

Journal Issue 1 2017



## The system entrepreneur

**Ian Burbidge** explores a different approach to public sector reform

**Gus O'Donnell** explains that policy based on wellbeing unlocks efficiency

**Emma Byrne** on why swearing is actually good for society

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## "HOWEVER WE CONCEIVE OF, MANAGE AND DELIVER PUBLIC SERVICES, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THE WIDER SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE"

IAN BURBIDGE, PAGE 10

### REGULARS

- 06 UPDATE  
*The latest RSA news*
- 09 EVENTS  
*Events programme highlights*
- 46 GLOBAL  
*Think tanks in the developing world must adapt to make an impact*
- 47 NEW FELLOWS  
*Introducing six new RSA Fellows*
- 48 REVIEW  
*Svend Brinkmann on resisting self-help and Mo Gawdat on happiness*
- 50 LAST WORD  
*Comedy writer Rob Gee on how laughter can break down barriers between patients and nurses*

### FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

- 15 *The Talk Reflection app is connecting social care professionals*
- 38 *Politicians are inspiring young people to get involved in politics thanks to Stand Up Speak Out*
- 43 *Open Cinema is transforming community spaces into inclusive facilities for the disadvantaged*

### FEATURES

- 10 PUBLIC SERVICES  
**Altered states**  
*The RSA's Ian Burbidge says we need to think like a system but act like an entrepreneur to bring about change in our public services*
- 16 POLICY  
**In pursuit of wellbeing**  
*Efficiencies can be found in the public sector if we create policy with a long-term view, explains former cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell*
- 20 CONVERSATION  
**Working well**  
*Dame Carol Black speaks to Matthew Taylor about the intersection between work and health*
- 24 SWEARING  
**Impolite society**  
*Swearing is more than just a means of lashing out, in many ways it is good for society, argues scientist Emma Byrne*
- 28 HIGHER EDUCATION  
**Universities' challenge**  
*Philosopher Jonathan Wolff says academia must get better at politics or it will be at the mercy of public opinion and financial necessity*

### 34 JUSTICE

#### **Sense and sensibility**

*Judges once had latitude to use their compassion when meting out punishments. Justice expert Pamela Dow asks whether, in pursuing objectivity, have we let the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction*

### 36 POPULISM

#### **Turning the tide**

*Former Economist editor-in-chief Bill Emmott says the social upheavals shaking the west are rooted in a sense of unfairness and we must restore equality in order to survive*

### 40 ARCHITECTURE

#### **Life plans**

*If users helped to plan our public buildings they would be more useful down the years, but co-design has not yet permeated architecture, according to Roland Karthaus*

### 44 MENTAL HEALTH

#### **Mind and matter**

*The RSA's Tom Harrison explains the big opportunity to finally put mental and physical health on a par during the latest phase of devolution*

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*Registered as a charity in*

*England and Wales, no. 212424*

*and in Scotland no. SC037784*

*RSA Journal, Volume CLXIII*

*No. 5569, Issue 1 2017*

*ISSN: 0958-0433*

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*for the RSA by Wardour,*

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# “WE NEED POLITICIANS TO UNDERSTAND PROBLEMS MORE DEEPLY”

*The post-election period is the best time for a government to announce radical and difficult things. On the one hand, the new government has a fresh mandate; on the other, it has five years to go through the pain of change and show that a new approach works. Given the huge demands and uncertainties of the Brexit process it may be a long shot, but we have to hope the new government will be radical about an issue not discussed much in the campaign but arguably more important than almost everything else: the way government itself works.*

It seems hardly a day goes by without further reason to question the record of David Cameron as prime minister. From big projects like NHS reorganisation, Universal Credit and the contracting out of probation services, to smaller ones like community organising and the National Citizens Service, and including apparently simple initiatives like the misguided Cancer Drugs Fund, there is evidence of policies failing to meet the objectives set for them.

Yet, before they were elected to power, the key masterminds of the Cameron project claimed to have thought deeply about how to run government differently. I remember in late 2009 going to a conference organised by a right-of-centre think tank on the subject of what was then seen as the big idea: ‘the post-bureaucratic state’. Speaker after speaker told the credulous audience how a Cameron government would avoid all the policy and implementation failings of New Labour’s target-obsessed ministerial control freaks.

Indeed, one reason the then Conservative opposition wanted to trumpet a new approach was that the failures of the Blair and Brown years had piled up, among the most notable being electronic patient records, PFI, individual learning accounts and ID cards. Moreover, there was the general perception, which turns out to have been only partially true, that Labour’s massive investment in public services had failed to lead to better services and more satisfied users.



MATTHEW TAYLOR

I am told senior civil servants have again been charged with thinking whether the new government could try to do things differently. If so, I hope they will heed some key lessons, many of which are underlined in this edition of *RSA Journal*.

First, however tempting it is to blame politicians, understand that failure is not just about incompetence or bad luck, but deeper shifts. As the RSA’s Ian Burbidge argues, complexity, pace of change and expectations of modern citizens are all fatal challenges to top-down technocratic models of social change.

Second, we need politicians and policymakers to understand problems more deeply (as the RSA’s Tom Harrison shows with the case of mental health, complex issues have systemic foundations) and why they persist, while also using more agile and adaptive methods of pursuing change. This is why we advocate ‘thinking like a system and acting like an entrepreneur’. That deeper understanding would be aided, as Jo Wolff argues, by a more honest and mutually respectful conversation between government and the academy.

Third, reformers need to recognise that changing the way we do policy and the way we do politics have to go hand in hand. In his fascinating piece, former cabinet secretary Gus O’Donnell describes the way wellbeing measures and behavioural insights could lead to very different goals and methods in government. The fact these important ideas are still at the margins of policymaking is, in part, a reflection of how political realities stand in the way of reform. I remember, when Gus and I both toiled at the Centre of Government, urging him to include the relations between ministers, advisers and civil servants in the reviews of departmental capability he was commissioning. His view – and he was probably right – was that to do so would scupper the whole idea of an objective assessment of performance. Yet, although politics stands in the way of new approaches to policy, our democratic institutions are even more troubled than our governmental ones.

Without radical change, it is only a matter of time before our new ministers come to the conclusion that few of their departmental levers are capable of shifting anything significant in the outside world. ■



## EMPLOYMENT

**GOOD WORK**

Now is the time to commit to a good work economy, according to the RSA's chief executive Matthew Taylor, who used his annual lecture to explain why he thinks all work should be good work. Taylor, who is chair of the independent Review of Modern Employment, defined good work as "fair and decent, with scope for fulfilment and development".

He set out five reasons why it is critical that we put good work on the national agenda: the rise of in-work poverty; the impact of work on health and wellbeing; the need to improve productivity; the impact of automation; and the need to foster habits of active citizenship.

In his lecture, Taylor said: "Work defines our identity, and is central to our day-to-day existence and to the long narrative of our lives. For the RSA, committed as we have been for 265 years to human flourishing and creativity, improving the quality of work at a time of rapid change has become an important theme and it is something we plan to focus upon even more in the future."

The RSA's #GoodWorkIs initiative attracted a huge response on Twitter and Facebook, illustrating that there is strong support across the country for the concept of good work and quality jobs. It builds on the RSA's body of research on the future of work, including research into the gig economy, self-employment and the implications of automation.



## SOCIETY

**THE BOSSOM LECTURE**

This year's Bossom Lecture featured leading authority on urban development and renewal Jonathan FP Rose, who spoke about what it takes to make cities and their communities thrive.

At a time of rapid global change, Jonathan proposed a model for designing and reshaping city regions that will increase sustainability, equality, resilience and adaptability; themes that resonate with the RSA's work on the role that citizens can play in creating more inclusive forms of growth in their cities, towns and regions.

Each of the annual Bossom events has a focus on the built environment and society. Endowed in 1965 by architect and politician Lord Alfred Bossom, the lectures feature leading thinkers and practitioners in architecture, urban development and place-making.

Participants in this year's lecture took a moment to remember the life of Lord Alfred's son, Sir Clive Bossom (1918–2017), who was a long-standing public servant and supported a number of charities and social causes. An enthusiastic advocate of the event series, and the wider work of the RSA, Sir Clive was a valued Life Fellow.

During the Second World War, Sir Clive served as a major in The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment). His political career began in 1949 when he became a County Councillor in Kent and his long career as MP for Leominster spanned 1959 to 1974, including serving as a parliamentary private secretary to the then Minister of Pensions and National Insurance, Secretary of State for Air, and Home Secretary.

Sir Clive married Lady Barbara Joan North in 1951 and the couple had four children. As a Fellow of 40 years and regular attendee of the Bossom lectures, Sir Clive will be sorely missed.

## OBITUARY

### SIR PAUL JUDGE (1949-2017)

It was with great sadness that we learnt Sir Paul Judge had died unexpectedly last month aged 68. Sir Paul had been a fellow of the RSA for 46 years. After attending the University of Cambridge and Wharton Business School he enjoyed a high-flying career, being appointed deputy finance director of Cadbury Schweppes at 28.

In his 30s, Sir Paul negotiated the £97m management buyout of Cadbury Schweppes' UK, Irish and French food business. This became Premier Brands and as chairman he saw profits rise from £6m to over £30m in four years, when he sold Premier for over £300m. Sir Paul used part of the proceeds of the sale to set up a new business school at Cambridge, originally called the Judge Institute of Management Studies.

From 1992-95 he turned to politics, as director general of the Conservative Party.

Sir Paul was actively involved in the RSA's governance from 2001, when he became a vice president of the Council. A year later he was appointed a Trustee of the Board and its deputy chairman. In 2003 he became chairman, a position he held until 2006, when he served as deputy chairman again until 2008. As chairman he raised the RSA's profile and brought more focus and ambition to its work. In 2004 he led the creation of the five Manifesto Challenges (Encouraging Enterprise, Zero Waste, Resilient Communities, Capable Population and Global Citizenship) and made the most of the 250th anniversary of the RSA by setting up the Coffee House Challenge, concluding the year by excellently chairing a major event at the Royal Albert Hall.

Sir Paul was knighted in 1996 for public and political service and in 2013 was appointed a Brother of the Order of St John by the Queen. He is survived by his wife, Barbara, and his two sons, Christopher and Michael, from an earlier marriage.



## ARTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

### CREATIVITY IN CARING

Theatre is enabling carers and people with dementia to communicate in creative ways thanks to work such as *The Garden*, a recent production by Spare Tyre Theatre Company, a participatory arts charity led by artistic director Arti Prashar FRSA.

A performance of this multi-sensory piece was recently staged for FRSAs by the RSA Performing Arts Network. The interactive production, created for people with dementia and their carers, uses non-verbal cues to awaken imagination. Spare Tyre complements the performances with training for carers that offers practical skills to use creativity in everyday care-giving activities.

Spare Tyre's work with voiceless communities is increasingly important in the current climate of austerity. The charity has worked in care environments for over seven years, witnessing the continuing squeeze in provision as public sector cuts bite. It is continually asked to prove how its activities save money, above and beyond other benefits. Activity coordinators (if they exist in a care home) are often working with annual budgets of £200 or less. Quality creative activities that are regarded by management as non-essential, but are widely acknowledged to contribute to mental and physical wellbeing, are reliant on volunteer-led bake sales and organisations like Spare Tyre securing private income. Even organisations and local authorities that in the past embraced the arts as a route to improved wellbeing are now struggling to find resources for this work.

Family carers are also under pressure; people are being cared for at home for longer as the qualifying benchmark for receiving statutory-funded care continues to rise. A rapid shift to cost-effective online support has left a whole generation of older carers feeling isolated. The charity therefore feels that we should get back to face-to-face support.

*The Garden* tours again nationally to care homes and theatres in autumn 2017.



IDEAS

## NEW PODCAST

Fellows can now access more of the best ideas in arts and education, public policy, economics and design wherever they are. The RSA Radio podcast, launched in March, will build on the popularity of the RSA Events podcast, taking leading thinkers out of the lecture hall for in-depth explorations of their ideas. It will seek to provide a space to hear from new voices and examine the power of ideas to create change.

Early highlights include a four-part series on the changing world of work, presented by the RSA's Matthew Taylor and Anthony Painter. The series tackles the future of work from the angles of automation, gig economy regulation, what makes good work and universal basic income. Thinkers featured so far include economist Ryan Avent, LSE sociologist Judy Wajcman, Labour politician Jon Cruddas, scholar-activist Trebor Scholz, Grub Club co-founder Olivia Sibony and *London Review of Books* assistant editor Joanna Biggs.

