.

To achieve a fundamental change in outlook, away from the centrality of paid work, will first and foremost take generational turnover. Adults raised to expect to find good work will support politicians who promise to bring back the economy of the past. The young people being raised now, at a time when work is less certain and less remunerative, will expect less from the institution and will find it more reasonable to expect people to find satisfaction and contribute to society in ways other than paid employment. Cohorts to come will grow up with very different expectations about the world than those held by their grandparents. Those expectations will shape their ideas about what governments might reasonably do to address the crisis of work, and they will build the political movements that enact the welfare changes needed to bring about a more prosperous technological future.

### SOCIAL REVOLUTION

That, more or less, is the process through which the industrial welfare states we have now were built. First came massive technological and economic change. Then came political battles between those who believed old social orders could and should be maintained and those pushing a more radical view. Over time, and after many different kinds of failures of social reform, ideas changed regarding what rights and protections workers were owed. And the people championing those new ideas built new institutions capable of wielding the power to change laws, levy taxes and provide the social insurance needed to make industrial capitalism less brutal and more equitable. The process took nearly 200 years.

Change may occur more quickly this time around. Idea transmission seems to occur much more rapidly in the digital age than in the past, for example, which has allowed ideas like a universal basic income to very quickly become part of popular discussions about how to make economies work better. But addressing the challenge of technological abundance is less a matter of technocratic policy design than one of fundamental change in our view of the role of work in society. In the industrial era, workers were a small but critical component of a big economic machine; the resulting challenge was to build a society that ennobled and empowered such workers.

In the digital era, workers are a vestigial component of a big economic machine, and the social machinery that ennobled and empowered people in the past now serves to demean and disempower. Realising the potential of the digital age will require nothing short of a new social revolution. ■

# THE MEANING OF LABOUR

*Alain de Botton and Matthew Taylor discuss whether the capitalist system can fulfil our deepest needs*

🐦 @alaindebotton

**TAYLOR:** At the moment you are researching the idea of wise work. What is at the core of this concept?

**DE BOTTON:** A lot of criticisms of capitalism start with the idea that we've got too much demand. We're obsessed with growth and need it in an economy, but that growth is at the price of other things, such as our sanity and the planet. My latest book, *Wise Work*, starts from a slightly different point of view. It suggests that there's nothing wrong with growth per se, but the area in which the economy is massively underperforming is the tricky business of making us happy. We're arguing not for an economy that doesn't make or sell anything, but that makes or sells things that are properly and substantially geared to the real needs of human beings, rather than their vain, fickle and often not very substantial desires.

**TAYLOR:** So, rather than accumulating stuff in order to demonstrate a high status, we should try to focus more on the intrinsic value of both work and the things that we consume?

**DE BOTTON:** Yes. We looked backwards a little bit to explore this issue. When consumer society got going in the 18th century, the idea was to build economies where people are buying and selling things to one another that are not necessarily substantial, but mean that societies can be rich. A debate emerged that is still hugely applicable to our own times. The stern moralists, the preachers of virtue – people like Jean-Jacques Rousseau – said the point of work is to satisfy our barest material necessities, and thereafter we should devote ourselves to philosophy, learning, the admiration of nature, and that's it. This theme rings through the ages.

If you'd said to the leaders of the East German government, "What sort of a society are you leading? Look over

ALAIN DE BOTTON IS A PHILOSOPHER, AUTHOR AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

the wall, they've got so many things in the supermarket," in their more halcyon moments, these leaders would have replied, "Yes, they may have lots of things in the supermarket, but these things are just fripperies, they're not really things that anyone needs."

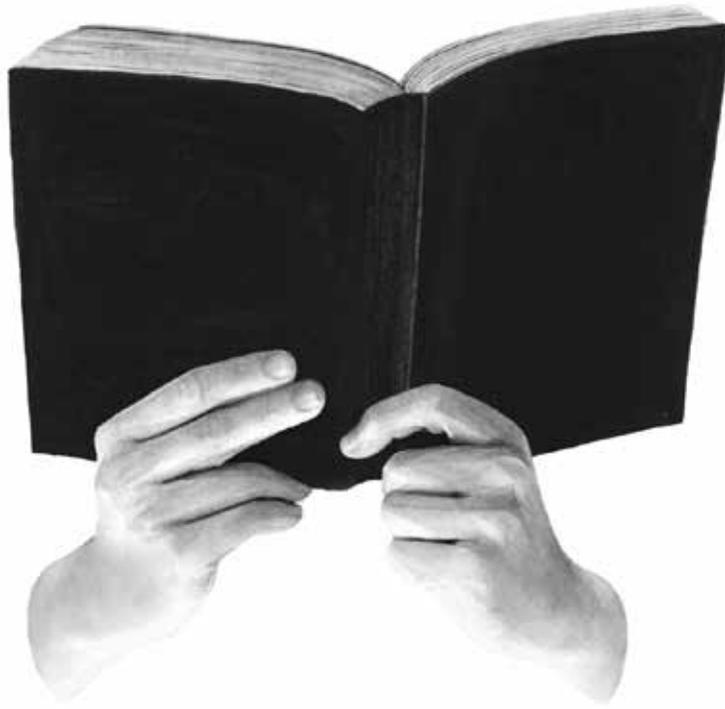
Now that debate has gone away. We've kind of accepted that we just will have lots of stuff. Some people say, "Well, the stuff makes us happy," and others say, "Well, it doesn't make us happy, but at least it makes us rich, and with our money we can pay for hospitals." That's what we've accepted. Within that, there's quite a lot of pessimism, and I think that's what we're targeting. The pessimism says you've got a choice of either running an economy that is buoyant but kind of nonsense, or else, you've got East Germany. And there's a side of human nature that quite likes that, but I don't think it's realistic.

So where do we go from here? One way forward is to imagine a future where we are actually making and selling things that are more genuine; that are appealing, commercial and also not contrary to the better sides of human nature.

We can criticise it in many ways, but I'm intrigued by Facebook, which is now worth \$328bn. If we look at Abraham Maslow's pyramid of human needs, it's the first company of that size to target needs near the top. It's making a business out of something we'd never thought would make that sort of commercial return: friendship. Since the 2000s, we've started to get very large organisations making money from higher up Maslow's pyramid.

I think the big businesses of the 21st century are going to be targeting things that were previously outside of commerce, such as our need for self-understanding or our need for not just hooking up with people, but successful relationships. Emotional health, which is a huge part of human unhappiness, is going to start to be targeted and commercialised in ways that I don't think should make anyone despair. >>





People at this point say they don't want these things commercialised. Well, absolutely, we need them commercialised, and we'll get there, because the true destiny of capitalism is to satisfy human needs. The economy will be finished when everybody's needs are satisfied and there is a product or service or institution that can deliver anything we need. When it comes to mobile phones, pretty much everyone is satisfied, but there are so many other issues: "I'm in the wrong job," or "I can't talk to my partner." There's a huge amount of unmet demand because entrepreneurship is still trying to understand the human animal and trying to satisfy that animal.

**TAYLOR:** When you talked about the role that corporations might play in moving us up Maslow's hierarchy, I immediately thought about the pharmaceutical industry. It ought to be spending a lot more money on research and development to cure life-threatening illnesses for very poor people, when it actually spends a huge amount on developing lifestyle pills that help people deal with first-world maladies, or guarantee them happiness and sexual virility until their dying day. Ideas that, I think, the ancient Greeks would have thought were banal and self-defeating. So, what's your view of the one industry that almost celebrates the fact that it's in the happiness business?

**DE BOTTON:** We're just at the beginning of working out a good solution. First of all, I've got nothing against first-world problems. We're trying to get everyone to the first world, so

that's the destination of travel for even the Central African Republic. So it's not a destination to be disdained. But I think in 100 years' time, people will look back at the psychological drugs on offer now and just treat them as jokes, because ultimately the real prize is getting human beings to be the best of themselves.

So many problems in the modern world are basically psychological problems. We are unable to be the best of ourselves, we're unable to be properly confident, generous, forgiving, intelligent, energetic; all things that we need. We're all of us underperforming. There is the promise that, with a better understanding of brain chemistry, we will be able to engineer better performance – understood very broadly – and this will be an extraordinary thing. We'll be ourselves, but at our best. We're not yet there, but the pharmaceutical company that gets there will have done mankind an enormous service.

**TAYLOR:** But isn't this exactly the point? The way capitalism works is by creating a deficit. It creates a sense in people that there is something they haven't got, that they need to have. Advertisers who might have said 100 years ago, "You're not really a full human being unless you've got running hot water," are now saying, "You're not a full human being if you haven't got an absolutely state-of-the-art HD TV." Similarly, what pharma has consistently tried to do, and succeeded in many ways, is move the line as to what is normal. And so you start off saying, "Well, obviously it's not normal to die of smallpox,"

## “NEEDS ARE GENUINE AND DESIRES ARE VAIN”

or, “It’s not normal to die of measles.” Then you say, “It’s not normal to be very depressed.” And then, “It’s not normal to be embarrassed in social situations.” And so isn’t capitalism a machine to generate a sense that I haven’t quite got the thing that I want to have? And isn’t that feeling, that I haven’t quite got what I wanted to have, corrosive to human wisdom?

**DE BOTTON:** I think that the feeling of “I haven’t got what I want to have” is fine per se. It obviously depends on the things that you think you’re lacking. In other words, if you think that you’re lacking a BMW with leather seats and a top speed of 300mph, that’s probably not a genuine need. This is where Maslow’s pyramid enables us to make a distinction between higher and lower needs, and subtly but imperceptibly it also makes the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate needs, or more legitimate. Now, we don’t want to speak like this, because that’s a very authoritarian way. Immediately someone will say, “What is a legitimate need?” But there is a way of saying that some of the things we need are fairer than others, and this is why in ancient Greek philosophy there was a distinction between needs and desires. So there are some things we need and some things we desire. Needs are genuine and desires are vain. So in other words, our longing for a BMW is a desire, our longing for love is a need. Our longing for breakfast at the Ritz is a desire, but our longing for a meaningful job is a need.

**TAYLOR:** So how do we resist capitalism’s constant urging to turn desires into needs?

**DE BOTTON:** If I can just rephrase that to capitalism’s constant urge to exploit our desires and not to commercialise our needs. I think the trick is to try and build an economy that targets our true needs. Now, that’s an immensely ambitious undertaking, because it’s so much harder to make money from needs rather than desires. It’s much easier to sell the crap food, the crap car, the crap hotel than it is to sell the good. But what I mean by the ‘good’ is a target aligned with our needs. I think that is the challenge in the way we respond to the pessimistic eco, left-wing narrative that says we can never make money from our needs. The argument is: we can and also that it’s a legitimate activity to try and commercialise these areas, because business is simply the agglomerated intelligence of lots of people working away at a problem, deploying lots of capital, and there’s nothing wrong with that. It just depends what it’s focused on.

**TAYLOR:** A fascinating study I read asked people how important issues such as sustainability and the treatment of workers are to their consumer choices, and most people said they’re very

important. Then they followed people around shops and their actions didn’t reflect their sentiments, particularly when there was a price differential. They found that this was not people choosing between immorality and morality, between base needs and a kind of higher sense of human fulfilment. Instead, particularly poorer people, were saying, “Look, my moral imperative is feeding my family. Yes, I would love to protect the dolphins, and yes, I’d love to worry about climate change, but my moral imperative is making the household budget balance and meeting the needs of my family.” So how will poorer consumers fit into this Maslovian shift in consumerism?

**DE BOTTON:** Here’s a sort of slightly perverse but intriguing argument. So the pessimistic narrative is: people in a hurry, people on low budgets, people whose lives are hard can’t possibly care for other people. We often accept that, as life is tough, we can’t care about children slaving in Mexico or something. The other thing that’s noticeable about human nature is that if it’s done right, we are incredibly empathetic.

I was at a performance of the film *Lion* the other day. One of its themes is extreme child poverty in India. At the climax of the film, I would say that probably half of the audience, who were fairly stolid, middle-aged people, were in tears. And if somebody turned up the lights and said, “Right, our only mission now is to try and help the children of India,” I suspect that most people, at the height of their emotional vulnerability and empathy, would have said, “Okay, fine, let’s do it; I’m signing a huge cheque.” Because a very talented team of filmmakers had got the audience to a point where the suffering of a child in another country was suddenly a really vivid reality. But in another mood, we think, “Oh God, more Syrian children, I’m so bored of this; I’m just going to switch the channel.” It just depends on how the situation has been presented, which is essentially a political task.

If you think back to the 19th century, at various points quite nice people thought it was fine for children to go up chimneys, and at other points they thought it really wasn’t. And the difference was politics. The difference was political arguments that made a certain sort of suffering so vivid that it could no longer be ignored, and people wanted to vote in legislation that would prevent even themselves from falling back to some of their more expedient ways at other points.

So it’s really the job of politics to make certain sorts of suffering vivid to a large audience, that will subsequently then refuse to accept that kind of suffering in their consumer choices. A democratic politician, however earnest and wonderful their cause, unless they’re able to seduce the audience, is dead in the water. ■

# NEW POWER LINES

*With workers' rights and wages being eroded in the 21st century, we need to find fresh ways of creating security*

by Carmen Rojas  
 @crojasphd

**I**n the US today, as in much of the western world, we work more, make less and have less opportunity and security than we did a generation ago. Roughly four in 10 people earn less than \$15 an hour.

On the heels of the economic recovery following the financial crisis, we have witnessed a decrease in unemployment, but when we dig deeper into the data, we see that many of the jobs created are contract, part-time and low-wage. Right-wing pundits often point to the notion of a 'failed recovery' as a way to justify the recent election of Donald Trump. In the US context, where racism and class are core organising features of our society, many are using this as a way to galvanise a broader base of workers to vote against their interests, leading to a fragmentation of working people's issues and of the labour movement. However, the notion that Trump's appeal was one to the working class is upended when we start to look at the voting patterns of black and Latino Americans, who broadly get paid less and live with greater economic insecurity than their white counterparts. They overwhelmingly voted for the Democratic Party candidate.

The organisations we once relied upon to secure wins for workers are no longer

DR CARMEN ROJAS IS CEO OF US-BASED THE WORKERS LAB, WHICH AIMS TO TRANSFORM LOW-WAGE INDUSTRIES

enough. Unions have been largely decimated by right-to-work legislation, which means membership is not obligatory in unionised workplaces and employees are not required to pay for representation. The legislation has left today's private sector union membership at 6.4%, a rate not seen since 1935. Even the non-profit organisations that focus on building power for workers have lost their transformational potential as they have largely transitioned away from radical politics to social service provision. Although these services include worker training and enforcement of labour laws, they often lack the adequate resources to have a meaningful impact on the lives of workers. Following the wins of the civil rights era, social movements became non-profit organisations that, at best, maintained the status quo. Without the resources or organisational bandwidth to advocate for structural change, they were no longer able to offer alternatives to 'business as usual'.

Despite what we have inherited, it is possible to create an economy that works for everyone, an economy that grows in leaps and bounds while providing workers with living wages, benefits, security and power in their places of work, where they spend the best part of their lives.

Fortunately, this is already starting to happen. There is a renewed commitment among workers to improve







their conditions and wages, and I believe we have reached a critical moment. All along the west coast of America, long-term health aides are preserving the fabric of communities by helping elders age in place. In the midwest and south, fast food workers are establishing regional economies by fighting for a \$15-an-hour minimum wage, allowing them to correct wage distortion caused by a nationwide minimum wage that does not account for robust local economies.

To advance this agenda and make the workers movement effective in the 21st century, we now need to collectively explore new models of power building. This requires creative thinking and organisational structures that are not limited by precedent, but are boundless.

So what does that look like in practice? Look no further than Austin, Texas, home to the Workers Defense Project (WDP), a membership-based organisation that empowers low-income workers to achieve fair employment through education, direct services, organising and strategic partnerships. The WDP has fought for years to improve conditions for the largely immigrant construction workforce of Texas, where a worker dies every two and half days. Despite several successes, the WDP was limited by its non-profit model and was not moving the needle enough. Then it tried something different.

In 2016, it launched Better Builder as a for-profit enterprise that provides property developers with faster permitting times in exchange for WDP on-site training, monitoring and workplace safety certification. The new, faster permitting

process acts as an incentive for developers as the documents are required for the building process. Better Builder was able to offer this incentive after Austin City Council passed a resolution approving a new fast-track permitting process that incorporated WDP standards, which necessitate a minimum living wage; mandatory workers' compensation, which is a type of insurance to cover wages in the case of an injury on the job; health and safety training; and a third-party on-site monitor to ensure standards are being met. Since launching, Better Builder has received more project offers than it can handle, has scaled up to cover three cities, and is poised to transform the entire construction industry in Texas.

The WDP was committed to moving beyond its non-profit structure in order to achieve scalable success and system-level change. Not all non-profits need to incorporate businesses in order to change their communities, but organisations should be boundless in their form to tackle the issues facing workers. For a construction worker in Texas, this programme allows for protections in the case of injury, higher wages than the industry standard, and training that allows for work mobility.

#### **DIGITAL POWER**

Technology is also being leveraged as a powerful conduit to connect workers to each other and build power. From social media strategies to app creation, the workers' rights movement, non-profits and unions are integrating digital strategies. Technology is also creating many jobs. But it is

## **“NO SINGLE GROUP CAN TRANSFORM CONDITIONS FOR WORKERS”**

not a panacea for the wide range of issues facing people who work. Technology tools require user engagement, resources to modify and a clear understanding of their uses and impact. Many technologists lack a deep understanding of the problems workers are facing and are limited in their ability to conceptualise tools that can build real power for workers instead of simply exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, such as privacy concerns, user agreements, limited English skills and suspicion of technology.

In the US, the most egregious case of technology being used to undermine workers has been the proliferation of platforms that transform once stable work into temporary contract work. That said, when harnessed as a tool that complements direct organising and policy change, while engaging target users as part of its creation, technology can significantly advance efforts to build power for workers.

A great example is the WorkIt app, developed by the Organization United for Respect (OUR), a non-profit that organises workers across the retail industry to improve wages and rights. From its inception, OUR focused on direct and digital organising, relying on mobile and social network sites to connect with workers in the nation’s largest retailers. Recognising an opportunity to provide further support, OUR decided to develop a tool that would allow workers to communicate in real time, offered advice for workplace disputes and made workplace laws and rules easily accessible. OUR proceeded to hire a seasoned chief technology officer and embarked on a successful fundraising campaign to further develop the prototype. After preliminary testing with about 200 users, OUR publicly launched WorkIt, an app that leverages IBM’s artificial intelligence program, Watson, to respond to worker questions related to human resource policies. Although it is early in its testing, there is great interest in the technology as a way to give workers real-time access to the rules of employment and their rights as workers.

No single industry, organisation or group with specialised expertise can transform conditions for workers. Building partnerships with people that bring different skills, experiences and expertise allows us to understand the issues that workers are confronting from different vantage points. This hybrid expertise creates opportunities for non-profit organisations to imagine new ways of disrupting unethical employers. It offers start-up entrepreneurs true feedback loops so the tools they are creating do not end up hurting workers more than helping them.

### **COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES**

A promising hybrid partnership I have been proud to participate in brings together a sustainability-focused asset management company, a cooperative development consultant and a cooperative finance and training organisation to transform the conditions faced by agricultural workers in California. The asset management company owns two farms and is interested in exploring new labour models that might increase worker power and reduce rampant exploitation in the agriculture industry.

Together with our cooperative development and finance partners, we are exploring a partnership that would result in the conversion of their farms from farm-labour contractors, where workers are beholden to middlemen, into certified labour co-ops. At the outset, we knew that we needed people who could think creatively about developing new vehicles that build power for workers. If completed, these regular farms could become the nation’s largest cooperative, owned by its 7,000 workers, primarily immigrant women.

The reality for the majority of people who work in the US is harrowing. For a number of historical and political reasons, workers in the 21st century economy have limited ways to organise for voice, power, increased wages or fair scheduling. Every day they are being asked to make the impossible choices between healthcare and childcare, between eating and keeping the lights on, between working and caring for loved ones. It does not have to be this way.

We can explore boundless organisational forms, new technologies and unusual partnerships to create an economy that works for everyone. We all play a role in imagining, creating and growing the next wave of great businesses and organisations that will ensure we are not the last generation to realise our dreams. ■



# OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

*The plight of the modern worker could be reversed if we make the right choices now*

by Benedict Dellot  
@BenedictDel

BENEDICT DELLOT  
IS ASSOCIATE  
DIRECTOR,  
ECONOMY,  
ENTERPRISE AND  
MANUFACTURING  
AT THE RSA

**W**hen the UK's new prime minister declared on her first day in office that it was her mission to "make Britain a country that works for everyone", above all, she was speaking to the swathes of low-earning, low-skilled workers who are, in her own words, just about managing. Work is the crucible around which we form our identities, make a living and build relationships. But, as Theresa May made clear, for blue-collar workers it no longer promises the rewards it once did. Trust between employers and employees has given way to a transactional relationship, and patience with stagnating wages and instability is wearing thin.

Average weekly earnings in the UK are still far below their 2009 peak, and this tight and enduring squeeze on income has resulted, for many, in an unprecedented plateauing of prosperity not experienced since the Second World War. We are

ILLUSTRATIONS: EMMA SHOARD



now in the perverse situation where seven million people in working households are below the poverty line.

Meanwhile, zero-hours contracts, temporary work, agency arrangements and other ‘gig’ working patterns are now large, and possibly permanent, features of our labour market. Over 900,000 people in the UK were on zero-hours contracts in 2016. Added to this are 865,000 agency workers; a number that is set to reach one million by the end of the decade. Caution should be taken when interpreting these figures; not everyone on zero-hours or temporary contracts is unhappy with their position. Think of highly paid lawyers and IT consultants, whose work has always been piecemeal. But by and large, far too many people are being pushed into forms of employment that are volatile and precarious.

Much of the media’s attention has understandably focused on the plight of workers using tech-enabled platforms, not least Uber and Deliveroo. But the proliferation of precarious work is happening in nearly every low-skilled sector and occupation, of which there are many. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), there are one million retail assistants in the UK, 770,000 care workers, 540,000 cleaners, 480,000 kitchen and catering assistants, and 300,000 HGV drivers.

Moreover, the proportion of the workforce in low-skilled jobs is only set to expand as the number of middle-skilled jobs shrinks. The UK lost 700,000 intermediate positions in the last decade alone. Without these middle-skilled jobs,

workers at the bottom will find it difficult to rise through the ranks and develop their skills. The idea of a career may soon be a foreign concept to all but the most privileged. On top of this, many of the higher education graduates and further education leavers who would have entered skilled jobs are now forced further down the labour market ladder, depressing wages in the process.

Equally pressing is the reduction of meaningful work; the type that commands respect and provides a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Manufacturing, the traditional bastion of blue-collar work, has atrophied. In 1980, industry made up one-third of all employment in the UK, but it now accounts for less than 10%. Today’s service sector jobs, whether in tourism, retail or logistics, struggle to compensate for the loss of meaning or sense of community once offered by industry. There is little tangibility, few things to literally grasp. According to the latest results from the British Social Attitudes Survey, the proportion of routine and semi-routine workers who say they have no freedom to decide the organisation of their work increased from 42% in 2005 to 57% in 2015. And the proportion who *always* find their jobs stressful rose from 1% to 10% over the same period.

Employees are now regularly monitored and their movements tightly orchestrated from above. For example, agency workers at JD Sports are allegedly reprimanded for the mere act of sitting down, according to a recent >>



undercover investigation by Channel 4. There is an unhealthy degree of top-down scrutiny and lack of employee agency, alongside basic mistreatment of workers.

### THE ROAD TO RUIN

How have we got into this situation? Some point the finger of blame at globalisation. Since the 1980s, global trade has boomed, resulting in a gradual shift of low- and middle-value manufacturing from west to east. In the UK, towns and cities, from Coventry and Sheffield through to Corby and Sunderland, have seen their prize industries overwhelmed. It is no coincidence that the places with a strong industrial heritage were more likely to have voted leave in the EU referendum.

Yet a sense of perspective is needed here. Global trade has brought unprecedented wealth to the world and lifted millions out of poverty. And in developed countries like the UK, while low- and middle-value manufacturing has certainly shifted abroad, the potential to export higher value services has grown enormously. We just have not been the best at grasping those opportunities.

Technological change is another scapegoat. Innovations in computing and the advent of the digital economy have certainly deskilled some jobs and reduced worker bargaining power in the process. Think of secretaries, typists and administrators whose skills became less relevant with the spread of personal computers, or of machine operatives who were usurped by increasingly sophisticated robots on the factory floor. Many economists predict a fresh wave of automation due to game-

changing advances in artificial intelligence and robotics. Researchers at Oxford University speculate that as many as 35% of UK jobs could be made obsolete within 30 years. New forms of robotics also threaten jobs that were once thought too complex in their dexterity for machines to mirror, such as the manual elements of caring, cleaning and taxi driving.