Meanwhile, an interview with Moses Sangobiyi FRSA explores his experience of pursuing a career in professional sport and what this taught him about the role of failure in success. In June, Matthew Taylor is talking to the authors of influential books that propelled social issues into the public consciousness.

Podcasts are radio programmes that can be downloaded to phones or computers and can provide a break from reading on electronic screens. They can be accessed on the podcasts page of the RSA's website, on iTunes or SoundCloud, or by subscribing to RSA Radio on your smartphone through Apple Podcasts or any other podcast app.



INTERNATIONAL

## NEW US DIRECTOR

Alexa Clay has been appointed director of the RSA US, bringing valuable knowledge of social entrepreneurship with her. Before joining the RSA she led research on social entrepreneurship and impact investing at think tank Ashoka and co-authored the book *The Misfit Economy*, which explores underground and hidden creativity.

Clay has first-hand experience of social innovation, having co-founded the League of Intrapreneurs, a movement to drive social impact and culture change from within incumbent systems.

"There is a huge opportunity to catalyse work that brings together the best of entrepreneurial problem solving and deep humanistic values," says Alexa. Her work will focus on developing strategic research partnerships, particularly around inclusive growth and basic income; supporting regional events and programming; growing the US fellowship; and overseeing the Benjamin Franklin Medal.

HOUSING

## SCALE TO CHANGE

Developers should provide a broader range of tenures than policy stipulates, helping to ensure residents are able to sustain local housing and networks as their needs change over time, according to a new report published by the RSA. *Scale to Change* argues that the current policy approach risks inadvertently creating segregated and polarised neighbourhoods, with people on average incomes often unable to afford homes under any of the tenures offered by new developments.

"All cities rely on providing people with access to homes they can afford, whatever their income," said report author Jonathan Schifferes. "Many of London's neighbourhoods are becoming less inclusive, and many of the issues we covered are relevant across the UK and other global cities. Rather than focusing on the housing mix alone, our report recommends that developers also consider how people mix. The ownership, governance and management of social infrastructure, such as schools and parks, is critical to generate interaction and shared identity in large-scale new housing developments." Over the coming months the RSA will explore how our connections at neighbourhood level will change with new technologies and evolving public services.

*Scale to Change* was supported with funding from British Land.



### MACHINE, PLATFORM, CROWD

Two of the world's most influential policy thinkers, MIT academics **Andrew McAfee** and **Erik Brynjolfsson**, argue that the digital shift from minds to machines, from products to platforms, and from the core to the crowd has profound implications for how we run our companies and live our lives.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Tuesday  
 11 July at 1pm



### TEN YEARS AFTER THE CRASH

As chancellor, **Alistair Darling** was involved at the highest levels from the outset of the financial crisis, right through the heart of the storm. Ten years on from the collapse of Northern Rock, he reflects on what we have and have not learnt, how vulnerable we remain, and how we can shape a fairer, more prosperous future.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Monday  
 11 September at 6pm



### THE POWER OF DESIGN THINKING

To celebrate the launch of the 2017/18 RSA Student Design Awards briefs, **Sue Siddall**, partner at design company IDEO, explores the role of design thinking in fostering innovation and tackling global challenges.

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Tuesday  
 26 September at 6.30pm



### THE GREAT TRUST SHIFT

Author of *Who Can You Trust?* **Rachel Botsman** and chief economist at the Bank of England **Andy Haldane** consider whether we are moving to a new era, in which we trust institutions less, but people and networks more. What does this mean for those industries critically reliant on trust, such as banking?

**Where:** RSA House  
**When:** Friday  
 6 October at 1pm

### PAST HIGHLIGHTS

Bestselling author **Steven Johnson** described the common roots of technological change; the Earth Institute director **Jeffrey Sachs** and Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose director **Mariana Mazzucato** explored how mission-oriented innovation policies can address public problems; Danish psychologist **Svend Brinkmann** argued that

too much self-help has atomised society; leading political economist **Ann Pettifor** outlined how democracies can reclaim control over money production; cognitive scientist **Steven Sloman** explained how our individual ignorance can be trumped by our collective wisdom; renegade economist **Kate Raworth** argued that our outdated economic theories

need to be drawn anew; former adviser to Hillary Clinton **Anne-Marie Slaughter** argued for a paradigm shift in outdated statecraft; lawyer and activist **Catharine A Mackinnon** showed how the law can produce a butterfly effect that generates major social transformation; *The Spectator's* **Katy Balls**, *New Statesman's* **Julia Rampen**, *BritainThinks'*

**Cordelia Hay** and the *FT's* **Miranda Green** dissected the issues surrounding the snap general election; and director **Ken Loach** discussed welfare and inequality.

*These highlights have been selected from a large number of events. For full listings and free audio and video downloads, visit [www.thersa.org/events](http://www.thersa.org/events)*

# ALTERED STATES

*To tackle the challenges faced by our public services, we need to learn to think like a system and act like an entrepreneur*

by Ian Burbidge  
 @ianburbidge

**A**s office workers and schoolchildren were hard at work on the afternoon of 12 May 2008, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck Sichuan province in China. The effects were devastating: over 87,000 died or went missing, 4.8 million were left homeless and the cost of rebuilding amounted to \$137.5bn. But the earthquake also had an impact researchers did not expect: a dramatic increase in the divorce rate. Academics have speculated that the physical instability of the earthquake translated into a cognitive and emotional destabilisation at an individual level; indeed, psychologist Amanda Forest called her paper on the phenomenon *Turbulent Times, Rocky Relationships*. It turns out that our thoughts and behaviours can be triggered by changes in our environment and the physical sensations they generate.

It is difficult to imagine a more uncertain and insecure environment than a post-earthquake zone. One moment, people's lives are relatively stable and routine, the next they are literally shaken up and nothing they previously took for granted can be relied upon. People are forced to rediscover a capacity for self-help and reciprocity. In a famous study first published in the 1960s, American scientist Charles Fritz found that communities typically responded to sudden calamity by focusing on the common good and that, paradoxically, levels of wellbeing often increased. We hear stories of looting and shooting, but much more common is mutual support and generosity. In the face of crisis a crucial issue is our loss of control and our attempt to restore it. A *perceived* lack of control appears to be the critical factor in how people respond to events.

In modern Britain we are fortunate to largely avoid major natural disasters. The contextual challenge we have is more subtle and societal and yet, as we saw in the Brexit vote, people still yearn to 'take back control'. We may

not suffer the profound, life-threatening fear and dislocation of disaster victims, but millions of our fellow citizens are beset by economic insecurity – uncertainty around the stability of one's access to work, income and savings. Researchers from the University of Virginia have even shown a causal connection between economic insecurity, physical pain and pain intolerance. It literally hurts to be economically insecure.

The fact that a single event, albeit one as destructive as an earthquake, can lead to a number of outcomes that are not obvious or predictable, such as the spike in divorce rate or an increase in community spirit, offers a window on some of the challenges inherent in delivering 21st century public services. But how do we plan policies and services in a world characterised by growing complexity and uncertainty that generates a range of unpredictable consequences? Even if we put aside some of the more speculative futurist predictions, a society increasingly driven by technology will see continuous change in the economy, human relations and our sense of identity. In areas such as employment we have seen the loss of traditional manufacturing, the rise of knowledge work, and increasing rates of in-work poverty. Globalisation and migration continuously disrupt the meaning of geographical distance in our lives. And both shaping and being shaped by these trends we see a society where power, wealth and opportunity are overly concentrated.

Compounded by deep social, economic and political divides too many people feel they have lost control of their lives, something that is reflected in high levels of anxiety and alienation. Those who have experienced a sense of community in the past bemoan its loss. Meanwhile, the state seeks both to withdraw entitlements and services while also being increasingly controlling in many of its relationships with citizens. The consolidation of power in the hands of public service experts and institutions reinforces disempowerment and a reduced sense of personal agency 

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## **“PUBLIC SERVICES REMAIN LARGELY BASED ON OUTDATED MODELS”**

or control; people feeling that things are done ‘to’ them, not done ‘with’ them. The state is too hierarchical, the market too lopsided, and rich educational experiences are unevenly distributed.

If the picture painted here is a reasonable reflection of a generally felt experience, are our governance arrangements and the policy that flows from them up to the task? The fear has to be that they are not and for very good reason. They are not sufficiently responsive, adaptive or persuasive. The question for public administrators and policymakers remains: how to change their practices to effectively cope with the complex dynamics of the 21st century.

Since the late 19th century, the theory and practice of public administration has failed to keep up with the pace of social change. Services that were originally conceived to tackle the issues of industrialisation and urbanisation through the professionalism and knowledge of public servants remain bureaucratic and hierarchical in their design and delivery. For 30 years, reformers sought to attack paternalistic and inefficient bureaucracy with the market-oriented tools of New Public Management. Its origins were in economic theory and the efficiency improvements that Frederick Winslow Taylor brought to manufacturing in the early 20th century by breaking the production process down into its constituent parts, controlling for variation and managing by numbers. This reform agenda used incentives, targets, markets and sanctions as their primary levers of improvement, underpinned by the assumption that citizens as consumers would act rationally in their own self-interest in response to a choice among providers.

The outcome of that expensive and often demoralising global experiment is now pretty clear – overwhelmingly, it failed. For all that New Public Management was able to create a clearer output focus in public services, as a hierarchical and unyielding tool it reinforced silos of delivery, left professionals disempowered, created perverse incentives as targets drove organisational focus, and crowded out creativity and innovation.

Could a new approach enable public services to adapt to an environment of complexity, uncertainty and nonlinearity? The RSA is experimenting with a framework and it has two core imperatives. First is to recognise the complexity involved in understanding the bigger picture. Second is to seek a flexible, iterative response to this complex and uncertain social context, pinpointing and pursuing opportunities for sustainable policy change that will make a difference to people’s lives. At the RSA, we call this method ‘think like a system and act like an entrepreneur’.

Complex societal problems have a number of features. They can be highly individual and may require relational support, for example frailty and loneliness, unemployment, mental health or

imprisonment. They can be highly political, requiring important ethical or material trade-offs, and therefore the deliberation and mobilisation of legitimacy. For example, answering questions of where to locate new houses and roads, whether to preserve the green belt or whether to approve licensing applications. They can also be ‘wicked’, with multiple causes interacting in unpredictable ways – issues such as obesity, criminality and homelessness – which require the alignment of a broad set of actors to effectively address them.

Complex systems exhibit nonlinear and often unpredictable change. Indeed, the insight of Edward Lorenz’s ‘butterfly effect’ is that it is hard to predict whether a small change in a complex system will have a big effect, no effect or something in between. As retired general Stanley McChrystal states in his book about rules of engagement in a complex world, “attempts to control complex systems by using the kind of mechanical, reductionist thinking championed by thinkers from Newton to Taylor tend to be pointless at best or destructive at worst”. When translated into public sector institutions, Taylor’s command and control thinking fragmented service delivery and reinforced a hierarchical authority whose role, argues occupational psychologist John Seddon, was to “give instructions (specifications and targets), monitor, control, reward and punish”.

Public services remain largely based on outdated models that assume a linear relationship between inputs, outputs and outcomes and that change is best achieved by pulling the big levers of central government: legislation, tax and spend, and earmarked funding streams. The legacy of this deeply ingrained thinking is the idea that if only we can properly understand an issue, and perfectly design a response, the problem will be solved. These responses are too rigid, path dependent and pre-ordained and consequently do not readily enable a systemic view of a particular challenging social issue to be taken.

This is where decades of public service reform based on a New Public Management mind-set has led. At its worst, it has compounded the problem of paternalism, the assumption that the professionals or bureaucrats know best, and therefore that the frontline staff and citizens should accept what they have to offer. Crucially, this failure to recognise that individuals are experts in their own lives raises the question of how we support effective engagement with people and communities in order to rebalance the provider-receiver power dynamic.

Without a rebalancing, public services could well remain ill-suited and unresponsive to the complex and networked world we live in. In many places, public sector staff are actively trying to effect this rebalancing while working within the constraints of an inflexible system. They are often those closest to the



front-line and the most likely to recognise that these issues cannot be tackled by their own organisation working alone. As one local authority attendee at a recent RSA event said: "If you look at the projections for the next few years, I don't think there is any other way than working as a system." To be able to work as a system we must, therefore, think like a system; however, this alone is not enough if we are to make real change in the world.