Again, these claims should be treated with a note of caution. Many advances in technology have complemented rather than displaced workers. Picture the lorry driver using GPS technology, or the sales assistant using CRM systems. Indeed, technological advances are a vital precondition of productivity growth, which opens up the possibility of wage rises. And where full automation does happen, it is often of discrete *tasks* rather than whole jobs, leaving workers to pivot and find new roles. A case in point is bank tellers, who moved into different positions following the introduction of ATMs. A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development looked at automation through the lens of tasks and found that just 9% of occupation types are at risk of full obsolescence.

A third force at play is immigration. Net migration from EU nations reached a historically high level in 2015 and the foreign-born population of the UK more than doubled between 1993 and 2014. Understandably, this has fostered fears that migrants are competing with workers for jobs, and possibly driving down wages. It is telling that places with high levels of joblessness are also those with the greatest appetite for curbing migration.

## “EXECUTIVE PAY HAS SOARED WITHOUT BOOSTING THE INCOMES OF LOW-SKILLED WORKERS”

Yet while there is some truth to these fears, the overall impact of migration is rather muted. A detailed study by the Bank of England in 2015 found that a 10% rise in the *proportion* of migrant workers in the semi- and unskilled service sector is associated with only a 2% reduction in pay. Given that the proportion of migrant workers in this sector has grown by only about 7% since 2004-06, the effect has clearly been small.

Undoubtedly, some places, occupations and industries have been more affected than others by the inflow of foreign-born workers, and not just in employment terms. But as Jonathan Portes, formerly of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, puts it, “the idea that immigration is the main or even a moderately important driver of low pay is simply not supported by the available evidence”.

### CHOICE, NOT CHANCE

It is all too tempting to blame macro trends in our economy, to point a finger of outrage at the unfathomable and confusing. Yet the problem is ultimately not with these forces, which have the potential to be wealth-creating, but rather with the way in which they are marshalled and how the proceeds are distributed. We are in danger of forgetting that many of the outcomes we see around us are the result of decisions made by policymakers, employers, shareholders and others in positions of power. Executive pay has soared without boosting the incomes of low-skilled workers. Almost half the UK’s welfare budget now goes to pensions as social security coverage for low earners has been reduced. Funding for higher education has remained stable while vocational and further education have shrunk drastically. These trends are not inevitable, but are the result of a combination of policy choices made by successive governments.

The UK economy does not operate in a vacuum and is continually rocked by forces beyond our control. But it is well within our gift to create a tax, education and welfare system that opens up opportunity and allows people to thrive at work. May’s new government has made promising steps in the right direction: a new industrial strategy, the review of modern employment practices (led by the RSA’s Matthew Taylor), and an investigation into worker representation on

boards. This builds on the achievements of her predecessors, including the implementation of the national living wage and the apprenticeship levy.

But however important these moves are, we need to go further if we are to respond to both the opportunities and the challenges presented by globalisation, by technology and by the movement of people. First, we need to take seriously the idea of a universal basic income (UBI), a modest amount of money paid to every citizen. It is obvious that our existing welfare system is failing us. It is intrusive, demeaning and does not do a particularly good job at making work pay. Universal credit is meant to simplify matters, but it comes loaded with an unhealthy degree of conditionality.

A UBI is a compelling alternative that would shift welfare from being a corrective arm of the state to a springboard for progression and personal development. Not only would it provide economic security, it would also allow workers to throw themselves back into learning, and give them greater bargaining power with employers. It would also be a reprieve to the growing number of people with caring responsibilities.

But is such a programme possible and is there a risk that people would simply stop working when given a regular income? Trials prove otherwise. Between 1968 and 1980, the US and Canadian governments conducted five experiments into negative income tax, a variant of UBI. These pilots resulted in a slight reduction in working hours, but mainly among groups where you would most expect it (and understand it), such as lone mothers.

To those who say the scheme would be too expensive to run, the RSA’s own UBI model is estimated to cost just an extra 1% of GDP. While significant, this is well within the realms of possibility and precedent. And there is no reason why these and other concerns could not be put to the test with a UBI trial in a UK city, mirroring pilots already taking place in Finland and elsewhere (which Louise Haagh covers in more detail in her article on page 42).

A second and related move should be to establish a UK sovereign wealth fund, akin to a national savings pot and investment vehicle. According to political theorist Angela Cummine, in 2016 there were more than 80 social welfare funds in operation around the world, most of >>

## “WE NEED TO REVIEW OUR TAX SYSTEM TO ADDRESS ITS OBVIOUS INEQUITIES”

them established in the 2000s. The most famous is Norway’s fund, which began with a cash transfer of \$300m 20 years ago and is now worth \$82.5bn. In the UK, such an approach could be adopted as a people’s fund, run in the interests of all citizens, rather than the government. Once the reserves reached a given size, the fund would begin awarding lump sums to people as soon as they reach adulthood. These ‘basic capital’ grants could be used to cover the costs of tuition or starting a business, or possibly reinvested in a personal savings account.

Sovereign wealth funds could help to redress the growing imbalance between the share of global income flowing to capital and that going to labour. Stagnating wages for those at the bottom end of the labour market matters less if workers have a stake in, and receive dividends from, the companies that are becoming ever more profitable.

### SECOND CHANCES

Third, let us give vocational education and adult learning the attention they are due. Further education colleges are a critical means of preparing people to work in skilled trades, from nursing through to accountancy and construction. Yet they have borne the brunt of cuts to the education system, while universities remain well supported. Adult learning has faced cuts of 40% since 2010. The government’s own Social Mobility Commission advocates a second chance career fund to help older workers who are at risk of redundancy retrain for a new career. Such an approach should be accompanied by a shift in the structure of education, including the introduction of more modular assessments better suited to a learn-as-you-go culture and people’s actual life experiences.

These kinds of ideas have informed the RSA’s championing of Cities of Learning, which it believes could help build a movement behind adult education, linked to regional skills and economic markets. Cities of Learning initiatives coordinate upskilling activities across a variety of educational institutions and community organisations, and use online accreditation to increase the recognition of achievements. Such initiatives

are running in 12 US cities. Over the course of two years in Dallas, 35,000 people registered for learner accounts, 70% of whom came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Fourth, we need to breathe new life into the trade union movement. Membership peaked at more than 13 million in 1979, and has since fallen to just 6.8 million, a quarter of the workforce. Most unions are also skewed towards older, wealthier workers in the public sector. According to think tank the Resolution Foundation, fewer than 1 in 10 of the lowest paid in the private sector are unionised.

It is now common to hear that unions are becoming irrelevant as traditional jobs atrophy. But on the contrary, this is precisely why unions are more important than ever. The carer on a zero-hours contract, the builder forced into bogus self-employment, the warehouse worker operating through an agency: if unions are not for them, then who are they for?

Several unions have already adopted new models and causes. The little-known Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) has taken a number of courier firms to tribunal on the charge of misclassifying their riders as self-employed. Unison, meanwhile, is supporting carers in their fight to receive the legal minimum wage, with some earning as little as £3.27 an hour.

But more lessons can be learned from what is happening overseas. In the US, the Fight for \$15 movement has used a single goal to galvanise thousands in support of higher wages. Equally impressive is the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which has established its own innovation hub, Fair Care Labs, to experiment with new methods of organising. This includes the creation of an app called NeatStreak that will help cleaners agree terms with employers. As Carmen Rojas argues on page 20, there is significant scope for unions and other power brokers to support precarious workers by innovating and deploying new technology.

Last but by no means least, we need to review our tax system to address its obvious inequities. According to the ONS, the lowest earning 20% of the population is the most highly taxed as a proportion of their income. Much of the blame falls on regressive indirect taxes, including VAT and the insurance premium tax, and more obviously on council tax, which swallows £1 in £10 of the income of the poorest fifth.

In his tenure as chancellor, George Osborne was vocal in his ambition to take low earners out of paying income tax altogether, and duly raised the personal allowance to £10,600,



with further increases in the pipeline. Yet as the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out time and again, this tax cut did far more to favour the already affluent, since many of the poorest earn too little to benefit. If the government is serious about its ambition to lift the tax burden on the low paid, it would do far better to look at national insurance thresholds. Better still, it would shift the tax burden away from earned income (gained from employment and entrepreneurship) to unearned income (in the form of capital gains and inheritances). As far as tax must be levied, it should surely fall more on the gains from good fortune and less on the gains from good work.

Be under no illusion that these are easy wins. But if the political shocks of 2016 told us anything, it is that the time of tinkering around the edges, of eking out marginal gains through top-down policy or bottom-up social innovation, has to end. It is a foible of think tanks, economists and ‘thought leaders’ to decry that life is especially tough in the modern era, to gloss over the problems of the recent past, and to say that “this time it’s different”. But look around you: this time it *is* different. Workers with a decade’s worth of stagnant wages, young people entering the labour market saddled with unprecedented amounts of debt, forgotten towns and cities with little hope but plenty of anger – one wonders why the surge in populist sentiment has not come sooner.

But we do have a choice. We can choose to ignore the plight of precarious workers, cast it off as a blip in a system that is just having a bad run, and carry on with business as usual. Or we can take a stand, build a coalition for reform, and present a compelling vision of a new type of economy that gives people economic security, dignity and meaning, and which allows us all to live larger lives.

Who’s with me? ■

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### NURTURING TOMORROW’S LEADERS

“There are a lot of economic, social and environmental issues that we seem to be walking away from. That’s why we need young people coming through who are looking to make changes and hold society to account,” says Jonathan Harper, CEO of Future Foundations, which aims to inspire young people to become social leaders. “We need a new generation of people who aren’t seeing leadership as a title, but as a responsibility,” he adds.

By running social leader training programmes for school students, Future Foundations works to build character in young people. “They explore who they are, what they value and then commit to action in the real world,” explains Harper.

After attending the Global Social Leaders (GSL) programme, students are challenged to set up a school club to ensure sustainable impact. Students running one project improved disabled access at local swimming pools. “They did a survey and found that only two pools had the necessary facilities; they then lobbied the council and raised money to set up some of the services,” says Harper.

Together, these clubs make up the GSL Society, which recently received a £10,000 RSA Catalyst grant. The funding went towards developing the programme, involving more students and testing it with 20 schools across the country, from Liverpool to Brighton.

Harper is keen to involve more Fellows in the programme as mentors, speakers and supporters.

■ For more on GSL: [jonathan.harper@future-foundations.co.uk](mailto:jonathan.harper@future-foundations.co.uk)



FIG. A

**Communication:**  
assess body language, devise interactive approaches, provide companionship, listen



FIG. B

**Inter-personal skills:**  
modify emotions as appropriate, monitor for developmental problems, empathise



FIG. C

**Work independently:**  
spot health conditions early, support independence, rehabilitate, innovate

# SOCIAL SKILLS

*Could care work, which is increasingly complex and resistant to automation, be an economic opportunity?*

by Shereen Hussein  
 @DrShereehussein

It is a great achievement that many people in the UK are living long, healthy lives. But at the same time, the increasing size and average age of the population has resulted in growth and change in the nature of demand for social care services. The UK population is projected to grow by 4.3 million between 2012 and 2022, and the number of people aged over 85 is projected to increase from 1.4 million to 3.6 million by 2037. Population ageing affects the structure of the whole population, with larger cohorts of older people and smaller proportions of working-age groups, so getting social care right benefits us all, whether we are supporting elderly relatives or ourselves advanced in years.

The relative reduction in working-age groups creates a fundamental problem in the supply of care workers, as well as a wider economic impact. Governments are pursuing various strategies to tackle this challenge, from raising the age of retirement to increasing productivity through advanced automating technologies and drafting in migrant workers to fill specific market gaps.

Longevity also entails increasing numbers of people living with long-term conditions such as dementia, and multiple and complex diseases. This means more people require support and assistance from their informal networks as well as the formal health and social care professionals. But there are other social changes that directly affect our ability, and willingness, to support older people and those with long-term care needs. Family norms and structure have changed considerably, with many people choosing to remain single, have fewer children or no children at all; and globalisation, mobility and migration mean families are spread across the globe with virtual connections replacing close geographical

proximity. Within these dynamics, women remain the primary care providers while pursuing careers and their own personal and family goals, consequently feeling the pressure of multiple and sometimes contradicting roles. While many families and friends will carry on supporting loved ones with long-term care needs as much as possible, the formal social care sector will continue to grow exponentially to meet increased demand.

Most formal care for older people, and others with long-term care needs, is provided by frontline care workers in care homes, people's own homes or in settings such as day centres. The sector's workforce also includes professionally qualified staff, such as registered nurses, social workers and occupational therapists; managers and supervisors; and an array of ancillary staff providing non-direct care services, such as cleaning, driving and catering. Current social care policy focuses on enhancing people's independence and maintaining them within their own communities for as long as possible, with care staff facilitating independence and providing personal care. This approach has proven to be more cost-effective, produce better user outcomes and enhance the ability of those in need to contribute to their communities and wider society for as long as possible.

The social care sector employs nearly two million people in the UK and is expected to grow considerably due to increased demand and the expanding role of care staff within a more integrated health and social care structure. The sector plays a crucial role in supporting the economy by maintaining the physical and mental health of the wider population. However, the growth and development of the sector are driven by more than just demographic changes. Social and political factors, technology and innovation, increased emphasis on user satisfaction and quality of life, and migration policies all affect social care. Given that a relatively large portion of its funding comes from the public purse, the sector is also >>

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## “SOCIAL CARE RELIES ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS”

heavily influenced by wider social and political trends. This creates major longer-term funding challenges and pressure to provide care in a more efficient and productive manner.

While the demand for social care is mounting, we are facing acute staffing shortages across most of Europe. The current workforce is mostly female, has an older age profile, a high level of migrant workers and encompasses a wider mix of qualifications than other employment groups. However, the sector has been successful in attracting men over the past couple of decades; they now account for more than 17% of the workforce. This group of men is diverse, with a combination of migrants with higher degree qualifications, younger people looking for something different and older workers moving from other sectors, particularly construction and retail.

The intimate and personal nature of many care tasks means that it is a labour-intensive occupation, thus increasing demand is likely to result in an almost equal demand for employees. This has been mitigated to a small extent by the increasing role of assistive technologies, which are likely to become more significant in future social care delivery. Assistive technologies can help provide virtual support to people in their own homes at a time when human resources are stretched to the limits. However, in the specific context of social care, concepts of cost-effective working and increased productivity through automation can only be implemented to a certain extent. Social care relies on human relationships and qualities such as empathy, which cannot be replaced or replicated by machines.

It is tempting to conclude that the social care sector is facing a crisis: growing needs, lack of funding, workforce shortages and a set of working conditions that deems the sector

unattractive to many. While acknowledging the significance of these issues, perhaps the solution could be born from flipping such a view and taking instead an opportunity perspective. This would begin to explore how social care, as a growing employment sector, has considerable potential to be a more innovative and diverse market, offering a potentially exciting employment experience that could be both emotionally and economically rewarding for a diverse group of people.

### THE EMPATHY FACTOR

This ‘opportunity perspective’ has partially emerged from an ongoing large longitudinal study I have led over the past six years, encompassing interviews with more than 300 stakeholders and surveys of more than 1,300 care workers. Central to such a perspective is the rewarding nature of this job and the empathy it requires, which sets it apart from many other jobs that pay a similar amount and where automation is likely to reduce the demand for human input. Thus, the alternative employment opportunities created by social care are more rewarding for a large number of people. As one employer put it: “I suppose it’s staff who are looking for flexibility and fits in with their life as well. They can choose what shifts they are doing during the daytime. Also, it’s a caring role. The carers do have to have some kind of empathy and some kind of caring nature to actually take on the role.”

A pivotal point when thinking about social care is to recognise that care work has grown from a ‘basic’ job that requires few skills into a relatively skilled occupation, with care workers expected to acquire various skills and apply them in the most independent fashion. This usually takes place in users’ homes or the community, where care staff work on their own without co-worker or supervisory support. For example, care workers now assist individuals to maintain their independence and contribute to wider society, as well as recognising early signs

of health conditions and taking on rehabilitation-focused roles. Recent recommendations by Health Education England set clear expectations for care workers to recognise the onset of dementia and take appropriate action. Communication skills, including language proficiency and understanding body language, as well as creativity are particularly important skills to acquire, with many service users requiring alternative communication and interactive approaches.

## OPENING DOORS

While care work is clearly centred on a transferable skill set, the need for specialist skills according to service user group should not be underestimated. In this sense, the evolution of care worker roles mirrors that of other health and social care occupations, notably nursing auxiliary roles, in that there is potential for cross-learning and transfer to the health sector. Other promising approaches lie in the premise of more joined-up approaches to service delivery by health and social care staff. This can lead to role expansion and new opportunities within the sector that are attractive to a wider group of job-seekers. While the focus here is on social care for older people, the same arguments could be made across the wider social care sector, similarly characterised by complex needs and skills.

Employers taking part in our research recognised the importance of creating suitable ‘career pathways’ to retain and grow their workforce. Social care is becoming one of the most generous sectors in the provision of post-recruitment training and qualifications, with progressive efforts manifesting in apprenticeships and other skill-development programmes, right up to management level. This is considered to compensate, to some extent, for the less attractive aspects of the work, including low pay and widespread use of temporary contracts. Recent research on men working in care showed they valued training opportunities that enabled them to move upwards within the sector, taking managerial roles, or moving across to other sectors. However, current investments in specialist ‘training’ appear ad hoc and less formalised. A tighter and standardised system of training and transferable qualifications would help to attract a wider range of recruits who can see the benefits of these skills to their careers. Additionally, efforts are needed to improve job security and levels of pay in recognition of the growing skills requirements. This will demand adequate funding, but more importantly, enhanced public understanding of the crucial role care workers play in maintaining the well-being of users, their family carers and wider society.

Without doubt, one of the key attractions of care work is its emotionally rewarding nature and job satisfaction. Our research shows that most care workers perform their caring tasks through a ‘deep acting’ process, which involves the ability to change one’s feelings in order to elicit the appropriate emotional display, thus internalising the organisational expectations as their own emotions. It is proven that this process results in positive feelings, such as personal accomplishment and counters other negative effects of a highly psychologically demanding job. High job satisfaction is well recognised as key

in attracting and retaining staff to the sector, especially when individuals compare their experience to previous jobs that did not require similar levels of empathy and human interaction.

The social care sector presents a combination of challenges and promises for the British labour market. On the one hand, there are significant concerns about the sustainability of funding, with various potential solutions being debated; on the other, the growing mixed market of care provisions opens a door to employment opportunities when we are facing the prospect of increasing job automation. In addition to addressing funding issues, it is essential to enhance the public understanding of the value of care work to our society and mobilise effective support to improve the working conditions of the sector. A revamp of the sector’s image and conscious emphasis on the broad training and career opportunities are essential to raising the profile of this sector in the eyes of both job-seekers and business investors alike. ■

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

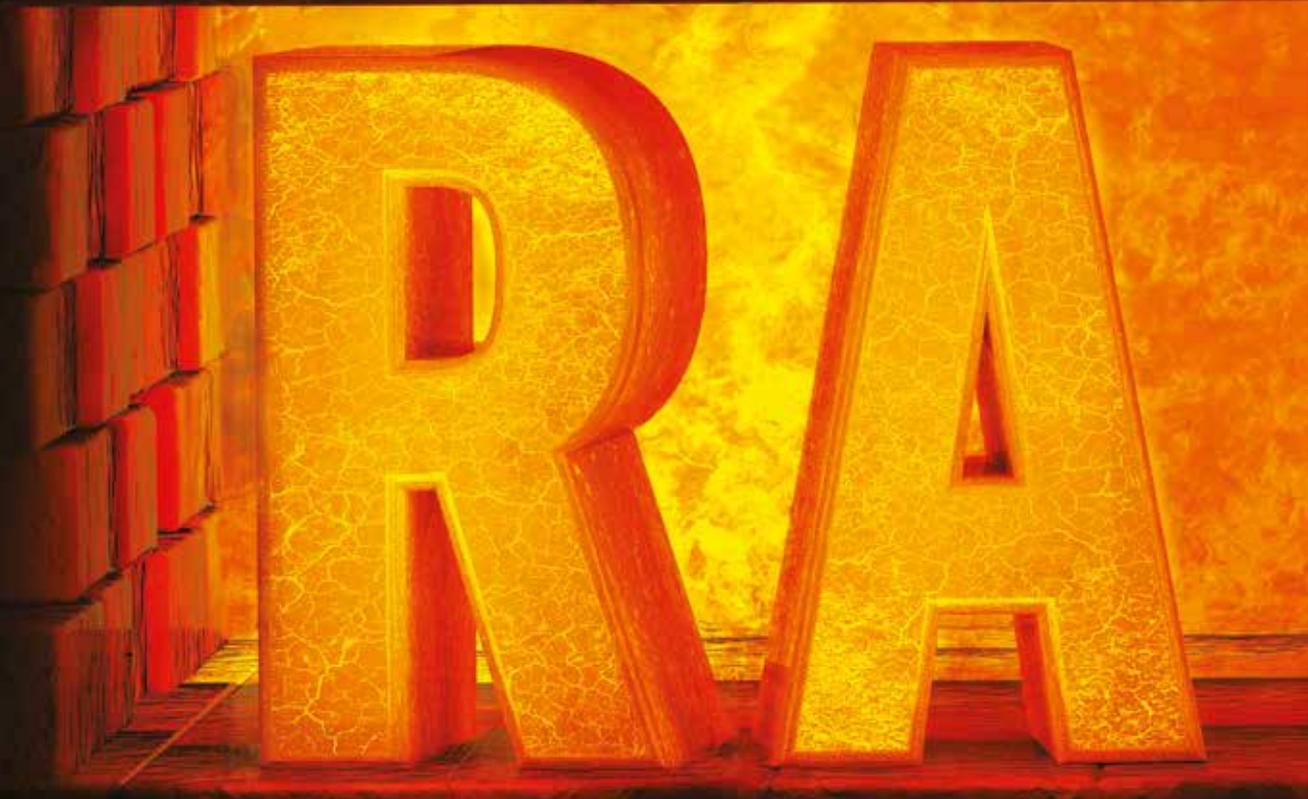
### BUSINESS BRAIN

Mothers with young children can feel conflicted as they try to balance parenting with career ambitions. “They want to look after their children, but often they also want to hold on to their professional identity and feel that they can grow,” says Ann Nkune FRSA, who set up Bloomsbury Beginnings in response to this challenge. The London-based community centre provides co-working space, crèche facilities and, critically, courses for mums who want to start their own businesses. “Even if our clients don’t continue with the business they were planning to start, our programmes help them get back into work and do things differently,” says Nkune.

Since Bloomsbury Beginnings opened its doors, it has helped 110 entrepreneurs develop their ideas, which range from buggy recycling businesses and children’s clothing brands to film-making projects. “Pretty much everybody who comes through learns how to do a simple, effective business plan, which allows them to quickly assess whether a business idea has legs or not,” explains Nkune. Supplementary to the courses in basic business skills are workshops that help entrepreneurs figure out their minimum viable product, which they can use to test the market.

Bloomsbury Beginnings has been helped along by £7,000 in RSA Catalyst funding, as well as mentorship. “I’ve had loads of professional support through the RSA. It also supported me to try crowdfunding for the first time over the summer, which has meant we’ve been able to refurbish our co-working space,” says Nkune. Bloomsbury Beginnings is now looking to share its knowledge with other co-working spaces and community centres. Nkune is also exploring whether employers might be interested in collaborating to offer flexible working options to new parents.

■ For more information, visit [bloomsburybeginnings.org](http://bloomsburybeginnings.org)