#### MOBILISING FOR CHANGE

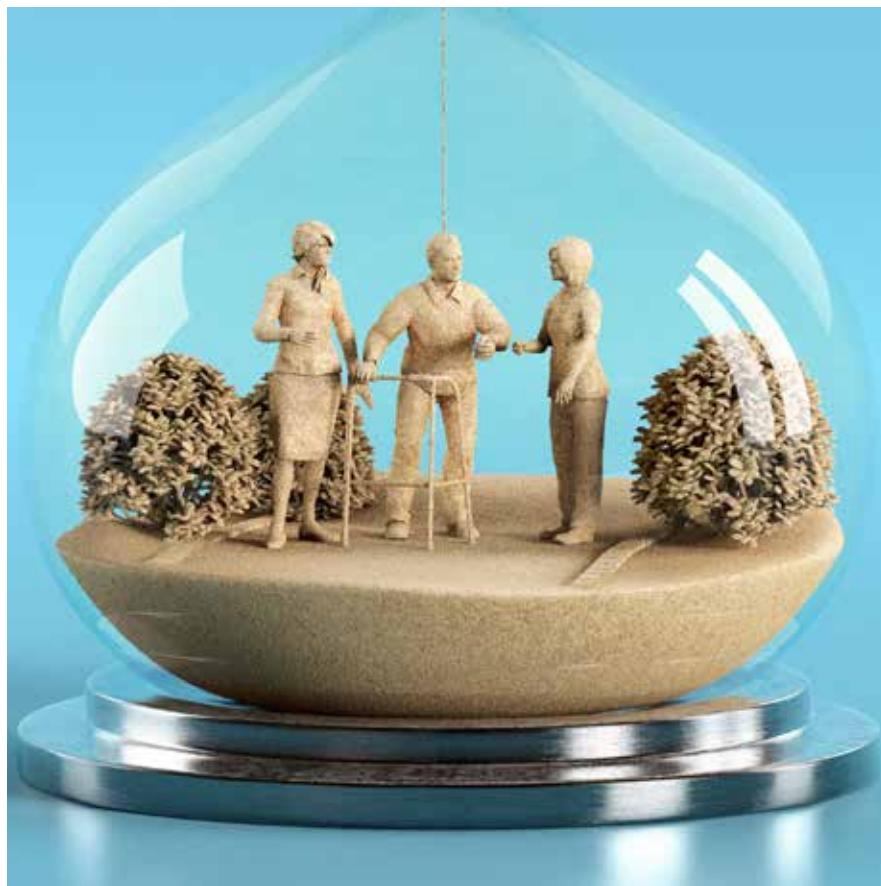
At the RSA we have been adapting a framework based on anthropologist Mary Douglas' cultural theory, which recognises that any change needs to take account of the different sources of power in any social setting. These are the power of the individual, driven by incentives to act; the power of the group, driven by solidarity based on shared values and norms; and the power of the hierarchy, driven by the policy and rules of those in authority.

To be successful, any attempt to tackle a social issue, introduce a new policy or to reform public services needs to take account of these power dynamics. Our critique of New Public Management is that it tried rigidly to use individual incentives to achieve hierarchically defined and imposed ends. In doing so, it effectively crowded out much of the intrinsic motivation, personal agency and solidarity that many public sector employees share. Because

the hierarchy was unable to see and understand the system adequately, the individual incentives prevented staff from responding entrepreneurially to the day-to-day challenges they face. As a result, the system focused on those particular challenges for which targets had been set.

This arguably lead to some successes while resources were flowing, for example on NHS waiting times, although this was not without its controversies, as John Seddon points out in his book about system thinking in the public sector. Processes were geared to meeting hierarchically imposed targets rather than achieving comprehensive and adaptive goals that aligned with the needs of patients. Solidaristic power between services, the voluntary sector and the community remained under-developed. Fundamental system change, for example merging local social and acute care, was far less successful. All of this was compounded when a new government embarked on yet another top-down reorganisation. The NHS has not been able to recover.

Although achieving change is difficult, there are points in time when it becomes more likely. The Sichuan earthquake is an extreme example of an opportunity that occurs when the stability of our social systems and day-to-day existence is disrupted, what we term a 'social moment'. The challenge is that we need to be able to respond to the opportunity when it arises. >>



An individual recovering from a heart attack due to an unhealthy lifestyle has an opportunity to change habits. But do they respond to this incentive or carry on as before? A community reeling from a spate of muggings of older people has an opportunity to mobilise collective action. Does this challenge the community's values sufficiently to lead to action or do they ignore the problem? An organisation responding to acute service failure has an opportunity to reform. Does new leadership use their authority to drive change or turn a blind eye?

Social moments are the point at which the existing balance between the power of the individual, the community and the hierarchy can be shifted to a new equilibrium. It does not require a perfect plan; it does mean that in many instances we need to take a risk, to step out into the unknown and respond to what we find. To read and react positively to these moments, in our own lives, in our communities, in our institutions, is to be entrepreneurial. This is not easy within public services, as businessman and politician Michael Bloomberg notes: "In medicine, or in science, [if] you go down a path and it turns out to be a dead end, you really made a contribution, because we know we don't have to go down that path again. In the press, they call it failure. And so people are unwilling to innovate, unwilling to take risks in government."

There are therefore fundamental barriers to the long-term adoption of innovation and different modes of working. They form an 'immunity to change', a term coined by Harvard professor Robert Kegan, which arises when institutional norms and systems combine to ensure that the status quo is maintained. Analysis of the systems that sit beneath cultural norms reveals further barriers, such as procurement rules, incentives, contractual arrangements or individual status. Those seeking to make change from within the system need resilience and emotional strength to counter this immune response.

The 2016 film *Hidden Figures* tells the story of Dorothy Vaughan, who worked at NASA in the 1960s as the space agency attempted to get a human into space and safely back again. She ran the computational team, which was likely to be disbanded when a new IBM mainframe computer was installed to do their work. But rather than see this change as a threat, she got hold of a book on Fortran programming, first teaching herself, then her team, how to use the computer. By the time NASA realised it needed people to program and operate the computer, her team were ready to embrace the opportunity. She had the individual agency to act, was able to mobilise her team, fostering a sense of group solidarity such that they were ready to respond when the

## **“CITIZENS ARE SEEN AS ACTIVE CO-CREATORS AND PROBLEM SOLVERS”**

NASA hierarchy realised they needed people that could actually program the computer. She clearly saw the opportunity in the new paradigm rather than fighting to preserve the old one.

We see that achieving social change needs people who are empowered, persistent and flexible. They need to work as part of a collaborative, iterative and responsive process, not one that proceeds in an orderly, linear, staged fashion with a defined start and end point. Their ability to react to an opportunity to tackle an issue that was not on the radar, but that was important nonetheless, is pure entrepreneurialism. Where they are able to align actions by individuals, groups and hierarchies in response to the social moment, they are most likely to achieve change that improves people’s lives and the communities in which they live. Anticipating, spotting, and reacting to opportunities when they arise is what we mean when we talk about the need to ‘act like an entrepreneur’.

### **FUTURE ACTION**

The RSA’s work is based on the belief that when we think about the pursuit of progressive social change, we should care as much about *how* we achieve that change as about the goals we pursue. Making change in systems as complex as, for example, health and social care may seem insurmountable. Indeed, attempts to change complex systems at scale are where some of the greatest failings in policy have played out in the past. Concluding his Nobel speech, economist Friedrich Hayek warned: “If man is not to do more harm than good in his efforts to improve the social order, he will have to learn that in this, as in all other fields where essential complexity of an organised kind prevails, he cannot acquire the full knowledge which would make mastery of the events possible.”

Cause for optimism can be found in those places where we see new types of public administration starting to emerge, partly as a response to the failure of the old paradigm, and despite (or perhaps because of) the ongoing period of fiscal austerity. These institutions act as a convener and catalyst for change rather than administering top-down change, where individuals act with a humility that recognises they are only one part of a broader picture. As the RSA highlighted in last year’s *Changing the Narrative* report, these local authorities are making the shift towards new models of governance, supporting local communities to meet their needs, where citizens are seen as active co-creators and problem-solvers rather than passive consumers. Yet these changes are often slow and too reliant on those public servants who bring new skills, new approaches and a new mind-set to today’s challenges.

However we conceive of, manage and deliver public services, we need to understand and appreciate the wider systemic perspective in order to be responsive to local needs and context. We do not expect – nor advise – anyone to take on grand societal challenges in their entirety. Instead, we would rather see people, teams and organisations develop an ability to identify opportunities for change and a capacity to react nimbly to them, rapidly prototyping and deploying possible responses. This is what we call the ‘think like a system, act like an entrepreneur’ mind-set. It is an approach that we will be further testing and developing in an emerging RSA programme of work. It is, at its simplest, a practical theory of how to achieve change in a complex and uncertain world, something we believe is needed now more than ever. ■

### **FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION A PROBLEM SHARED**

Technology is unlocking efficiency in public service delivery thanks to innovative software. Talk Reflection, an app that enables social care professionals to share their working experiences, is one of the more recent developments in this field.

RSA Fellow Lydia Hirst has been trialling the app as part of an organisational behaviour study at Birkbeck, University of London. So far, the various benefits have related to experiential learning. “There were benefits in the sharing of experiences,” she explains. “The comments that people got from other members of the group led to new solutions and better practice.

“The care managers also found that people who were sick or having days off were able to come back in and catch up very quickly. And we saw that carers were able to give each other more support when working at isolated hours.”

Based on the initial trials, Lydia thinks there’s a possibility that collaborative reflection leads to greater job satisfaction. “I can see the potential for it. Carers that feel they can make a difference and can come up with new ideas will, I think, gain greater job satisfaction. But I don’t have real evidence yet – we’ll need to show that,” she says.

The project, which received a £2,000 RSA Catalyst grant, is now undertaking a longer, six-month trial. Lydia is currently looking for further funding to help with technology changes.

■ To get involved, email [lydia@lhconsulting.uk.com](mailto:lydia@lhconsulting.uk.com)

# IN PURSUIT OF WELLBEING

*Government decisions based on quality of life and behavioural insights would provide the efficiency savings we badly need*

by Gus O'Donnell  
 @Gus\_ODonnell

When David Cameron became prime minister in 2010 he announced two potentially revolutionary changes. First, he defined government success as raising the quality of life, or wellbeing, of the people. Second, he wanted government to engage with people in ways that helped them change their behaviour in order to raise their own wellbeing. I always saw these two initiatives as intimately linked. The role of the Behavioural Insights Team, inevitably dubbed the 'Nudge Unit', was to develop ways of raising wellbeing based on a better understanding of how real people, with all their faults and foibles, made decisions. Both changes were necessary, particularly as he inherited a deficit of over 10% of GDP and needed efficient ways of maintaining public services while cutting spending.

But despite the efforts of David Halpern, the head of the unit, this connection between the two never permeated government as a whole. Nudge policies had their triumphs: they got people back to work faster, encouraged them to pay tax on time, and improved student grades. But departments were hesitant to apply these tools – or any other tools, for that matter – to boosting wellbeing per se.

Yet the need for these linked revolutions is as great as ever. It is clear that the UK's public finances will not be in surplus any time soon. We will still be in deficit by the time of the next election, now pencilled in for 2022.

This is not, to be fair, for lack of trying. But the struggle to repair our fiscal fortunes has been extended by disappointing economic growth, which forecasts suggest is likely to slow still further. So we face the continuing, worsening challenge of meeting ever-rising demand out of much smaller increases in tax revenues. How can we create a benign square out of this vicious circle?

One option, of course, is to increase taxation. But taxable capacity is limited, with a historically high proportion of total revenue coming from the highest paid already. Another option is to increase borrowing. But while there are good arguments for increasing infrastructure investment to support growth, letting go of the deficit to finance current public services risks descent into a financing crisis at a time when the UK can least afford one.