# BRAIN REACTIONS

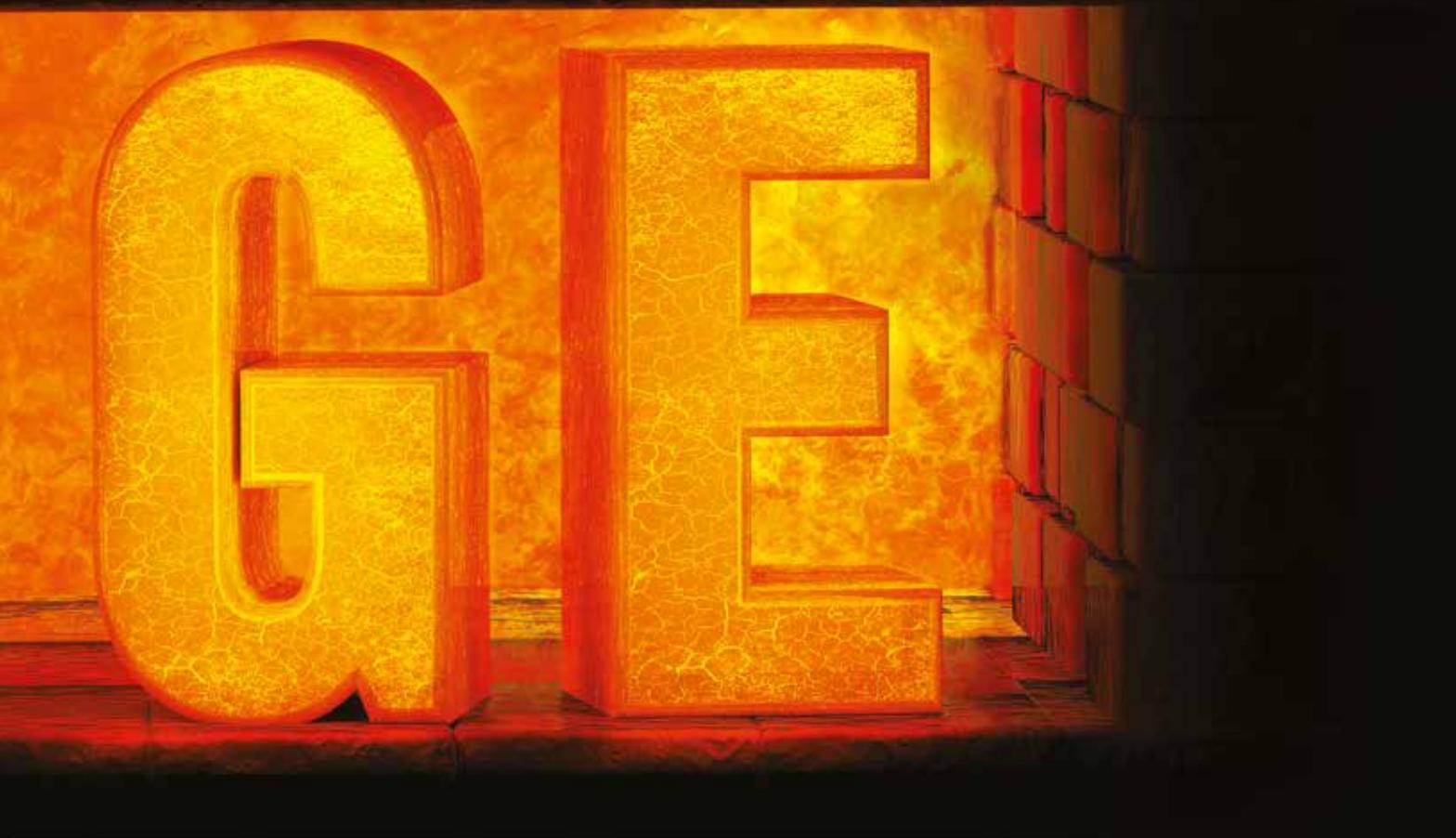
*Reason is at the mercy of anger, but the same neurological responses that are helping to divide society could unite us*

by R Douglas Fields  
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 WHY WE SNAP:  
 UNDERSTANDING  
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 IN YOUR BRAIN

People are angry. The votes for Brexit in the UK and Trump in the US shocked the world and exposed deep fissures in society. Both events had rational explanations rooted in complex economic and social issues. But each event was also characterised by narratives of ‘otherness’. Fears of immigration, the notion that these countries should be ‘great again’ or should ‘take back control’, and talk of elites all ignited a sense of ‘us and them’ and spoke to a deep-seated tribal instinct. What are

ILLUSTRATION: DESIGN\_LAD



the roots of this rage against ‘others’ and why is it exploding now? For fresh answers, look past politics and see instead inside the human brain.

To a neuroanatomist’s eye the human brain has not changed since the stone age. The neural circuits of rage in our brain were forged in a survival-of-the-fittest struggle on the prehistoric open plains of Africa. What I see as a neuroscientist is an organ grappling to cope with an artificial environment that it was not designed for. Nature’s control mechanism, which keeps the biology of every species in check with its changing environment (natural selection), is outstripped by the furious pace of technological advancement that transforms the environment of human beings faster than the cycle of a generation.

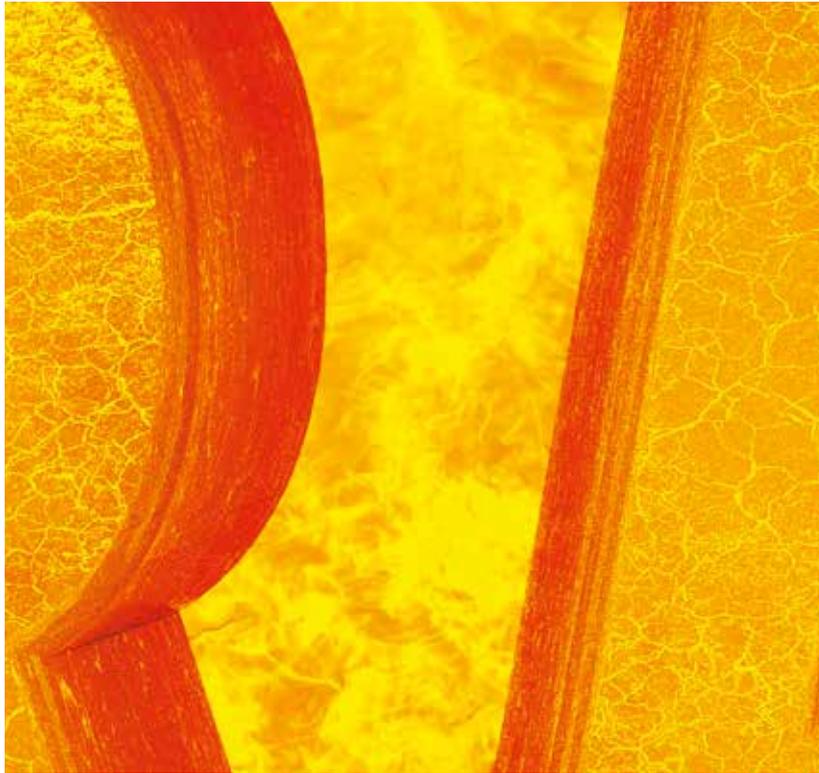
From a biological perspective, the peril that we face is daunting because the success and survival of any species are at risk when its environment changes faster than genetics. As a consequence, the neural circuits of anger and aggression within the human brain are vulnerable to misfiring in the modern world.

What we see in politics today is tribalism played out in public arenas. Building a wall spanning the width of a continent, blocking people of certain religions from entry into the US, and breaking up the economic alliances between

the European Union and the UK, are all representations of an ‘us vs them’ mentality.

However, tribalism is a double-edged sword. The ability of human beings to form tribes, to coalesce into cooperative groups, is the foundation of our success as a species. We do this so effortlessly that we fail to appreciate how remarkable and complex this behaviour is. Men divide arbitrarily into teams, ‘shirts and skins’, and instantly engage in intense athletic competition. Within a fraction of a second, they distinguish another person as either ‘us’ or ‘them’, and quickly divine their intentions. And this behaviour stretches well beyond the sports field. A mother could not recognise instantly the cry of her own child above all others unless her brain perceived the cries of other children differently.

The neurocircuitry of instantaneous discrimination is a vital part of our brain function, which, by necessity, operates faster than the speed of thought. Our conscious mind has an astonishingly limited capacity. We can hold on average no more than a string of seven digits in our working memory. This is such a pitiful limit that we must resort to pencil and paper just to carry out long division. Now consider a football player collecting and crunching all the diverse data necessary to determine in a flash if another person on the field is one of ‘us’ or ‘them’. In the most complex decisions we >>



face, such as whom to marry or where to live, we tend to trust our feelings. That is because there is much more to decision-making than conscious deliberation.

The ability to distinguish instantly ‘us’ from ‘them’ evolved for the critical life-saving purpose of threat detection. In the face of a sudden threat there may be no time to think, so nature has equipped the human brain with high-speed neural pathways that send information from all of our senses to the brain’s threat detection centre before it goes to our cerebral cortex, where consciousness arises. This input from our senses eventually reaches our cerebral cortex by passing over a longer, slower and more complicated route. The brain’s threat detection circuitry is constantly analysing the vast amounts of data on our internal and external state, and is always on the lookout for danger.

### **PRECONSCIOUS PROCESSING**

You duck and put your arms out to deflect an errant ball streaking into your peripheral vision; only afterwards does your conscious mind kick in and ask, “What was that?” Your subconscious brain circuitry has already detected a threat and set you on an instantaneous, definitive course of action to protect yourself before you were consciously aware of the danger. Complex motor commands were shot to your muscles to evade or confront the danger and systems throughout your entire body were energised to propel you into action. Your heart pounds, your blood pressure skyrockets, your sweat glands pour out perspiration to cool you down, your muscles

tense, ready to fight or flee, but you have already responded and evaded the danger before you are consciously aware.

The same threat detection circuitry is engaged any time we encounter another person. We size them up before we consciously realise what is happening. This ‘preconscious’ information processing can be studied in the human brain by detecting electrical signals in the appropriate brain regions, and these systems operate long before any signals develop in the cerebral cortex to provoke a conscious thought.

The outcomes of the votes in the UK and US were a surprise and bewildering to many, who watched people rage at elites who had deprived them of opportunity, then usher in economic instability. Equally, an angry backlash occurred against those voters, who were characterised as ignorant and ‘other’. But neuroscience provides some answers to these actions because rage and reason are different brain functions. Emotion and cognition are carried out in different brain circuits.

Language arises from the cerebral cortex, so our brain’s threat-detection mechanism in the amygdala and hypothalamus does not have language to set out all the reasons for the perceived danger. Instead, the output of our brain’s threat-detection circuitry is communicated to our conscious awareness by multicoloured emotions that convey very specific messages about the threat. Fear, sadness, envy, regret, anger and all the other subtle emotions we experience are the result of our brain’s assessment of our current state. This is why, when our threat detection mechanism identifies differences in a stranger, we feel a visceral reaction. And emotions are powerful motivators of

## “THERE IS MUCH MORE TO DECISION-MAKING THAN CONSCIOUS DELIBERATION”

behaviour. Whether we fully understand what sparked them or not, emotions move our decision-making and our behaviour.

The emotion of anger serves one purpose: to prepare us to fight. Humans have language, so verbal battles can be substituted for physical combat, but the two are twin gears of the same mechanism; each one moves the other. Violence is necessary for survival so our brain is equipped with the neural circuitry to launch this behaviour, but engaging in violence simultaneously puts survival at risk. Therefore, violent behaviour is highly controlled, initiated by distinct neural circuits that are triggered by a few specific provocations. The instantaneous aggressive reaction of a mother to protect her young, for example, is triggered by a different neural circuit than other provocations that result in sudden aggression.

One of the nine triggers of rage that provoke this reaction in the brain is called ‘T’, for tribe. Early in human evolution our species lived in small groups, where everyone likely knew each other. An encounter with a strange group represented a threat to survival from competition for resources, and violence is how social animals defend their group. This is true for most vertebrates and especially so for primates. Males are equipped by nature with physical strength for defence and aggression, which is why they carry out most of the violence and aggression.

The problem today is that, while this Neolithic neural circuitry was balanced to the level of threat our species experienced when our brain evolved in an environment of relatively infrequent interactions with strange groups, this circuitry is not so well calibrated for the modern world. Technology has enabled the tremendous increase in numbers of homo sapiens by providing the means to house and feed large populations living in huge social groups. In addition, high-speed transportation and instantaneous communication in the modern world result in constant pressure on the ‘T’ trigger. People of different cultures, classes, values and races do not live in complete isolation any more. We rub elbows because we can cross the globe in a matter of hours, and we interact over the internet and through broadcast media instantaneously and incessantly.

Unfortunately, those who do not find affinity and success as a member of society will find a group that will embrace

them. This is the appeal of gangs that can suck inner-city youth into a self-destructive and violent life that offers nothing but membership for a person who has none. To be part of a group is a fundamental human need. Moreover, the internet brings anonymity and superficiality in place of face-to-face interactions. Just as anonymity inside a car diminishes the ability to see those in other cars as people, causing drivers to rage on highways, so too is the case on the information superhighway.

### REASON OR RATIONALISATION?

The message here is not that anyone who voted for Brexit or Trump is a caveman. Tribes are necessary and must be protected. If what drove a vote was deliberation, then the neural circuitry of ‘us vs them’ is not pertinent. The difficulty here is to discern reason from rationalisation. The telling indicators are whether the arguments are directed at what is wrong rather than whom, and whether anger and violence fuel the rhetoric. “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of ‘em, would you? Seriously. Okay? Just knock the hell – I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise. I promise,” said the US president on his successful campaign to the White House. And this is what disturbs people about Brexit and Trump: the anger and hostility, and the attacks directed at people rather than their arguments. Cogent arguments cannot be laid out in 140-character ejaculations, and there is so much vicious violence against ‘others’.

But the paradox is that the same neural circuitry that divides us also unites us with the realisation that we share affinity as members of a larger group. Republican or Democrat, both are citizens of the US, and immigrant or resident, all have families they love. So the photograph of a lifeless child washed up on a beach in Greece touches us all, and the ‘T’ trigger unites us.