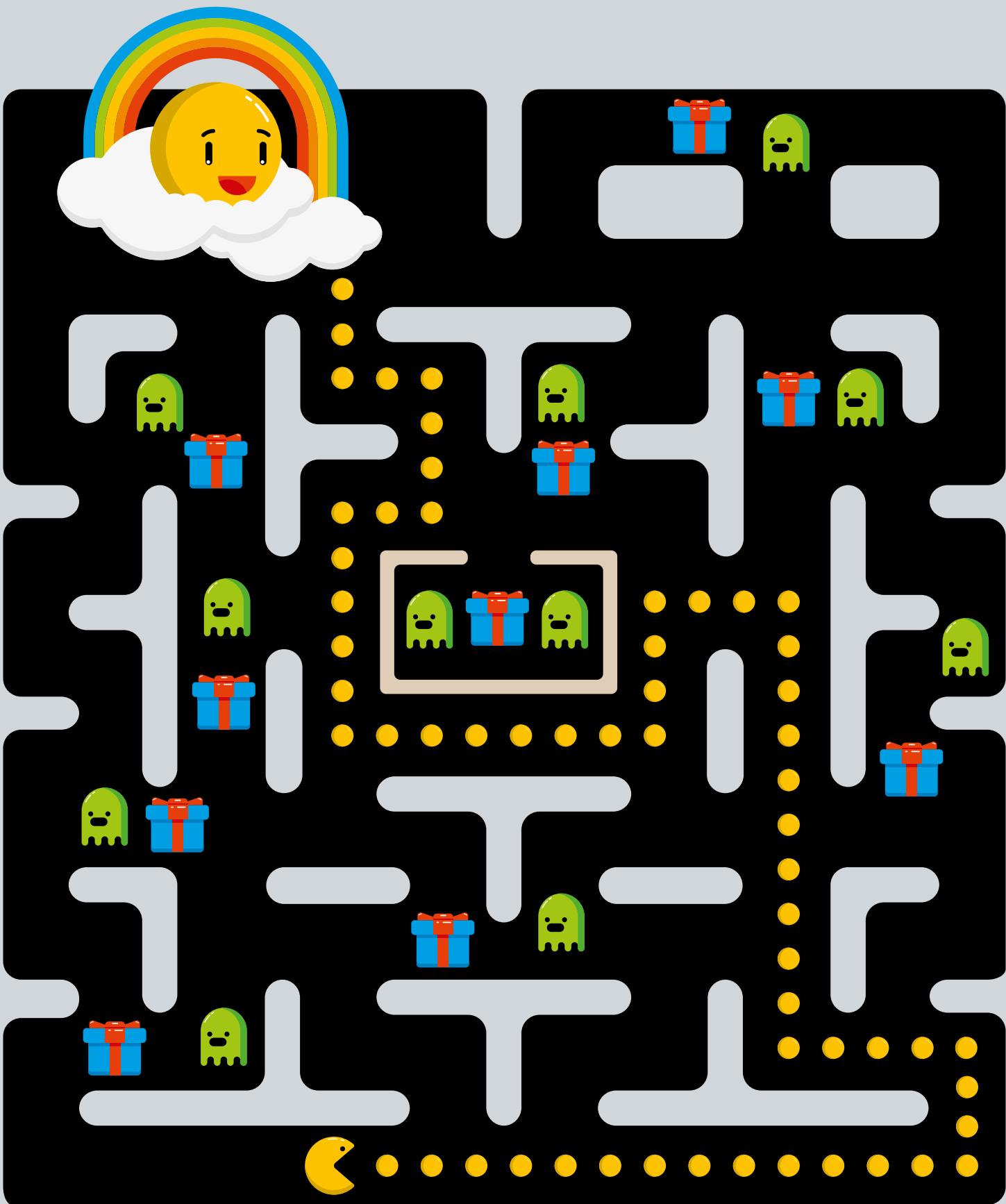
A third option is to increase productivity in public services. But some ambitious efficiency targets are already built into budgets, on a scale that (in the health service, for example) exceed anything that has been achieved historically, coming as they do on top of the savings that have already been made.

Efficiency is measured by relating inputs to outcomes. Inputs are relatively easy to count: they are the financial costs of public programmes. But measuring outcomes is much harder. How do we best assess whether a public service is 'better' or 'worse'?

This is where the wellbeing lens makes an enormous difference. It could provide a much clearer, more coherent view of the trade-offs that have to be made in allotting taxpayers' money to public programmes.

Let's take a few examples. Start with the biggest spending pressure cooker: health. To maximise the impact of expenditure on wellbeing, the budget should be rebalanced to give more to mental health services and less to building (and keeping open) general hospitals. In education, it would mean measuring the wellbeing of our children with the same rigour that we assess academic achievement. For older people, it would mean giving priority to programmes designed to keep them out of hospital. And it should place a barrier before the kind of practice rightly condemned by the most senior judge in the Family Division of the High Court, of driving elderly couples out of their own homes on 'health and safety' grounds, only to separate them when they are placed in 'care'. 

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 AND 2011



## **“POLICIES ARE MADE FOR HUMANS, AND SHOULD ALLOW FOR THEIR HUMANITY”**

These few examples illustrate the difficulties as well as the opportunities, since a shortage of hospital beds, a decline in academic attainment or an uptick in accidents in the homes of the elderly would inevitably cause an outcry. But it would throw the spotlight on some particularly poorly targeted areas of spending, such as the pensioners' winter fuel allowance, which costs over £2bn each year.

### **REALITY CHECK**

A focus on wellbeing should lead to better outcomes, but only if we can also improve the way programmes are delivered. In the past, we have tended to ignore the fact that policies are made for humans, and should allow for their humanity. Real people make mistakes, regret earlier decisions and at times need help, in all sorts of different ways. This is where policymakers' growing understanding of behavioural economics should kick in.

Its basic message is very simple: focus on what people actually do, rather than theorise about how you might expect them to behave. This means listening to them, but remembering that actions speak louder than words. Do juicy tax reliefs persuade everyone to save? No. So enrol them automatically in a pensions programme. If you do not want to be heavy-handed, let them opt out, but make it the default option, and see if that works.

Allowing people to learn from their mistakes is good, for both human freedom and the public purse: it reduces dependency and helps people take better decisions for themselves. But some errors (like failing to save anything until you're too old to earn) cannot be reversed. Then an early ‘nudge’ is justified, its sharpness depending on the necessity of action. And it has proved successful in spreading the habit of saving for retirement into groups uninspired by tax reliefs alone.

The Nudge Unit has chalked up numerous other successes. Some followed better (behaviourally sensitive) language in official communications. A minor change in the wording of a letter to people who owed tax demonstrated effectively how emphasising social norms could speed up payment. Similarly, the unit found that jobseekers were nearly twice as likely to turn up for a job fair if the text from the job centre used their names, and nearly three times as likely if the person sending the text added ‘good luck’.

The point is not that nudges are small tweaks, delivering incremental change, but that they work from the big understanding that officialdom is dealing with humans, not robots; an understanding the commercial world was quicker to reach than the public sector. This, in turn, explains why behavioural economics and a focus on wellbeing are so closely connected. The second revolution, however, has proved much harder to bring about.

Scepticism runs deep, fed by the inbred Treasury suspicion that such ideas are always an excuse to spend more, never a reason to spend less. And this combined within government with a reluctance to move away from the discipline of a monetary calculus. If, in short, quality of life – or wellbeing – were to be the policy success measure, we would need to find a way of measuring it.

The alarmingly simple solution was to ask people about their own wellbeing, and so the Cabinet Office asked the Office for National Statistics to start collecting subjective data. While we still have not done so for long enough to smooth out cyclical effects, this was a huge step forward.

### **THE MEASURE OF IT**

Subjective data need careful analysis, but without them we are blind, or at best only partially sighted as to the impact of policy on wellbeing. Just looking at life expectancy, for example, leaves us in the dark about the quality of life. None of our ‘objective’ data sources picks up the effect on wellbeing of factors such as loneliness or unemployment.

As the new, subjective sources of information matured, we began to experiment with their application to policy. The chief problem we encountered, and which I underestimated, was not that nothing of the kind was being done already – it was being done quite exhaustively – but that often the wrong measures were being used.

All major investment projects, for example, are (or should be) launched after a cost-benefit study, using the Treasury's Green Book as the methodological bible. All other policies are supposed to be accompanied by similar ‘impact analyses’. The traditional coinage for these calculations was exactly that: money. Rarely do calculations of the benefits side take full account of the distributional effects, which may change the wellbeing calculus a lot. To take the example of the winter fuel allowance again, an informed wellbeing calculus might encourage us to concentrate much of the £2bn on the poorest



pensioners, using the rest to reduce isolation and loneliness among all of the elderly. Indeed, the Conservative manifesto contains a commitment to means test the allowance in some way and use the proceeds to fund social care.

More broadly, the pursuit of wellbeing using behavioural techniques would lead to a massive switch in spending towards prevention and away from cure. Starting young, if we measured and targeted the wellbeing and resilience of our children at schools, our chances of having less remedial work to do with them in later life – through the courts, mental hospitals and social services – would be greatly enhanced. But the Treasury, case-hardened towards spend now, save later pleas, will take some convincing.

### A NICE APPROACH

There is, however, one example that should encourage Whitehall's purse-minders. Perhaps the only wholehearted adoption of a wellbeing approach has sprung from a desire to take the politics out of very difficult decisions. For years NICE has been deciding which drugs can be afforded on the basis of their addition to quality-adjusted life-years (QALYs). Within certain parameters, this practice is widely accepted, and has acted as a brake on spending as well as a consistent way of making tough trade-offs. Using QALYs would also have avoided the debacle of the Cancer Drug Fund, whereby a popular election pledge resulted in £1.27bn in spending on treatments outside the purview of NICE that later proved to be largely unbeneficial.

We should go further with the QALY process, applying it to the politically difficult business of deciding which hospitals should be closed. Perhaps the prime minister may see the opportunity to deploy QALY analysis. It would be worthwhile to study precisely how NICE managed to change the way things are done. And a wellbeing approach would help inform a much better debate on assisted dying.

An even more radical approach would be to take a helicopter look at the impact on wellbeing of everything government does, and how it is organised departmentally. Some landmarks will stand out, not all of them what the sceptics might expect. For example, the subjective data show that security is fundamental to wellbeing, so defence would remain a priority. The connections between health and social care would become even more apparent, as would the nonsense of thinking separately about tax and benefits.

Taking stock today, it is fair to say we have the tools of a revolution, but need the impetus. Data on wellbeing are building up, to the point where they can meet the need for rigorous analysis. Indeed, it has now been incorporated into the Treasury's Green Book, validating its use in cost-benefit analysis. Its advocates must make it clear that it is not a soft option: departments will still have to make policy choices within an overall spending constraint. But politicians, who instinctively prefer their own calculus of trade-offs to the discipline of such analysis, are the most difficult to convert of all. It would be a great pity if the start made by David Cameron proves to be a wasted legacy. ■

# WORKING WELL

*Dame Carol Black, the country's leading expert on health and work, speaks to Matthew Taylor*

🐦 @DameCarolBlack

**TAYLOR:** Is the question of work and health really two distinctive agendas? One is about keeping people in work, speaking to the dire statistics on the chances of people being on incapacity benefit for the rest of their lives and the way in which their health deteriorates. Then there's a broader agenda about the workplace as a site for healthy behaviours and public health. Is that right?

**BLACK:** They're a journey. I tried very hard, and only partially succeeded, in persuading governments to turn the tap off. I couldn't understand why so much money and energy was spent on people who were very far from the workplace when so little effort was taken to stop people making this journey. Once you set off down this path, you are being given repeated medical certificates, and once you have reached, say, 20 weeks out of work, you were unlikely to be able to take the reverse journey. We, the doctors, were partly to blame, because no orthopaedic surgeon says to the patient in front of them, "Now, before we do this operation, can I check what your job is, and what's your rehabilitation going to be after the surgery." As medics, we concentrate entirely on diagnosis and treatment. But people enter the benefit system and become sicker, they become deconditioned and deskilled. If you get repeated fit notes or sick notes, you get used to sitting at home; your social world closes in on you; you don't do very much, so you're not physically active either.

**TAYLOR:** There are three ways in which you can intervene in that process. One is health in the workplace when people start to develop conditions; their work can be adapted, for example. The second is to do with the healthcare system and the degree to which that cares about people

getting back into work post-treatment. The third is, of course, the benefit system. Most people seem to identify conditionality in the benefit system as critical: fit for work tests, and so on, which have become highly controversial. Do we need to intervene in all these stages and have we only done work at the final stage?

**BLACK:** A great deal of effort and energy has gone into the running of an ever-increasing benefit system. I want employers to really make their workplaces places that encourage health; places that encourage you to be fitter; to make sure there's good nutrition there for you; to make sure that if you want to give up smoking, there's encouragement, and the possibility of help to do that.

I call it 'total worker health', and I'm really borrowing that from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in the US. The concept is that you pay attention towards the things that the Health and Safety Executive [the national watchdog for work-related health and safety] are interested in. But then, you must have excellent leadership that cares rather than ticks the box. People pay lip service to board engagement, but the best companies I've seen doing this have somebody on the board whose responsibility it is to take an interest in the health and wellbeing of the staff. Probably the most important thing is line manager training, because if you're not well managed, if you're not provided with good work, if your manager doesn't really know you and won't listen to you, and if you don't trust them, you're not going to be happy at work. I would get that right first and then I would, in addition, provide the bicycle schemes, the good food and so on, but these things will not work if you've got a toxic workplace.