I hope that, in time, the increasing encounters that new technology enables between people will diminish perceived differences and strengthen the things we share as human beings. The media has done this for sports figures of different nationalities. Technology makes them familiar to us and then we embrace them as a valued member of ‘our’ group. However, the rewards of this positive change will not be felt if we choose to separate because we are angry. ■

# SHARPENING YOUNG MINDS

*A concerted effort to reduce educational inequality in the UK has improved the attainment of poor pupils, but hard-won gains are now in jeopardy*

by Julian Astle  
 @JulianAstle

“**W**hat about the barge operators?” This question may sound to English ears like a line from a Monty Python sketch, but it is more likely to have been asked in the Dutch Ministry of Education than the Ministry of Silly Walks.

In an effort to boost the attainment of traditionally underperforming groups, the Dutch have long scaled per-pupil funding according to the parents’ backgrounds, occupations and qualifications. Unqualified or low-skilled immigrants are the main beneficiaries, followed by caravan dwellers, barge operators and then people with low levels of education. It was an idea that would catch the eye of a young British MEP called Nick Clegg who, in a 2002 pamphlet called *Learning from Europe: Lessons in Education*, cited the Dutch example when making the case for what we now know as the ‘pupil premium’. Under this initiative, extra money is allocated to schools for every child poor enough to have qualified, at any point in the past six years, for free school meals.

The fact that Clegg’s proposal completed the hazardous journey from pamphlet to statute book owes much to the work done during the 2005-10 parliament by his colleague David Laws. Sensing that the weakening of the two big parties’ grip on British politics may soon present the Liberal Democrats with the opportunity to govern, Laws set about developing a range of targeted and costed social policies designed to improve young people’s life chances. Specifically, he urged Clegg to abandon the popular but regressive pledge to abolish university tuition fees, which would subsidise high-earning

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graduates in mid-career, and instead spend the £2.5bn cost of that policy on poor children in nurseries and schools, through a pupil premium and early years premium. The logic for the switch was that it was low attainment, not high cost, that was keeping bright but poor school-leavers locked out of higher education, and parental income, not ability, that was the most powerful predictor of attainment. For the Lib Dems then, the pupil premium was the means by which they would initiate a fundamental rebalancing of the education budget, from richer, older students towards the youngest, poorest students; a precondition for a serious assault on the root cause of England’s social immobility – the educational attainment gap.

The Conservatives also pledged to introduce a pupil premium in their 2010 manifesto. Michael Gove shared Laws’ analysis that England’s grotesque levels of educational inequality represented the biggest and most urgent challenge for any incoming education secretary, but he had a different perspective on the role of the pupil premium in the effort to reduce those inequalities. Gove believed the pupil premium would incentivise schools to admit more children from poor backgrounds, in the hope that those who had historically

## “THE SIZE OF THE GAP IS SLOWLY CLOSING”

suffered the heaviest penalty from lack of school choice – poor families living in poor communities served by poor-quality schools – would finally reap its benefits. Conscious that, all other things being equal, it is the sharp-elbowed middle classes that tend to win the competition for places at over-subscribed schools, Gove viewed the pupil premium as a way of ensuring all other things would not be equal.

So which, if either, of these hoped-for benefits has materialised nearly six years on from the pupil premium’s introduction? There is no evidence that the incentive of additional money has led schools to discriminate in favour of pupil premium-eligible applicants, which the law now explicitly permits. This is unsurprising because the amount of money offered per pupil is almost certainly lower than the cost of providing the extra support disadvantaged children need to perform at the level of their more affluent peers. The Dutch system attaches almost twice as much funding to the most disadvantaged pupils as it does >>



to non-disadvantaged pupils, compared with the 15-20% top-up provided in England. Set against the risks of admitting large numbers of relatively low-performing pupils in a system where poor performance carries career-destroying consequences for school leaders, the pupil premium's financial benefits are, truth be told, trivial.

But what about the impact within schools? According to the Education Policy Institute, although outcomes for disadvantaged pupils remain lower by every measure, with pupil premium students 19 months behind their peers at the end of Key Stage 4, the size of the gap is slowly closing. However, this broadly positive trend masks some important differences. The gap is closing faster in primary than secondary schools, faster in schools with lots of pupil premium students than schools with only a few, and faster in London than elsewhere. What is more, the gap has continued to widen for certain pupil premium students, such as the most persistently disadvantaged pupils in secondary school.

It is impossible to credit the pupil premium with reductions in the size of the attainment gap because of the likely impact of other changes to funding, policy, assessment and accountability that have taken place in parallel. What can be stated with certainty, however, is that the pupil premium has focused an unprecedented level of political and professional attention on the problem, which is surely a precondition for solving it. This is where the true value of the pupil premium is to be found.

There are now tell-tale signs that the system, at every level, is alert to the problem of educational inequality and determined to tackle it. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has

been set up to find out how to improve the attainment of the poorest pupils. Academics are busy evaluating the impact of the growing number of innovations in schools. The government has created the position of National Pupil Premium Champion and there are now annual Pupil Premium Awards. The school inspection and accountability frameworks now look at the gap in attainment, with the consequence that schools are forensically tracking the performance of pupil premium students. The optimism this should inspire is tempered by a number of challenges that the coming years will bring, three of which merit particular mention.

The first and most serious of these is the government's plan for grammar school expansion. For the first time in decades, the cross-party, 'one nation' consensus about the parameters of schools policy is being challenged. The evidence shows that not only do grammar schools educate very few poor children and a vanishingly small number of the very poorest, but their very existence does real damage to the prospects of those they do not educate but who live nearby. In England, 47% of pupils in comprehensive schools located in selective areas achieve five A\*-C-grade GCSEs, including English and maths, compared with a national average of 57%, while 27% of pupils receiving free school meals in selective areas clear that hurdle, compared with 35% nationally. Little wonder that both the outgoing and incoming heads of Ofsted have spoken out about the dangers, particularly for the most disadvantaged pupils, of increasing selection at age 11.

The second challenge is the growing crisis in teacher recruitment and retention at the very moment when per-pupil

# “GRAMMAR SCHOOLS EDUCATE VERY FEW POOR CHILDREN”

spending is set to see the largest real-terms cut since the 1970s and the first since the 1990s. This is deeply worrying because the deployment of high-quality teachers is the most important factor in pupil progress. While this is true for all pupils, it is particularly true for the poorest, who are particularly sensitive to teacher quality, with good teachers delivering even bigger gains and bad teachers doing even more damage.

## THE EARLY YEARS COUNT

The final significant risk is that we fail to boost the quality of early years provision. Government policy continues to be designed to meet the childcare needs of working parents rather than the developmental interests of children. If we are serious about reducing the educational achievement gap, 40% of which has opened up before children even get to school, we need significantly to raise the quality of pre-school provision. If early years provision is viewed as a way of boosting adult employment rates, a premium will always be placed on quantity and affordability. If, on the other hand, it is viewed as a way of boosting child development – of narrowing the school-readiness gap – then quality becomes the key issue. Instead of investing in more free hours of childcare for working parents, as the government’s new 30-hour-a-week entitlement does, we should in fact be raising the quality of pre-school education for all children, the poorest most of all, regardless of whether their parents work.

As these debates run on, the RSA will continue to advocate for progressive, evidence-based policymaking. At the government’s request, we have begun preparations for the biggest set of randomised control trials ever conducted in the UK into the impact of cultural education on the current performance and future prospects of Britain’s poorest children. The trials will seek to measure the impact that arts and cultural organisations, working in and with schools, can have on pupil premium students’ academic achievement, non-cognitive development (such as motivation, confidence, resilience and creativity) and ‘in-subject’ performance in the arts and culture. At the very least, this should serve to stretch the conversation about educational disadvantage and provide a useful corrective to the assumption that underpins so much contemporary practice: that what poor children need is a stripped-down, didactic education and an unrelenting focus on ‘behaviour and basics’.

These trials, which will run across two academic years with a treatment and control group for each intervention tested, will provide invaluable insights for policymakers, commissioners and practitioners alike. For not only will we learn more about

the relative effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of different forms of cultural education, but we hope also to learn more about what it is that makes them effective. Is it the process of drafting and redrafting that explains the spillover benefits of the visual arts? Or the feedback and rehearsal at the heart of drama? Or the deliberate practice and mastery required of a musician? Or the motor skills developed in the dance studio? Or the motivation and ongoing inspiration drawn from a memorable experience, be it a display or a public exhibition? If we are to make the case for a culturally rich education, we will need to be able to explain not only what works, but why it works.

None of us knows what the results of these trials will be (we will find out in late 2019), but I am willing to make a prediction. While there may be quicker or cheaper ways of closing the attainment gap in core academic subjects than cultural education (think one-to-one catch-up classes in maths and English), there will be few better ways, and probably no better way, of reducing the cultural, creativity and life-skills deficits that, together, produce the UK’s yawning opportunity gap. ■

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### SWITCHED ON

Parents think of reading print books with their children as part of the bedtime routine, but when it comes to digital media, kids often digest content alone. “We want to encourage parents to share in digital books just as much as they do print ones,” says Dr Natalia Kucirkova, senior research fellow at UCL’s Institute of Education, who is running the Children’s Reading On Screen project.

Digital devices are sometimes seen as disruptive to the family dynamic. However, it doesn’t have to be that way. “When parents and children create stories together through digital books, there is a nice family dynamic,” she adds.

The project, which has received a £2,000 RSA Catalyst grant, is exploring how to get the most from digital devices and aims to create a resource hub with practical advice and the latest research about digital learning. “You often find that children are just watching YouTube channels or TV on digital devices, but they could be used for book reading or creating stories or drawings,” explains Kucirkova.

■ To get involved, email [n.kucirkova@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:n.kucirkova@ucl.ac.uk)



# PUBLIC PURSE

*We should consider basic income a democratic right rather than a solution to unemployment*

by Louise Haagh

**T**he idea behind basic income initiatives is to promise every member of a community a regular, unconditional cash payment of equal size, on a permanent basis. This is an old idea that has gained new traction in western countries, with governments from Finland to Holland conducting pilot studies in order to put the challenge of implementation to the test.

While yet to be adopted by a national government, and with many detractors, the principle of basic income has enjoyed support across the ideological spectrum. At the same time, the proposal has largely been met with scepticism among established social and political actors. One reason for this is a perception that a transition to basic income necessarily entails a systemic break with the contemporary welfare state in favour of a much simplified libertarian model of welfare. I argued in *Policy & Politics* (2011, 39:1) against a conventional view of basic income as being in conflict with established welfare states and with social democracy. In place of this, I suggest basic income can be viewed as part of a re-democratised

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welfare state. In this sense, it is not a radical alternative, but a natural extension of an established tradition.

The post-war democratisation of welfare in Europe brought unconditional access to education and healthcare. The guarantee of basic security this afforded, along with the equal standing implied in the political franchise, can be argued to have created a basis for a guarantee of basic subsistence as a foundation of the market economy. Post-war welfarists did not anticipate the need to add a universal income floor, but that does not mean they would have welcomed the behaviour conditionalities that prevail currently. The social participation entailed in the war effort had weakened the divisive discourses of earlier anti-poverty policy linked with the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor.

Providing a basic unconditional floor of security in income and housing can be viewed as a matter of good institutional design. There are many reasons why this idea has not been taken up in practice. Post-war welfarists did not foresee the precarity of the labour and housing markets that exists today. But added to this are misconceptions of a more general type. Among them is an undifferentiated view of what income represents. The mistake involved is that income – as distinct

## “BASIC INCOME IS NOT A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE”

from services – must ordinarily and predominantly be earned from formal labour. In an economy heavily dependent on income and with no other means of subsistence, tying access to basic security wholly to labour is tantamount to subjecting individuals to a servile status in their relation to others and vis-à-vis the state.

Another overdrawn area of popular concern about basic income relates to macroeconomic policy. People forget that Milton Friedman – father of Monetarism and the movement to control the money supply and minimise inflation – was also an advocate of a form of basic income guarantee: the negative income tax. Rather than view a basic income as a source of disruption, it is more plausible to regard the institution as a potential economic stabiliser and, as such, a tool supportive of national development policy and occupational life.

### THE MOTIVATION FACTOR

A very familiar concern about basic income is the notion it will demotivate work. This too is ill-conceived. Motivation is a product of many factors. The authoritative evidence suggests that when people withdraw wholly or partly from the labour market they do so for rational reasons; for example, because of prohibitive costs of childcare or travel, or because of poor conditions at work. Building an unconditional, basic tier into the post-war welfare state could have prevented many of the problems we are familiar with today in the form of administrative costs, punitive controls and motivational bias linked with the phenomenon known as the poverty trap. This is the situation of a person who judges it is better for her to remain on income support than lose access to this entitlement – albeit temporarily or in part – when taking on paid employment. In fact, the notion of the poverty trap is somewhat narrow in that it focuses attention on the immediate monetary aspect of work motivation. Current benefit systems do contain straightforward monetary disincentives to take on paid employment, including high rates of effective taxation on additional earnings. The institutional problem, however, is more general.

The principal difficulty lies in the attempt to control behaviour directly as a condition for obtaining support. Behavioural policies have become more complex in ways that overly micromanage individuals’ lives. Out-of-work conditionalities have been complemented with in-work conditionalities. An implication is a person may be asked to change a job she enjoys because it offers one or two hours’ worth of additional income less than the level that qualifies for a certain class of income supplement. This is evidently an administrative intervention too far. The problem here is not

the existence of income supplements, but the way they are attached to controlling persons’ choices.

The way current welfare discourse and policy construes the problem of employment in terms of individual responsibility is very problematic. A survey I carried out on people’s sources of affiliation with work, published in *World Development* (2011, 39: 3), showed occupational motives to be central among a range of other sources of economic security. The study looked at effects of security on persons with different levels of income, not just the poor. A combination of longer education, more stable employment and the presence of external sources of economic security was shown to reinforce the chances that persons would value work for itself alongside or over immediate wage incentives. This suggests people value formal work that has occupational structure, in the form of skill trajectory, recognition and long-term affiliation. Welfare systems that, by offering a form of coherence between key sources of economic security, are able to generate economic stability, are more effective, as I have shown in *Polity* (2012, 44:4). Therefore, at stake is not whether public services should entail administrative interventions, but to what end these should perform. One can envisage more support in place of checks. It is this thought that has motivated municipalities in countries like Denmark and France to experiment with giving income support on an unconditional basis alongside reorientating administrative resources towards facilitating citizens’ employment on a voluntary basis.

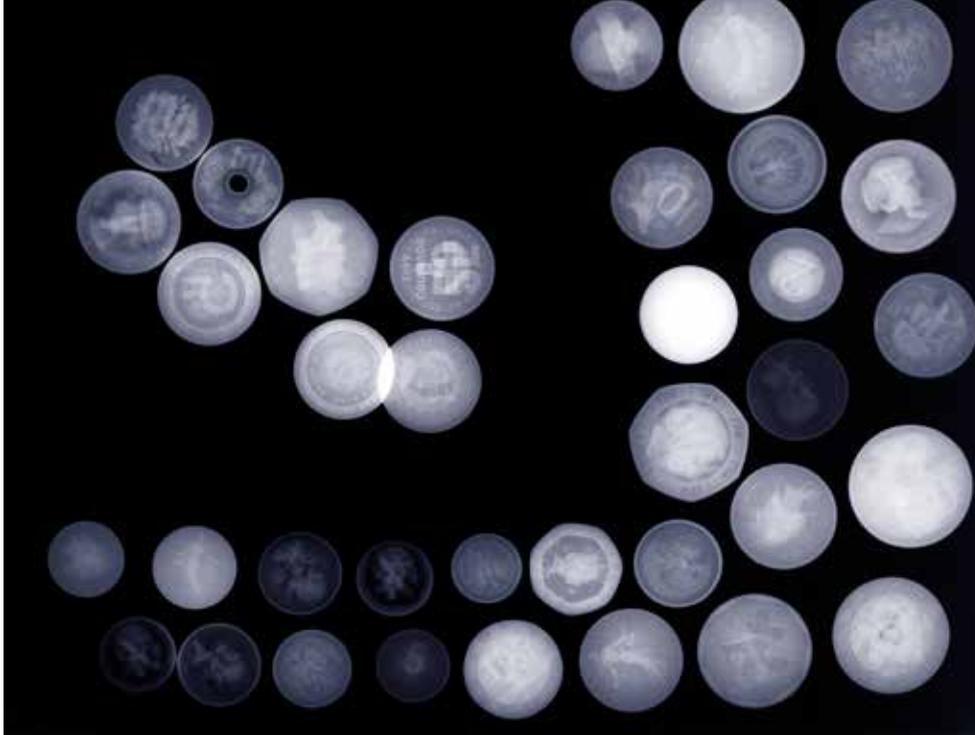
Ultimately, the problem at issue is what in economics is known as the principal-agent problem, which essentially is about the inability to scrutinise other people’s true intentions and thoughts. It is very difficult to read and control a person’s motivation through diktat, and of course, it is generally considered an offence to liberal values of autonomy to attempt to do so. When employment is precarious the problem gets worse. Much more conducive is to create institutional incentives that act more in the background to cultivate developmental and contributory motivations that persons intrinsically have. My research in *Policy & Politics* >> shows that the ratio of investment in training relative

### FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

#### AI AND BASIC INCOME

RSA Australia + New Zealand partnered with Basic Income Guarantee Australia in November to host a symposium on universal basic income (UBI) in Brisbane. This followed two big events looking at the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) with former Google 'Innovationist' and RSA A+NZ Board member Justin Baird. How AI will affect wealth distribution and where UBI fits in are at the heart of RSA A+NZ's calendar of events in 2017.

■ For more information, contact [admin@rsaanz.org.au](mailto:admin@rsaanz.org.au)



## “MOTIVATION IS A PRODUCT OF MANY FACTORS”

to administration is much higher in welfare states that have high levels of public spending on education at all levels. An implication is that states spending more on administration relative to education have weakened institutional incentives in favour of mechanisms of direct control.

Punitive behaviour models, which link eligibility for welfare payments to very particular conditions, such as the number of job applications made, are also broadly unjust. We really have no way of determining exactly in what measure a person is responsible for her unemployment or the level of wages she is able to command. It is politically unjust that people who can cushion unemployment because of inheritance or family support are exempt from behavioural checks, while the least fortunate are subject to scrutiny. Yet it is not only the poor, but all groups facing unemployment that suffer injustice when they have to exhaust their savings before they are eligible for basic security. In this regard, middle earners who have paid high rates of tax and other social contributions can also argue they are being treated unjustly within the means-tested system.

Post-war welfarists were highly conscious of the socially cohesive effects of the combination of contributory systems and universal security. Unconditional basic income need not entail abandoning the existence of contributory tiers within the welfare system, as some have suggested. Basic income can be viewed instead as a central tool in rebuilding social trust in the justice and efficacy of the public sector. It is a contributory source to the establishment of other forms of risk pooling and saving whilst creating a practical basis for senses of affiliation to common welfare.

One concern about government-led basic income experiments is that they focus on the poor and unemployed and the problem of their relatively short-term behaviour. Basic income advocates need to think carefully about how far, and on what terms, they want to stake their case on these studies and methods. The Finnish government, which initiated a two-year practical experiment in January 2017, has already expressed concern that results may be unreliable because subjects of experiments are contaminated by knowing they are in a trial. The government institution in charge of the experiment has even issued a warning that people in the experiments should not be approached lest the results will be biased.

### THE WAY AHEAD

As observed above, post-war welfarists assumed security was both a natural and positive motivational driver. They were wrong to assume that labour market institutions would conform to it. To me, this means they got the basics right, but the instruments needed were left to drift. In failing to guarantee basic security, and then gradually abandoning development policy over the 1970s and 1980s, the political establishment let go of the tools required. Abandonment of regulatory instruments to stabilise housing costs and access, and reduced investment in occupational planning in favour of privatisation of care services, are decisions that have shown to be ill-judged over time. The historical experience of welfare states with more high-skill lines of regular employment suggests development policy involving social partners is needed and takes a long time to build.

In summary, it is time to correct the basic mistake of the post-war welfare model in omitting basic subsistence as an unconditional right. However, we should restate other areas of postwar reformism: the concern to generate forward-looking development policy and institutional mechanisms to address national development challenges in a collective way. ■



# ENLIGHTENED ENTERPRISE

**T**he RSA's mission is to spur 21st century enlightenment through ideas and action. But every country has a different social context. A network of 44 RSA Connectors articulates what 21st century enlightenment means in their countries by planning and coordinating projects, sometimes channelling ideas that have developed internationally.

In Japan, for example, the scale of collaboration needed to rebuild communities following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami has brought about a change in how society sees the role of enterprise. Appetite has grown for organisations that apply commercial strategies to tackle social challenges.

In a country known for its conservative and traditional culture, social enterprises are a relatively novel concept. For example, Ashoka, a global network of social entrepreneurs, selected its first two Japanese Fellows in 2012. Drawing on the RSA's expertise, Fellows in Japan are trying to make sense of this shift in attitudes and build on the existing momentum. To this end, in July last year they organised a debate at the British Embassy in Tokyo on how to develop homegrown social enterprises.

## THE TEST OF TIME

Five established social enterprises shared their experiences of getting started, what inspired them to take action, and explained how they gained traction in society. A central question during the debate was what it takes to ensure a venture will survive. Safecast was one of the five social enterprises that participated. Founded in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, it collects data on radiation levels using Geiger counters. The breakthrough moment for Safecast was when it discovered the power of getting the public involved. Instead of making the Geiger counters itself, it sold kits that people could assemble, which spread the impact of their work far and wide.

During the debate, the discussions energised Fellows and attendees, suggesting that a new breed of passionate pragmatists

is emerging that can take Japanese social enterprise to the next level. The event was also practical, providing legal information on establishing social enterprises in Japan and best practice for interaction with local and national government. Although a relatively new debate in Japan, the central message is one very familiar to social enterprises around the world: the importance of striking the right balance between business and passion.

Social innovation is also central to work being done by Fellows in Thailand around the concept of 21st century enlightenment in their context. Fellows have been meeting regularly to discuss topical issues and are planning a series of debates. Some of the problems they are seeking to address, such as sustainability, are not easily solved by businesses, nor are they completely taken care of by governments or other institutions. The RSA Fellowship in Thailand will explore challenges that fall through the gaps and bring social innovation to the table as a possible path towards better outcomes. In Bangkok, Fellows are creating a series of workshops involving a diverse group of stakeholders: academia, business, government, NGOs, non-profits and think tanks, who will discuss some of the region's most pressing challenges. Rather than have a one-time event, the goal is to foster a community that will work together to co-create better outcomes. ■

## GET INVOLVED

To find out more about the Fellows network in Japan, contact RSA Connector Tania Coke ([t.coke@btinternet.com](mailto:t.coke@btinternet.com)), who is planning future events on social enterprise, as well as developing other in-country projects.

If you are interested in participating or finding out more about Fellows' work in Thailand, please contact RSA Connector Chris Oestereich ([chris@wickedproblemscollaborative.com](mailto:chris@wickedproblemscollaborative.com)).

For more information about our international programmes, contact director of RSA Global, [Natalie.Nicholles@rsa.org.uk](mailto:Natalie.Nicholles@rsa.org.uk).



## THE LONG RUN

*Society is preoccupied with success, but we should learn to see the value in failure too*

by Moses Sangobiya FRSA

🐦 @msango1

**F**ailure hit me hard when I flew from London to the US to compete in National Football League (NFL) trials. After 10 years of training, of giving it everything, I didn't make the cut. I had started playing American football relatively late, at the age of 16, but after a year I was making a name for myself and had my eyes set on the NFL International development programme. I worked hard, but in many ways success felt inevitable. It was what I was training for and I pursued it single-mindedly.

I took up the sport at a time when I felt like I didn't fit in, having recently returned to London after two years living in Nigeria. Like many teenagers, I was trying to discover what I was good at, but also looking for a sense of belonging. I tried basketball, tried getting into computers and learning how to code, but none of it clicked. It might sound silly but I started playing American football after seeing it on television and thinking it looked easy and like something I could do, so

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YOUNG SOCIAL  
ENTREPRENEURS

## “I WORKED HARD, BUT IN MANY WAYS SUCCESS FELT INEVITABLE”

I contacted the London Warriors. In the first training session, one of the coaches threw the ball at me so hard it went straight through my hands and hit me in the head. I was told I didn't have the hands needed to be a wide receiver and I should try running into someone. They put me in the defensive end position and told me to tackle one of the best running backs in the country. After being told I wasn't good enough to play the receiver position, my pride kicked in and I was determined to make an impact. When play started I threw myself in and hoped for the best. Somehow I wiped the player off his feet and everyone went crazy. I loved the feeling I got from that first tackle and kept seeking that praise and respect. I was so caught up in chasing the feeling that when I was named Rookie of the Year it took me by surprise.

From that moment, I focused on becoming an NFL player. There was a clear path to the NFL for European athletes through the international programme, NFL Europe. I knew people who had been through it; my coaches were either former NFL players or staff. This wasn't a pipe dream; it was within reaching distance.

But the international programme was shut down in 2007 and a lot of my peers scaled back their ambitions. That wasn't an option for me. American football was the first thing I was ever good at. I couldn't stop playing. I decided to carve a route to the NFL for myself. Now aged 21 and recently graduated from university, I saved some money and flew out to America with a list of 30 colleges to approach for a football scholarship. Twenty-nine of them took my calls but said they didn't need players. The 30th, Texas A&M Kingsville, invited me to come the next day for a visit. The team coach, Bo Atterberry, offered me a scholarship there and then on the basis of my 'highlight reel' video. He didn't even ask to watch me play or train, saying: "The fact you've flown out here proves you've got heart. That's the kind of player I want on my team." I went back to the UK to train and get ready for the scholarship, which was due to start in a few months.