**TAYLOR:** Do employers, on the whole, understand the components of wellbeing at work sufficiently? 

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WAS NATIONAL  
DIRECTOR FOR  
HEALTH AND  
WORK 2006-12





**BLACK:** There are many, particularly the big companies, that now increasingly get this. I'm really pleased to see that NHS England now has a programme that includes some of the things I've just mentioned. But it starts with leadership, line managers, their attention to musculoskeletal and mental health. You could really have about six or seven things that, if companies and organisations put into practice, would probably make a difference.

**TAYLOR:** One of the things that we're seeing is more and more people working post-pension. That is something that we should be delighted about because we know that one of the challenges as we get older is isolation, depression and a sense of not having a role in society. So it's great that more older people are doing more work, and that we've got more flexible forms of employment for them to undertake. Is there more that we should be doing, around this question of how it is we encourage people to work, not five days a week, not intensively, but to carry on working until they really can't do it any more?

**BLACK:** We've got to change the culture and the attitude. We're almost a society that thinks that when you get older, you get less physically mobile. You'll find people saying, "Oh well, I'll take the lift and not the stairs, because you know I'm getting older!" And I feel like saying, "Well, you should take

the stairs, because that would do you more good!" We equate getting older with loss of function, and it really irritates me. Of course, there are some physiological changes, but if you stay active, and are engaged, you can at least reduce them.

**TAYLOR:** Now we've got rid of the mandatory age of retirement, and you can carry on working, you're not allowed to get rid of somebody just because of their age. Will the ageing of the workforce be something that helps us to focus better on health? If we've got these older workers then we need them to be productive; to see coping with changing health status not as something you have to do occasionally because everything has gone wrong, but just as a day-to-day part of getting the best out of people?

**BLACK:** We have to make sure older people understand that they can do a lot for themselves; again, things like their nutrition, their weight and whether or not they're smoking. I've been to too many old people's homes where they get people up, and they sit them round the room in chairs, and they sit there for the rest of the day, they don't necessarily communicate. Many, many old people could contribute by, perhaps, volunteering, or, as you say, doing a small job, but being part of something. And having a purpose, and feeling valued.

## **“YOU MUST HAVE LEADERSHIP THAT CARES RATHER THAN TICKS THE BOX”**

**TAYLOR:** You recently published a review on links between work and addiction. What aspects do you hope the government will take notice of?

**BLACK:** How we get people who are in the benefit system, who are addicted, back on the road to work. These addictions are like chronic diseases. I considered these people as having a condition, not being weak minded, which some people would say they are. And when I talked to them, I would ask them what did they want, even though it may seem a long way away? And they nearly all said in one way or another the same thing: they wanted a home and preferably a home away from their friends, the community in which they'd become addicted, if they were in treatment. They wanted work, and they wanted to be valued; they didn't want to be given dreadful work just because they'd been addicted. They wanted a partner and if possible children. And you realised these people just want what you and I want.

**TAYLOR:** Is the order of intervention wrong? The assumption is you've got to cure the addiction, and then people can lead a normal life. But is it actually if they were leading a more normal life, it would be easier to cure the addiction?

**BLACK:** One of the major recommendations of the review is, don't just start people in treatment and get them clean; start with a caseworker or employment adviser who takes them on the journey of: “Okay, you're in treatment, but now let's talk about the sort of work or volunteering you might do.” So, by the time they come out, they have got a purpose. Because what people told me is that when they get clean, it can be a black hole, as they've got nothing to do. There is little point in just giving them clinical treatment without attending to the things that are going to make it possible for them to stay clean. And the two important things are a house and then work.

**TAYLOR:** As an employer at the RSA, if someone said to me, “Would you take someone on who has recently overcome addiction, but for whom addiction will always be an issue?” I would be inclined to say yes, but I'd want to know there was somebody I could contact, if that person ran into difficulties.

**BLACK:** Again that was one of our recommendations. Many employers told us they would be willing to consider it, but

they wanted it de-risked and by this they didn't mean money, but a person on the end of a phone, a caseworker, someone who would immediately come in and be supportive and stop the wobble.

**TAYLOR:** Now that 15% of the workforce is self-employed, do we need to think about this growing group and their health? On the one hand, self-employment offers opportunities for people to work in very flexible ways, people maybe with mental health issues, who need to have quite a lot of control over their work, so that they know when they can work intensely, and other times when they need to step away a bit. On the other hand, many lack support mechanisms and often their margins are very, very small. One opportunity may be platforms that connect self-employed people up, where they can talk to each other, buy services together and get provision together?

**BLACK:** It is a real challenge, because many don't think they need to pay any attention to their health. I have tried to think about how you might help them; things like apps, cognitive behavioural therapy online and so on, but we need first to get them to want to be interested. A lot of people who freelance do get sick and struggle, and I suspect quite a lot are really sick before they give up. This area needs a lot more work.

**TAYLOR:** What has advising governments and trying to influence policy on workplace health taught you about how to make a difference? Is it about the relationship with individual politicians? Is it quality of the policy? Is it luck? There are things that you've done that made an impact, and others that didn't have the impact you wanted.

**BLACK:** It's a mixture of all three of those elements, because timing is crucial. Having good relationships is important, but not only with the politicians. What has been crucial to me is the relationship with the civil servants who support you. But the thing I most learnt is the need to be patient. I'm pretty persistent in holding on to my recommendations, nudging policymakers and officials and discussing things with them. But joining this up can be difficult because each department has its own trajectory. I used to try and be the bridge, to go and see people, talk to them and try and get us all in a room. Relationships are probably the thing that allows you to make some progress. ■

# IMPOLITE SOCIETY

*Swearing is often misread as simple vulgarity, but scientific research is revealing more profound reasons for using taboo words*

by Dr Emma Byrne  
🐦 @SciWriBy

**I**t's not big, and it's not clever, or so we tell our children. It's not real language, more akin to an animal's howl of pain than the soliloquies of Shakespeare, or so linguists like Steven Pinker insist. But research increasingly shows that our beliefs about bad language are misguided. If you have ever wondered whether there is more to profanity than a frustrated or feeble mind, read on, but beware: there will be swearing.

When I first became interested in the neurological, psychological, and sociological research into swearing, I was struck by two things: first, almost every paper written on the subject of swearing boldly claims that its authors are the only academics prepared to take on the taboo topic of bad language. Second, very few of the papers ever clearly define swearing, preferring instead a hand-waving, 'you know it when you hear it' definition. That is probably because swearing is a slippery beast, wide-ranging in its applications and constantly reinventing itself. Any attempt at an extensional definition of swearing is doomed to fail: a list of swear words made today will be obsolete in a generation or less.

As a result, if we want to know what constitutes swearing, it is never a case of simply looking up words in the dictionary. For a start, many lexicographers throughout history have been prudish about including any terms that had even a whiff of vulgarity.

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In the Victorian era, the Oxford English Dictionary suggested the word ‘ineffables’ be used instead of ‘trousers’, which was shocking to 19th-century readers, and well into the 20th century it left out ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt’. What is more, the nature of what we consider taboo has changed over time. A ‘bloody hell’ 150 years ago would be as offensive as a ‘fuck’ today. That is not a sign that we have become liberally lenient about language; there are words that were sung in the nursery rhymes of my youth that these days are almost never heard in polite society.

One of the most famously documented examples of a shift in swearing in the English language comes from Shakespeare’s plays. The earliest known editions of *Othello* and *Hamlet* contain oaths like ‘sblood’ (God’s blood) and ‘zounds’ (God’s wounds), both of which are cut completely from later editions. The changes were made in response to the Master of the Revels (a misnomer if ever there was one) deciding to use his power to clean up the stage. More recently, Vladimir Putin signed an act into law in 2014 banning from the arts and media the four main swear words that constitute the majority of Russian swearing and, as my Russian friends wryly insist, the majority of the Russian language, full stop. One of the banned words, khuy (‘cock’), is the root of over 500 other terms in the Russian language, so this is no small change. The ban also renders

jewels of Russian literature such as Alexander Pushkin’s poem *The Wagon of Life* literally unprintable.

### EMOTIONAL WORDS

But why are some words so weighty that even powerful leaders feel the urge to legislate them out of existence? Swearing is not about semantics. In the media, the doctor’s surgery and the classroom, words such as ‘sexual intercourse’ and ‘defecation’ are seen as reasonable or even necessary. Yet synonyms of those words, ‘fucking’ and ‘shit’, which refer to the same concepts, engender an entirely different emotional response. And that difference has been measured scientifically.

If you want to determine how strongly someone is experiencing an emotional response, you do not just ask them. We are remarkably bad at assessing our own emotional states, and even worse at faithfully articulating them to others. Social pressures, expectations, context and biology combine to make it almost impossible to objectively report our feelings. We know, for example, that male volunteers are much more likely to downplay their pain scores when interviewed by female scientists. In an attempt to capture an unfiltered biological measure of emotion strength, psychologists measure people’s heart rates and galvanic skin response (roughly a measure of how sweaty

## **“WE TEND TO FORGET THAT SWEARING IS SO OFTEN THE SIGN THAT SOMEONE IS IN DISTRESS”**

palmed they feel) rather than simply asking how they feel. To date, hundreds of people have volunteered to be wired up to monitors while they have swear words shown or read to them. The results are impressively consistent: the stronger a swear word, the larger the physical reaction.

There have been some ingenious modifications of these studies that have helped to shade in the picture of how we develop our ingrained emotional response to swearing. It is unlikely that ethics approval would be granted to a protocol that involves wiring up children and swearing at them. Instead, several scientists have tested emotional responses to swearing in people who learnt second languages at differing ages, from birth through to early adulthood. Consistently, those people who learned second-language swear words before adolescence show the strongest emotional responses to those words. By the time you are an adult, any new swear words that you learn fail to make the connection to the emotion-processing parts of the brain. Couple this knowledge with the fact that swearing morphs over time, and it is entirely probable that you do not have anything that remotely resembles the same emotional responses to the set of swear words that your parents found powerful, and our children will have a different set of emotionally forceful words than we do.

That inter-generational difference is part of the reason why swearing continues to be so powerful and so positive. As a social species in heaving habitats, we need a powerful set of signifiers that identify us to our ‘in-group’ and separate us from our ‘out-groups’. Despite the seemingly endless variants of the word ‘fuck’ and the 500 words based on the Russian for ‘cock’, different social groups use swearing in subtly different ways. Studies from

several English-speaking cultures, with the exception of the US and Canada, show that judiciously used swearing is an excellent tool for team cohesion and bonding. Jocular abuse of a colleague is a disarming signal, a sign that we trust the other person to take our friendly meaning, rather than retaliating with violence.

### **SIGN LANGUAGE**

Swearing is also an excellent painkiller, although we are still trying to unpick exactly how it works. When tasked with keeping their hands in ice-cold water for as long as possible, volunteers are able to stand the cold for half as long again when repeating a swear word than when repeating a neutral one. We also use swearing as a warning, a safety valve for our frustrations and a signal to our fellow humans, which manages to be almost as likely to force one’s point as coming to blows, but ultimately less harmful. In fact, this is likely to be something we have been doing since we were proto-human. When chimpanzees are taught to use sign language, and also potty trained, they internalise both the word for faeces and the taboo against it. This leads to them using their sign for excrement as an insult and an admonition when they do not get their own way. The humans studying these primates are doubtless thankful that it is only the idea of bodily waste that gets thrown around; wild chimpanzees have no compunction when it comes to expressing their disapproval using the real thing.

If swearing is so beneficial, why is it still so taboo? Part of the reason is tautological: if it is not taboo it is not swearing. In order to pack an emotional punch, swearing has to touch on those things that cause shame or fear. There is also a huge



measure of hypocrisy involved. We carry around in our heads a ‘model person’ who is rational, fair, generous, honest, diligent and wise. We come down hard on people who deviate from this model but have a tendency to forgive ourselves. “If other people swear then it’s because they are rude, uncivilised, quick-tempered, whereas when I do it, it’s a momentary aberration.”

The unfortunate downside of this hypocrisy is that we tend to forget that swearing is so often the sign that someone is in distress. From the involuntary swearing of the Tourette’s syndrome sufferer to the rote swearing of the aphasic who has been incapacitated by dementia, from the cancer sufferer masking their fear to the defiant teen unsure of their place in the world, study after study shows that our first response is to withdraw from people when they swear, when as often as not it is a sign of how much help they actually need.

#### FUTURE IMPERATIVE

I am certain that swearing has been with us as long as we have had language and taboos. Our chimpanzee cousins invented and embraced it as soon as they had the wherewithal, and it is likely

that early groups of hominids who could settle their differences with words rather than blows managed to survive better than those who physically fought. No matter what legislative efforts are made, swearing is part of who we are. You might as well try to eradicate weeping or laughter.

Swearing is a phoenix and each social change burns away old certainties and replaces them with new ones. The ‘zounds’ and ‘sblood’ of our ancestors has no power over us because we know that God will not curse us with the plague for speaking ill of Him. Our descendants will likely be amused that we ever thought that fucking and shitting – acts as universally human as breathing and eating – were ever taboo at all. Slurs based on race, ability and sexuality are the new ineffables, though who knows how long this taboo will last.

While we cannot be entirely certain how it began, we know that swearing is resilient. Just when it seems to be losing its power, we abandon the words that do not give us a sufficiently strong punch and stop using terms that a changing society has rendered unsayable. For all its capacity to cause offence, we need swearing. Its invention and reinvention are part of what makes us who we are. ■

# UNIVERSITIES' CHALLENGE

*Higher education institutions must learn to play politics or their role in civil society will be determined by public opinion and financial pressures*

by Jonathan Wolff  
► @JoWolffBSGn

**I**t may seem odd that the dry and dusty university sector receives so much attention. But here in the UK tuition fees have been a major electoral issue, so there we are: in the newspapers and on TV screens on a regular basis. Of course, those of us in the university sector will insist that we are important, but so too are primary schools, midwifery units and mental health services. It is probably because so many reporters and news editors are at an age when they want to get their children into the best possible university that their attention swings in our direction. And for many parents, whether their children are carrying on the family tradition of attending a particular Oxbridge college, or are the first in the family to enrol on a higher education course, there is great pride and ambition in smoothing the passage of your offspring into the first years of adulthood.

But the struggle for university admission encourages a fairly narrow focus on what a university is and does. Universities are judged by applicants on whether they offer the desired course, what their entry standards are, how they will look on a CV and what sort of social opportunities they offer. For most candidates, the precise nature of their academic course comes a long way down the list of priorities. Few applicants or their ►►

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## **“UNIVERSITIES OFTEN ASSUME THE ROLE OF UNOFFICIAL OPPOSITION”**

advisers are even in a good position to judge relative merits and, unless some sort of alarm bell has been set off, universities are generally trusted to provide a sound training in the chosen field.

There is, nevertheless, a deeper discussion to be had about what universities should be doing and how they should be set up to do it. In typical UK style, we have done our best to avoid the issue, but from time to time it bubbles up. For example, a few years ago a Swiss academic caused a stir on an internet philosophy discussion group by suggesting that it is important for university faculties to be composed primarily of national citizens. This, he said, was because universities have the role of “passing on national culture and values” and only home academics can do the job.

### **CULTURE SHOCK**

That same day I was at a workshop at the London School of Economics and I went out to dinner with colleagues from a number of London philosophy and politics departments, together with our workshop guests. Of the 30 or so academics at the dinner, only two were British citizens. One was to leave for Australia the following year, and I was the other, although only one of my parents and none of my great-grandparents were born in the UK. Discussions that evening revealed that no one had ever thought that our mission as academics is to pass on the national culture of the country in which we taught. Few, if any, felt equipped to do so in any case. But maybe we were doing this despite ourselves, not just in our choice of curricula and reading, but more broadly in how we have absorbed and passed on the university’s obscure rites and customs. Certainly, every university manages to generate a great deal of anxiety for new students and staff about doing things the right way.

But if not passing on the national culture, what, then, is the mission of a university? Every university has its mission statement, and at the core they are all the same: to achieve excellence in research, to produce open-minded and clear-thinking students, to foster international collaboration, and, broadly, to make the world a better place on a local, national and global level. Sociologists, though, will point out that universities play many other parts too, largely connected with reproducing themselves as the headquarters of the intellectual elite. Universities do this by restricting entry to their sacred seminar rooms, and policing

the boundaries of who is allowed to make a contribution to academic debate via the most prestigious publishing venues. This is the case even when our official policy is to widen access and overcome all forms of discrimination.

One alleged form of discrimination, however, is even more of a taboo than others. There have always been rumblings about left and liberal bias in the academy, but the pitch is rising. Anecdotally, the association is overwhelming. In many UK humanities and social science departments you will be hard pressed to find a single academic who votes Conservative. In other areas the picture is little more mixed, but hardly representative of national trends. Is this the result of self-selection or bias? Probably a bit of both. Those known for their right-wing views may well be less likely to be called for interview or to survive the process. Knowing their likely prospects, others may exit academia at an early stage. One study from the US suggests some bias in hiring decisions, claiming to show that “even after taking into account the effects of professional accomplishment, along with many other individual characteristics, conservatives and Republicans teach at lower quality schools than do liberals and Democrats. This suggests that complaints of ideologically based discrimination in academic advancement deserve serious consideration and further study.”

If it is true that universities should have a key role in passing on the national culture, it is natural to think that, politically, they should reflect the culture in which they reside. As they are currently composed, universities, although largely state funded, often assume the role of unofficial opposition, most often from a left-liberal perspective, whatever the current ideological makeup of the government. Miraculously, most governments around the world have been prepared to grin and bear it, respecting academic freedom and not wishing to intervene. But with an authoritarian political wave sweeping across the world, from China to the US, things are already changing. Chinese colleagues report that they are now less free to teach western ideas than they were just a few years ago. But the greatest attack on universities at the moment seems to be in Turkey, where there has been a purge of academics alleged to have been complicit in the attempted coup. If they really were part of a plot, it must have been one of the swiftest forming and most secret large-scale conspiracies known



to history. In any case, opponents of President Erdogan are being removed from potentially influential positions.

The danger, then, of seeing universities as having a primary role in passing on, or at least protecting, the national culture, is that it gives governments licence to intervene when they believe this is not happening. Yet, equally, creating a university that floats free of national culture has its dangers. We see this in the predicament of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, which was initially funded by investor and philanthropist George Soros. Founded to attract postgraduate students from a wide range of countries, particularly in central and eastern Europe, it has one of the highest proportions of overseas students in the world. But new Hungarian legislation on higher education will make it impossible for the CEU to operate in the country, according to the university, which believes it is being deliberately targeted. One wonders, though, whether this assault would have happened, or at least in the same way, if the Hungarian political elite aspired to send their children to the CEU for their undergraduate education.

UK universities, especially those in London, also figure very highly in terms of international student recruitment, at least for the time being. Five of the world's top 10 most international universities are in London. But it has not always been so. I was

an undergraduate in London in the early 1980s, in a cohort of 40 philosophy students. Among us was one ex-pat Italian – the daughter of a pilot based in London – and one mature American student, but everyone else was British, almost all from the south of England. In contrast, the student body now at many UK universities is truly international.

It is probably a combination of three factors that has led us here. First, there is simply a desire by many universities to attract the brightest and best from all around the world, to invigorate the classroom and lab. Second, there is a falling demographic of 18-year-olds in the UK and this trend will not be reversed for several years. The continuing expansion of the higher education sector simply would not have been possible without a large number of overseas students. Third, of course, international students are needed for financial reasons. Many people regard the standard fee level for home and, for the time being, EU students, as scandalously high, at up to £9,000 per year. But for comparison, private schools that really do reproduce an idea of the national culture charge an average of between £15,500 and £26,000 a year for a day pupil. By this standard it is hard to see how universities can survive on £9,000 per student, and, by and large, they cannot. To offer UK students >>

## **“REDUCING INTERNATIONAL NUMBERS WOULD MAKE A UNIVERSITY SEEM PAROCHIAL”**

the education they expect, cross-subsidy from high-paying international students is now essential.

It is this level of dependence that makes Brexit and the proposed reduction in the numbers of international students such a financial threat to UK universities. When she was home secretary, Theresa May suggested that universities need to develop business models that are not so dependent on overseas students. This is rather like telling political parties to develop platforms that are not so dependent on votes (although for some political parties that does seem to be the current reality). The only apparent way to do this is to cut costs, and given that for universities the most significant costs are staff and space, going down this route is a short-cut to mediocrity, with more staff on part-time contracts with no time for research, and increasingly crowded classrooms.

### **INTERNATIONAL STANDARD**

We have, therefore, a precarious balance. In almost all cases, the majority of staff and students at UK universities are domestic, although virtually all institutions have a significant international presence too. So what is the right proportion? In today’s world, reducing international numbers would make a university seem parochial and stale, not to mention financially weak. Yet, increasing international numbers can detach universities from their national base and cut off local support. In pragmatic terms, a steady flow of home undergraduates is needed to help make opinion formers and voters care about universities. But to make universities worth caring about, they need to be international in outlook.

For university staff, however, the most significant recent change in universities is what they see as rising managerialism and an even greater concern for university finances. In the UK, university management has rarely been popular with staff, and there is now a widespread belief that pressure on academic staff is running at unprecedented and unsustainable levels. Once upon a time, it is thought, there was a golden age with generous government finance, low student numbers, no evaluation of teaching, no assessment of research, and every day a real lunch break accompanied by a glass of wine or two to set you up for the afternoon. Yet, at best, this is a highly selective memory. Looking through department files over the decades, each year there are letters referring to unexpected financial strain through a change in funding formulae,

exceptional costs, and the need to make cuts. Every university finance spreadsheet I have ever seen suggests that this year and next year will be tough, but in year three our scrimping, saving, dedication and planning will reap rich dividends. In 30 years in higher education, I am yet to reach year three.

However, despite continuity of strain, there is something new in university finances. With the increased reliance on fees and reduced direct government investment, next year’s income for any university is far less secure than it has been in previous decades. This difference, rarely properly explained to staff, is at least in part behind the pressure at many universities to run a significant operating surplus and build up reserves. A decline in student numbers, especially high-fee masters students, where the numbers are very volatile, can put a university into a financial tailspin. Money in the bank is needed simply to guarantee that salaries can be paid for a few months.

Yet, with a proposed cap on international student visas designed to reduce net immigration figures, a financial shock seems to be what the government is planning for the sector. Of course, after a couple of years the immigration numbers will stabilise at a lower level and net immigration will stop falling. Yet the harm to universities will be permanent. I have not seen detailed plans for the proposed policy, but one possible outcome is that the Russell Group of top universities will soak up the bulk of the permitted international students and, where they have unfilled capacity on courses, will accept more home students, dropping entry standards where necessary. This will leave universities further down the league tables very vulnerable, with the real possibility of closure for some newer institutions.

Many of these are located in economically struggling regions of the country, where they are a significant local employer. And, of course, the newer universities are home to many of the most radical academics, who are most critical of government policy. These universities also have the highest concentration of ethnic minority staff and students. Hence, one possible consequence of reducing international student numbers will be to take the critical edge off the university sector, reversing the admittedly meagre achievements made in recent decades. And this, of course, is how indirect discrimination often works. Not by overt government policy, as in Turkey or Hungary, but by the apparently unintended,



but welcomed, consequence of policies selected for other reasons. Conspiracy theory can be overdone, but incidental effects can sometimes be very useful in achieving wished-for goals.

#### COMMON PURPOSE

What, then, can we expect for higher education in the UK in the coming decade? Universities in the middle of expansion plans premised on increased overseas student numbers will lobby furiously against student number caps, while quietly seeking out a plan B of retrenchment. Financial pressure will turn a screw many wrongly claim cannot be turned any further. Universities, in their role of employers, will continue to be squeezed between their progressive aspirations and the regressive reality forced on them by financial pragmatics. And ideologically, it is hard to see anything but the intensification of criticism of government policy. But it is also hard to see the government taking very much notice, other than by inventing new ways to undermine the security, authority and credibility of the sector.

If that is what we can expect, what should we hope and lobby for? The reason university mission statements – emphasising the pursuit of excellence in research, teaching and public engagement – are all the same is because these are the goals that universities

must aim at if they are to be worthy of the name. Both universities and the government must support staff and students so that they can achieve their best work. Researchers should be allowed to follow their ideas wherever they lead, and students should be prepared not just for the job market, but to take their place in civil society. This means that the government must exercise restraint in any temptation to bend universities to its own agenda. It must help secure access to international sources of research funding, as well as maintain significant flows of international staff and students. It should also sort out the mess of undergraduate tuition fees, which, with the recently announced retrospective change to interest rates, could become the UK's next financial mis-selling scandal, draining confidence from both the government and the universities. And many universities need to do much more to embed themselves in their local community, for mutual benefit.