I was gearing up to go out to the US when the university called to say they were retracting the scholarship offer; the grades I'd received in my UK degree weren't high enough. I was devastated. I'd worked so hard to achieve my dream and had come so close, but it was snatched away.

I felt angry and confused, but kept training and playing in the UK. At the same time I was fortunate to be employed by a Premier League football team to mentor young people, but I wasn't happy. There remained an itch to play at a high level so I decided to give it one last shot, this time skipping the college process altogether and going straight to the NFL.

I asked a friend who had played professionally to train me for six months and quit my job with no idea how I would support myself. I was determined to throw everything into it.

Training for six to eight hours a day, seven days a week and measuring everything I ate, I could feel my body changing. During practice I felt head and shoulders above everyone else. I was coming into my own. I booked flights to Baltimore for the NFL Regional Combines, then to Detroit for the Super Regional Combines. Not progressing through the first stage was not an option.

### TESTING TIMES

When I arrived in Baltimore it was winter and freezing. The trial took place at six in the morning in an airport hangar that had been converted into a stadium. The halls were lined with huge murals of players and trophies. Each player was given a jersey with a number on it and from that moment on we didn't have names, just a number, like pieces of meat in a cattle auction. We were told to sprint between every drill, that everything we did was being assessed, including how we carried ourselves and how we spoke. It's not just the eyes of the coaches on you, but those of all the other players. I didn't say a word, to avoid revealing that I wasn't American. That morning was the biggest test of my life.

At the end of the trial we were told if we were successful we would receive a call, if we weren't successful, we wouldn't.

I went back to my hotel room and waited for that call. I broke down in tears. The sheer intensity of the experience was overwhelming. It was the culmination of not just the past six months, but 10 years of pressure and expectation, which had totally consumed me. Friendships and relationships had all suffered in its shadow. The next stage of the trial would be two weeks later in Detroit, so I just waited for the phone call. I didn't want to call or speak to anyone apart from that coach who was going to tell me I'd made it through to the next round.

It wasn't until the day before I was due to fly to Detroit that it dawned on me: I hadn't made it and I wasn't going to get that call. But I had to take the flight anyway, as I couldn't afford to change my travel plans. With three empty days to fill, I dragged my luggage through the derelict streets of Detroit without purpose. My dream of becoming a professional athlete was shattered.

I returned to the UK with no idea what I was going to do next. American football was done. It felt like all that time I had dedicated to it, all the sacrifices, had amounted to nothing. I was angry with the sport. But I was even >>



## “WE DON’T HEAR ENOUGH ABOUT THE ROLE FAILURE PLAYS IN SUCCESS”

angrier with myself for being foolish enough to aim so high. Why did I decide I was so special? The hardest people to face were the former NFL players who had cautioned me that I should play for the love of the sport, not for success or money.

That trial was two years ago. Since then, another Premier League football team got in touch, asking me to head up one of their community programmes. A big part of the job is getting kids who lack privilege and confidence to set ambitious goals. Two years after my trial, it has finally dawned on me that what I’ve been doing all along has huge value. This journey has opened up all sorts of opportunities that I should be grateful for. I’m applying the skills and experience I developed in pursuing American football in ways I never thought possible. More importantly, it has prompted me to ask questions about how we think about and pursue success, and how we learn through failure.

Is there potentially a danger in the idea that hard work is the route to success? How do we deal with it when, despite hard work, we don’t succeed? If a person sets out to achieve one thing, comes up short but then uses the experience to achieve something else, is that still a failure? And why do we find it so difficult to talk about our failures honestly?

Culturally we’re encouraged to take risks in order to succeed, but we don’t hear enough about how to deal with adversity or the role that failure plays in success. If we do,

it’s the Silicon Valley notion of ‘fail fast, fail early’, under which failure is only embraced in order to kill bad ideas and let the good ones rise to the top. In practice, I think most of us are all still terrified of failing. I’ve found that for many young people this fear is part of what stops them from trying in the first place.

This generation of young people are coming into adulthood with a great deal of pressure to appear successful. Social media encourages people to present a perfected and successful image of themselves. My mission is to let people know that it is alright to make mistakes and to fail, but to realise that these moments do not define you. What defines you is what you are able to take away from the experience and how you are able to use it to grow.

### SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS

Not making the cut was probably the harshest experience I’ve been through, but looking back on it now, I see the absolute necessity of that experience. I don’t regret it. I honestly feel that failing taught me that I can bounce back from defeat and still go on to do amazing and rewarding things.

As a society we need to create an environment that encourages ambition, but where failure is not something to be ashamed of. If we aren’t scared of failing and know how to learn from it, perhaps we would be more creative, successful and better-rounded human beings. ■

■ Listen to the podcast, in which Moses Sangobiyi speaks to Matthew Taylor, at [www.thersa.org/podcasts/thelongrun](http://www.thersa.org/podcasts/thelongrun). Moses is interested in hearing from people who have used their failures to grow. Contact him on Twitter: @msango1

## NEW FELLOWS

### ANDREW ELDRED



As head of employee relations for Crossrail, Andrew is responsible for ensuring that workers' interests are considered throughout

the life of the project. "While Crossrail Ltd does not employ any construction workers itself, it does have an interest in ensuring that construction employers on the project are observing certain minimum employment standards and are managing relationships with their employees and trade unions effectively," he explains.

Andrew has been working in employment relations since 2000. During that time, he has observed some contradictory developments. "The first is the continued decline in the influence of national collective agreements and the trade unions as a consequence of the industry's reliance on subcontracting and dependent self-employment. The second, by contrast, is a revival of interest in the principles of good employment practice, largely as a result of escalating industry concerns about shortfalls in skills, productivity and innovation."

Andrew is working to address the skills issue by ensuring that Crossrail Ltd and its contractors fulfil their commitments to provide apprenticeships and local job opportunities.

Andrew joined the RSA to gain access to the Society's research and events related to employment and skills.

### STEPHANIE RAIBLE



Stephanie teaches Cultural Entrepreneurship at the University of Minnesota Duluth, the first bachelor's course of its kind in the US.

Her courses instruct students on the culture industry, creative economy, design thinking, and launching and managing organisations.

The courses also unlock creativity, which can be lost during adulthood. "Many of my students feel that this is their opportunity to reconnect with a side of themselves that is more open and creative," she explains.

Stephanie's work has spanned five countries, including Germany, where she was a Fellow within the Robert Bosch Foundation Fellowship Programme, focusing on social entrepreneurship and leadership education. She has also taught within the Ethical Leadership MA course at Claremont Lincoln University, and is a doctoral candidate in Organisational Leadership at Northeastern University, with two MAs from University of Pennsylvania and Institute of Education-London (joint with University of Deusto).

By joining the RSA, Stephanie hopes to access knowledge that will complement her teaching. She has used several Student Design Award prompts and *Journal* articles for classroom discussions. "I enjoy being exposed to diverse perspectives from different contexts and disciplines as they enhance what I'm presenting in the classroom," she explains.

### IN BRIEF

Here are a few more Fellows who are working to drive social progress:

**Wendy Baverstock** is managing director of London-based social enterprise Working Chance. The charity provides recruitment services to women with criminal convictions and care leavers, helping them to find work and support their children.

**Bart Kolodziejczyk** is a nanoscientist whose portfolio includes two tech start-ups and two not-for-profit organisations. He has advised the UN, OECD and EU on science, technology, innovation and policy and was named one of *MIT Technology Review's* Innovators Under 35 for his conductive polymers, which reduce the cost of solar panels.

**Seren Dalkiran** pioneered the first worldwide scientific study on millennial leadership for her PhD research. She is also the originator and co-founder of the Synergized Earth Network and initiator of Millennial Motion: The Next Generation of Leadership, both of which unite leaders from across generations to tackle pressing global challenges in the 21st century.

**Stephen Welton** is the chief executive of the Business Growth Fund, which helps entrepreneurs and small businesses in the UK to prosper through investment. He is also an active supporter of Speakers for Schools and Inspiring the Future.

## YOUR FELLOWSHIP: ENGAGE WITH THE RSA IN FOUR MAIN WAYS

### 1 Connect online:

Search for Fellows online at our new website. Visit [www.thersa.org/new-website](http://www.thersa.org/new-website) for details of how to log in. You can also follow us on Twitter @theRSAorg, join the Fellows' LinkedIn group and follow our blog at [www.thersa.org/blogs](http://www.thersa.org/blogs).

### 2 Meet other Fellows:

Fellowship events and network meetings take place across the UK and are an excellent way to meet other Fellows. Visit our website to find an event in your area.

### 3 Share your skills:

Log in to the website to update your Fellowship profile and let other Fellows know about your skills, interests, expertise and availability.

### 4 Grow your idea:

RSA Catalyst offers grants and crowdfunding support for Fellow-led new and early-stage projects that aim to tackle a social challenge. Visit the Project Support page on our website.

Explore these and further ways to get involved at [www.thersa.org](http://www.thersa.org)

## LAST WORD



*Rainy days with nothing to do are becoming a thing of the past thanks to technology, but maybe boredom wasn't so bad after all*

by *Phill Jupitus*  
🐦 @jupitusphillip

Childhood boredom was the worst. Usually consigned to wet leaden Sundays. No shops open, nothing on TV, nothing to do. I vividly remember sitting at the table of our living room in Barking in the late 1960s and drawing sparse, repetitive landscapes. Overlapping hills receding into the distance. When I ran out of space, I turned the page and started again. Trees, clouds, buildings or animals were never added to break up the bleak vista, just the hypnotic interlacing slopes of endless hills.

Whilst recently making a documentary about the changing nature of boredom for Radio 4, it became apparent that this kind of 'old-fashioned boredom' is going out of style. The main reason is that most of us now carry a whole world of knowledge around in our pockets. Any information, entertainment or news is instantly accessible. The real-time activities of friends and colleagues are all the mere swipe of a finger away. Take a walk round your nearest shops and cafés and start counting how many people are looking at their devices, heads bowed, in mute worship of the new religion.

I have always regarded my line of work (wiseacre without portfolio) as a form of cultural lottery win. At school, I never showed much of an aptitude for anything. After a coma-inducing visit to a careers fair, options were narrowed down to meteorologist or supermarket manager. The latter is gleefully thrown in my face regularly by my father. On the opening night of *Hairspray* at the Shaftesbury Theatre, he ambled into my dressing room after the show to find me, a wheezing seven feet and 20 stone of wig, heels, false eyelashes, lipstick and red sequins. He looked me up and down and mumbled: "You'd have been a rubbish Co-op manager..."

I didn't pursue life as a performer. The job and I bumped into each other

PHILL JUPITUS IS A  
STAND-UP COMEDIAN,  
ACTOR AND POET

by accident in 1985 and just sort of struck up an unlikely friendship. Today, there are hundreds of comedy clubs where young hopefuls can hone their skills. The drama department of the University of Kent offers a degree-level course in stand up comedy. Every August, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival groans under its cargo of thousands of solo performers. Today, rather than random chance, there's a well-worn path and career structure. The way you negotiate this can mean the difference between doing the same thing 20 years later or sitting in Beverly Hills, sending your shakshuka back because they didn't use a duck egg.

Perversely, the thing I have enjoyed most about an accidental life in performance is the boredom. Onstage on your own, the brain is more alert than at any other time. Fizzing with adrenaline and nervous energy, you are hyper aware of both surroundings and situation. You look out at the hundreds of faces and work through your act. You know the peaks and troughs of your narrative, so any variation in response throws you into a mild panic. This constant artificial state of high alert is incredibly tiring. Subsequently, you crave nothingness. Looking forward to just sitting and watching the bonnet chewing up the miles. Car in cruise, brain in neutral.

For the first time in 30 years, I have absolutely no idea what I will be doing over the coming 12 months. When self-employed, unemployment rarely happens suddenly, it gradually creeps over you. But I am looking into the approaching void with optimism, a chasm into which I for one will definitely be casting my smartphone, releasing my mind from the dull tyranny of constant digital distraction. Now, hand me a sheet of paper, because I feel some landscapes coming on! Hang on, my agent just sent an email.

Ah... never mind. ■

# Do you know someone who would make a great Fellow?

Your nominations are a great way to add the expertise and enthusiasm of friends and colleagues to the Fellowship community. You can nominate them online at [www.theRSA.org/nominate](http://www.theRSA.org/nominate). We will send a personalised invitation on your behalf and notify you if your nominee becomes a Fellow.

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