The American political philosopher John Rawls said that while the politician plans for the next election, the statesperson plans for the next generation. We need statespeople at the helm of higher education, but in the meantime, universities, not just in the UK but the world over, have to learn how to be better at politics. ■

*This Journal went to press before the UK general election.*



# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

*The UK criminal justice system has swung from one guided by personal context to one mandated by objectivity. Have we got the balance right?*

by Pamela Dow

Jane Austen died 200 years ago this year. Like many, I watched the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* at an impressionable age, finding lifelong friends in its heroines and others in her fine canon. Only later did I become aware of the felon in Jane Austen's family.

On 8 August 1799, Jane Leigh-Perrot, Austen's aunt and her sometime host and chaperone in Bath, was accused of stealing lace worth £1 from a millinery shop. This was four times the sum of five shillings, theft of which value carried the death sentence. Jane's aunt said she had made a mistake; the shop clerk testified differently. She was arrested on a charge of grand theft, refused bail and committed to prison. As a rich, respectable woman, it was unlikely that Jane Leigh-Perrot would have been sentenced to death if found guilty but the alternatives were grim: branding or transportation to Australia for forced labour. Her social standing did allow her to stay in the house of the prison keeper in Ilchester while awaiting trial, rather than in a cell, and her devoted husband James was allowed to stay with her.

PAMELA DOW IS CHIEF REFORM OFFICER AT CATCH 22 AND HAS A DECADE'S EXPERIENCE OF JUSTICE AND EDUCATION REFORM AT SENIOR WHITEHALL LEVEL

Having heard Leigh-Perrot's testimony and character references from friends, the jury took 10 minutes to find her not guilty. We can speculate what may have happened to someone less refined than Jane Austen's aunt. For, in practice, criminal justice in 1799 owed more to *sensibility* than *sense*. Punishments reflected subjective context: social status, prejudice, community values, compassion and experience. This was rational and explicable at this time. Apart from London's Bow Street Runners, there was no organised police force. Capture and prosecution was left to victims, vigilantes and parish constables (usually volunteers). Maintaining law and order depended on harsh deterrence: 200 offences carried the death penalty.

The local judiciary had great latitude. Juries might conclude that stolen goods had been over-priced in the first place and reduce their value below the five-shilling threshold. Sentencing was shaped by a judge's personal view of desert, and the suitability of barbaric punishment. Appeals were common: 35,000 death sentences were handed down between 1770 and 1830 in England and Wales but only 7,000 executions took place. A victory, then, for sensibility, for nuance and humanity, but *not* for fairness, national consistency or progressive

values like equality before the law. Certainly not a victory for empiricism or evidence-based policymaking.

Criminal justice in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was notable for reasons other than this minor celebrity ‘lace collar crime’. The 1779 Penitentiary Act, drafted by John Howard, introduced state prisons for the first time. Fewer people were branded, transported to Australia or executed, and between 1770 and 1830 the prison population doubled. The end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st saw a similar significant increase.

Today, more than half of all sentences accounting for our prison population of 85,000 are for either drugs, violence against the person, or sex offences. These are all crimes over which the police, Crown Prosecution Service, courts and parole boards have very little latitude.

We can characterise the trajectory of criminal justice since the Penitentiary Act as the triumph of sense over sensibility: of consistent national training and standards, predictive analytics, forensic science and sentencing guidelines. Measuring performance and collecting data mean ‘outliers’ could be identified and corrected and, through law, codified in policy and rigidly applied.

As rational agents, this appeals. ‘Postcode lotteries’ are difficult to defend in health and education but the idea that the same crime could be committed, or not committed, in Lancashire and Dorset with different outcomes seems abhorrent. We want objectivity – the triumph of sense – to prevail over the subjective sensibilities of prosecutors and police officers.

Or do we? We have all felt the frustration of dealing with the machinery of bureaucracy, and watched fellow citizens act unthinkingly (at best) because ‘the system’ will not let them do otherwise. We recognise the increasingly transactional, bureaucratic, disempowering, risk-averse nature of many public services.

Let us imagine a 2017 version of Jane Leigh-Perrot: well-off, probably a bit bored, depressed, possibly a kleptomaniac, possibly addicted to alcohol or drugs. A prison sentence is unlikely to be the right punishment. Not because Jane is posh but because there are better ways of keeping society safe and fair, and making her pay for her crime. A restorative justice programme might have her work in the hat shop for a few months under close supervision, combining visible punishment with the opportunity to build social capital and make a purposeful contribution. A problem-solving court might hand down a conditional sentence involving mandatory addiction intervention and judicial monitoring. These measures are often cheaper than custody while also ensuring justice is being done, seen to be done, and done well.

Too often the reformers leading these innovative approaches and others like them do so in spite of the system rather than because of it, asking ‘forgiveness not permission’. They should not have to do either.

Over the past two decades, a compelling body of work has been assembled, providing evidence and instruction for successful public service improvement defined by sense and sensibility. People like Professor Julian le Grand, Sir Michael

## “WE WANT A MORE HUMAN PUBLIC SERVICE”

Barber, the RSA’s own Matthew Taylor and many others all point to a mutually dependent set of common factors for reform. First, devolution and autonomy. This need not only mean a transfer of power from Whitehall to City Hall, but far more diverse and ambitious devolution of decision-making to highly performing and accountable civic institutions. Second, a relational, not transactional, approach to the workforce. Higher regard, investment and status for frontline staff, not only remuneration but also recruitment, retention and training. Third, accountability through transparency: universally accessible and comparative data that encourages systems to be intellectually curious, healthily competitive and self-improving. Finally, higher aspirations overall. Expectations set by the performance of the best, rewarding innovation and calculated risk.

In balancing sense and sensibility, we do not want to diminish the fairness of law or the blindness of justice but we do want the justice system to be effective. We want a more human public service based on informed and accountable decisions, and context. Most importantly, we want people at all levels to take responsibility for reducing harm to society. This means equipping the judge with evidence about the effectiveness of different sentences; the probation officer with flexibility, resources and authority for common sense to prevail; and the prison governor with the levers to prepare people for a law-abiding future.

Public services, and the systems and policies that govern them, are merely the combined acts of millions of people, all of us motivated by complicated bundles of sense and sensibility.

As the author soon to be gracing the £10 note wrote: “It isn’t what we say or think that defines us, but what we do.” ■

### FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

#### THE NEW FUTURES NETWORK

Since February, the RSA has been designing the New Futures Network (NFN), a new body that would support prison reform. Proposals submitted to the Ministry of Justice conclude that the NFN should: drive partnerships that boost people’s chances of leaving crime behind; champion good practice that supports rehabilitation; and provide a channel of communication between the frontline and policymakers. NFN would focus on: increasing employment; enabling prisons to home grow sustainable innovations; identifying untapped local resources; and creating a space for exchanging good practice, ideas and information.

■ For more information please email [jack.robson@rsa.org.uk](mailto:jack.robson@rsa.org.uk)

# TURNING THE TIDE

*Only by restoring equality in society will the west overcome its current malaise*

by Bill Emmott  
 @bill\_emmott

**E**quality is the biggest political issue today. It is bigger than globalisation, Brexit, identity, automation, ageing societies or immigration, because equality is the overriding issue that encompasses all of those concerns and more. It is the one reason why liberals deserve to feel guilty about the rise of populism, as, by neglecting or distorting this issue for much of the past two decades, they have been undermining their own values and the future of the open societies that they believe in.

The success of liberal societies, especially once they became democracies, has lain in their openness: an openness to new ideas, people, goods, competition, opportunities, to new ways of organising society itself, which has given them the world's highest living standards and placed them at the frontiers of scientific progress. Yet the evolutionary, sometimes disruptive change such openness has brought has, in turn, required close attention to equality. That is equality before the law, above all, but also equality of political voice and rights, of what the ancient Greeks called *isonomia*, an equality of participation that we call citizenship.

Each time the social and economic system has felt unfair, each time there have been social convulsions, societies that dealt with them successfully have tended to do so by measures to extend equality: spreading the franchise, providing public education and health, establishing a welfare state. The alternative was either gridlock or conflict.

Since 2008, we have again been in one of those times. The financial collapse of that year, lest we forget, was the worst for 80 years. The long-lasting economic pain that followed it engendered a sense of betrayal and systemic failure.

That pain piled on top of the less widespread, but still real, suspicion of 'globalisation', by which is principally meant cheap competition in manufactures

from China and other emerging economies, and the job losses such competition has caused. Alongside globalisation has been the much more powerful, but less visible, cause of jobs losses: technological change. The spread of automation and digitalisation has destroyed many jobs even as it has created others.

Globalisation and the financial meltdown are linked, because it was free global movements of capital that made the 2008 crash the true calamity that it was. But the crash also destroyed – or deferred, for at least a decade – the hope that the stresses from globalisation and technological change were just a transitional matter, to which economies and societies would sooner or later adjust. Governments and central banks became overwhelmed by the need to prevent a repeat of the 1930s Great Depression, so the crash drowned out or crowded out much hope of longer-term solutions.

The best example lies in the US. That same year, 2008, saw the election of the man who was the first great outsider, even populist, candidate of our current era in the west, a man with little political experience, elected on a wave of enthusiasm, simple slogans and financing from small donors rather than billionaires: Barack Obama. Politically, Obama formed and profited from the backlash both against the foreign-policy failures of the preceding Bush administration in Iraq and Afghanistan, and against rising income inequality and associated social malaise.

Obama, too, probably expected to be the president who addressed inequality, at least in some form. That was, indeed, the prime purpose of his Affordable Care Act, the healthcare legislation known as Obamacare. But his true role lay in rescuing the US from the financial collapse that had begun in the summer of the electoral campaign. By the time that had been done, his Democratic Party had lost its majority in Congress and the Obama administration's chance of major legislative initiatives was gone.

BILL EMMOTT IS AUTHOR OF *THE FATE OF THE WEST* AND FORMER ECONOMIST EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

IMAGES: ISTOCK >>



Eight years later, Obama's legacy is his worst nightmare: Donald J Trump. But as with Obama, Trump's election resulted from anger about inequality. The opponent Obama also beat, Hillary Clinton, won more votes among poorer Americans than Trump did, but not enough to win the presidency, for too many poor and middle-class voters suspected her of being part of the problem rather than a plausible part of the solution. Her close links to Wall Street and other big-ticket campaign-finance donors, and the vast wealth she and her husband had accumulated both directly and through the Clinton Foundation, gave resonance to the slogan shared by both Trump and her 2016 Democratic opponent, Bernie Sanders: that the system is rigged.

That phrase, though it is broad and unspecific, encapsulates the modern issue of equality better than any other. The nearly 11 million French men and women who voted for Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election on 7 May felt something similar. So did the anti-austerity Indignados of Spain, the first wave of popular rebellion in Europe following the financial crash. And there is no doubt that among Trump's

63 million voters were a lot who believed that the system is somehow rigged against them, even if many will have differing views about what is meant by 'the system' and how it is 'rigged'.

For this is not just about income inequality of the traditional sort. If that were the issue, it would have come to the forefront much sooner. Such inequality has risen during recent decades virtually throughout the west, from the US to Japan, from Germany to the UK, though not in France. But it did so without earth-shattering political consequences, because for a long time the inequality came without an abiding, or at least sufficiently strong, sense of unfairness. What connects the various populist political movements worldwide is the greater sense of injustice that has come from the 2008 crash, and the feeling of political and civic inequality that the crash, its causes and its remedies have engendered.

Money, whether as income or wealth, matters above all as a warning signal that inequality is becoming entrenched, not just socially but also politically, so much so that the chance of anything being improved, from the point of view of those who see themselves as powerless victims, feels low or even non-existent. This is what is meant by accusations that the system is rigged. The idea of the west, with all the dynamism it has brought, does not depend upon incomes or wealth being equal or even close to it. But it does depend upon political rights being equal. It does depend on people mostly considering their societies to be fair.

Open societies, the advanced democracies, have never been fully fair in any meaningful sense of the word. But they have made progress and muddled through in political terms because enough people have believed that within those societies they could make their way passably well, with a reasonable set of opportunities open to them and without grossly unjust obstacles in their way. Not all the people, of course. But enough to keep things moving, in proportion to changing expectations and perceptions of what is fair and unfair.

## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Even in the US, where money talks louder than in most places and the culture of economic competition is at its fiercest, inequality is not only a matter of cash. Rather, it is a matter of opportunities, education, marriage, political voice, the way economic inequality begets a new, more deep-seated and potentially pernicious form of inequality associated with wealth and the cascade of assets. It is a matter, certainly, of low and declining real incomes, of diminishing incentives even to bother to look for work, such that nearly 10 million prime working-age men and women have left the labour force. But it is also a matter of feeling that wealthy oligarchs have sewn up the political process in such a way that there is little hope of any remedies being legislated or fairness being restored, unless, to borrow Trump's other resonant phrase, 'the swamp' can be drained.

Emmanuel Macron, during his ultimately victorious campaign to become France's youngest-ever president, also spoke of inequality, even though on the conventional measures of income inequality France is an exception, for it has not become more unequal over

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### THE PEOPLE'S VOICE

It's no secret that young, disadvantaged demographics are not engaging with politics. "The general perception is, if you want to make a difference and be involved in politics, you've got to be an elected politician," says Giles Kenningham FRSA, who set up Stand Up Speak Out with Lee Davis, who was special adviser to former secretary of state Nicky Morgan.

The organisation was set up to tackle this misconception and hopes to encourage younger generations to participate in politics by sending panels of political speakers into schools, engaging pupils in discussions and inspiring action. "The reality is that young people can shape the agenda in lots of ways through campaign groups, charities and blogging. The internet has democratised things," says Giles, special adviser to David Cameron when he was prime minister. He feels that the involvement of younger generations is vital for the future of politics. "The only way the government can stay in touch with public sentiment is by talking to people. Look at society and the way things are moving so quickly; technology is dramatically transforming the social and economic landscape – and millennials are going to drive that," he explains.

Giles believes that bringing younger voices in to the mix will enable better discussions and decisions. "To have an informed and good debate you need a diverse range of voices," he explains. Beyond the panel sessions, Stand Up Speak Out will also help students to secure work experience placements.

With £2,000 of RSA Catalyst funding, Stand Up Speak Out will begin running pilot sessions in June. Starting in London, they will later roll out across the country.



the past two decades. Instead, he focused on another form of inequality and unfairness: that between insiders, privileged by the protections they enjoy in work and life, and the growing number of outsiders, denied secure contracts or ladders up which to climb.

A similar story can be told in both Japan and Italy, countries that are divided deeply between the insecure young workers as well as female workers forced to work on short-term contracts or in the illegal economy, and secure older, mainly male employees. In these countries, as in Britain, France and much of the rest of Europe, this process is also widening another divide, between the young and the old.

It is common to lament the cost of welfare states and to claim that in the modern world they are unaffordable. Actually, to the degree that is true, it is chiefly a consequence of early retirement and of paying public pensions to generations who now stand to collect them for as many years – perhaps 25–30 – as they spent in the workforce. Italy spends the equivalent of 15% of its GDP on public pensions, France 14%, Japan 10%. Perhaps the point can be best illustrated by France: whereas in 1970 the effective age of retirement in that country was 68, little different from life expectancy at birth, by 2014 the effective retirement age had fallen below 60, while life expectancy is now 80.

## EQUALITY MATTERS

What is to be done? The prologue is to throw aside both the obsessions of socialism on redistribution and the post-Thatcher phobia about equality. Equality matters, but not in the way

Karl Marx thought of it, as something requiring “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”. Society today generally rejects such pure redistribution in favour of an equality of rights and opportunity, and a sense of fairness. Then the first part of the answer is to avoid financial catastrophes such as that of 2008, and so to do a better job at keeping living standards rising, for the public as a whole.

The second is to work on campaign finance and other political reforms so as to push back the excessive power of interest groups such as Wall Street and the City, while also breaking up the biggest banks. Too little has been done since 2008 to make the financial system less ruinously risky.

The third part of the answer is to put much greater emphasis on equality in all its forms. This will include traditional focuses such as access to education, which has become more unequal than before, especially in the UK and the US, on welfare support for the neediest, and on training and adjustment programmes in times of economic change. It will also need to include a rethinking of what we consider to be the working age, with efforts to make it easier for the over-60s and indeed over-70s to continue in work, as they do in Japan and South Korea. And it will require a big emphasis on equal rights in the labour market, to avoid the insider-outsider divide.

It will need, in other words, more than just lip service to help ‘the just about managing’. All our western societies need to stay open if they are to thrive; but they also need to restore a sense of equality if they are to survive. ■

# LIFE PLANS

*Applying co-design to architecture can create buildings that change with the times and improve public service delivery*

by Roland Karthaus  
 @MatterArchitec

During my lifetime, a revolution has swept through public services and, while its work is far from complete, expectations have been transformed. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of buildings. Advances in engineering and IT are widely touted as transforming architecture, but the process of defining the brief and the budget for a building remains remarkably unchanged. Without the broadest input into the briefing process from potential users, buildings rarely enable and support the full breadth of their potential use. The consequence is a built environment that is poorly suited to the needs and expectations of the 21st century.

Well understood in service delivery, co-design is a concept that incorporates the input of potential users in commissioning so that the final product, service or building is better tuned to their expectations. In his work in the 1970s, the urbanist Christopher Alexander demonstrated the practical utility of this approach to buildings. Unfortunately, his ideas have never taken hold in architecture.

While the costs of providing a service accrue over time and concurrently with the benefits or income they provide, buildings represent seemingly large, one-off investments, one step removed from their use. Financial models that connect income over a future period with this initial construction cost are widely used, but are rarely instrumental in the design process. Construction expertise is increasingly specialised, generating impenetrable language and practices that act as barriers to user engagement. Short-term risk is the overriding concern: potential delay, increasing costs and a general fear of allowing non-experts in on the process. Yet the direct and indirect costs of a building over its lifetime are normally hundreds of times its construction budget

and the risk of these not delivering their full value is rarely interrogated effectively.

As a current example, the government's prison transformation programme will see £1.3bn spent to build nearly 10,000 prison places over the next 30 or so years. This is a big number, but the direct costs of re-offending are estimated to be between £9.5bn and £13bn a year (a staggering £390bn over this period). Prisons form only a part of the criminal justice estate, but if their design can have a meaningful impact on rehabilitation, the case for greater investment is clear.

Debates about the value of design have also recently raged publicly in relation to schools. The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme in the 2000s placed great emphasis on design quality, but is now regarded as an example of profligate government spending due to a lack of evidence that it helped improve school exam results. There is of course another debate to be had about whether that is the sole purpose of a school. While there are still many talented architects working with individual and independent schools, producing great buildings, the dominant current philosophy appears to be that school buildings should be considered as neutral boxes that do not fundamentally influence the business taking place inside them. This ignores the value of investment, which can only be understood over a much longer period and within the context of the other factors that affect the education experience. Buildings do not make good things happen, they only enable or hinder them, making the connection between design and use difficult to measure in simple terms.

This disconnect between commissioning and use is partly due to a general lack of education and awareness of the built environment. People unconsciously accept sub-optimal buildings; because they assume the status quo exists for good reasons that they do not understand. The imagery used

ROLAND KARTHAUS  
IS DIRECTOR  
OF MATTER  
ARCHITECTURE





to promote architecture exacerbates this, with its emphasis on as-yet unused buildings and eye-catching aesthetic gestures; neither is a true measure of good design. While there continue to be well-designed buildings of all types that counter this trend, they remain exceptional and it would be hard to say overall that the design of the built environment has substantially improved in recent decades.

If we are to reverse this trend, we need to overcome – and help policymakers overcome – the conception of buildings as simple containers. Whole-life costs still take far too narrow a view of the power of design to release the full potential use of buildings. This is not a call for profligacy, but, as with the wider economy, construction is not a zero-sum game. If a bigger budget can be spent in a sophisticated and well-informed manner, it can generate many more times its own value in social and economic benefit over its lifetime. Conversely, the costs and constraints of poorly designed buildings accrue ever more rapidly as they are used.

So, in the absence of simple evidence, what can we learn from? The evolution of digital products is deeply entwined with society and provides a useful analogy for contemporary architecture. Buildings and the activities they accommodate can be thought of as one, in much the same way that tech companies work simultaneously with hardware and software.

Apple's key computing innovation was to design hardware and software together, but this relied on excluding variety and uncertainty. Another example is Linux: open-source software that develops independently of, but in parallel with, rapid increases in processing power and diversifying uses. Increasing expectations are a key driver; no one would try to run modern software on an early personal computer, but this is what we are attempting with our built environment. In Apple's case, expectations were largely generated through marketing. The iPhone was an exercise in selling a more personal experience of technology; specifically, Apple

technology. Linux took a different tack, relying on the iterative refinement of a myriad of technical users with an expectation of open-ended capability.

Buildings have tentatively learnt from both approaches. Derided at the time, the V&A's 1980s advertising campaign – 'An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached' – began a trend that is now ubiquitous: good coffee as a requisite part of a good experience. Coffee might draw people in, but the modern museum or gallery experience itself is dependent on creating contained and controlled environments, much like Apple's philosophy.

Public services commonly have more complex requirements and such buildings involve a proliferation of technical experts in their commissioning, more akin to the Linux example; but this technical contribution tends to overrule the potential for broader input from public users and for future flexibility. Hospitals, universities and prisons are often poorly designed for adaptation and expansion, a process that begins almost immediately after the building is opened, generating a permanent Gordian knot. The focus in the design process instead is on the narrowly defined technical performance of buildings; while this has undoubtedly improved over recent decades, the ability to accommodate increasingly complex, fluid and unpredictable use has not.

A good example of this can be found in relation to housing. In the three decades following the Second World War, the British state undertook an unprecedented mass house-building programme. Some of these modernist estates were built too cheaply and quickly, resulting in failures of the building fabric, but in many cases a combined or even greater problem was the cost of maintaining them. Commissioned during an extended period of growth in public services, they were designed on the assumption that the services needed to support them – waste collection, landscaping, cleaning and management of shared spaces – were plentiful and

## **“WE NEED TO OVERCOME THE CONCEPTION OF BUILDINGS AS SIMPLE CONTAINERS”**

affordable. As that assumption changed over the last quarter of the 20th century, the cost of these services became unsustainable and many estates fell into disrepair and squalor. Some stood for half a century before being demolished and rebuilt, surrounded by pre-war housing that continues to stand, partly because it continues to be serviced in the same, adaptable way. The costs of rebuilding these estates are still being sharply felt, but are as nothing compared with the wider costs of whole sections of society living in squalid and unsafe conditions for many years. There are also well-designed modernist estates that provided much better quantity and quality of housing than existed before and still do. The purpose of this example is not to critique forms of architecture, but to draw attention to the way that the design of a building and its ongoing use are deeply interconnected. The irony of the modernist example is that it is precisely because these buildings were designed around a model for their maintenance that they failed. The failure was that this model was not able to accommodate change.

In his book *The Oregon Experiment*, Alexander outlines a co-design process for the incremental expansion and adaptation of the University of Oregon. The key principles are that the users of the campus have crucial knowledge to contribute and that the extension and adaptation of the buildings is a continual process. It seems apt that Alexander's ideas have been most influential in the field of computing: open-source software using ‘blocks’ of code that his work inspired have made programming accessible to the public. While a similar approach is gradually taking hold in public services, the architecture that is designed to accommodate them has yet to follow. Some commissioners in different fields are beginning to rediscover this approach. A few local authorities are experimenting with co-design for the redevelopment of housing estates, and individual projects such as school expansions and community buildings are often exemplars of co-design on a small scale. Indeed, the RSA Transitions prisons project, to which I contributed, aimed to demonstrate how services and buildings designed together with their users could release latent social value from public assets.

Far from increasing the cost and risk of a building, co-design can be deployed to understand future patterns of usage, radically expanding the design process through exploring and testing professional assumptions. Neither does user involvement transfer the activity of design from architects and other professionals to users; their role is to act as experts in how they use the built environment and as custodians of it into the future. While some designers may resist the interference of people not trained in design, the best examples of co-design are led by highly skilled architects and designers, resulting in beautiful buildings. The key

difference is that they accommodate change and subsequently take on a deeper kind of beauty that arises from a strong relationship between a building and its users.

Even though the limited examples of co-design are currently working against the grain, the tools and processes exist to be rediscovered and more widely accepted. This will only happen through the pressure of people's expectations: we need to be much more demanding of our buildings. Meanwhile, policymakers, commissioners and architects need to understand risk in the longer term and realise the benefit of letting ordinary people loose in the process of design. ■

### **FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION TAKING ACTION**

Open Cinema, a network of community cinemas founded and led by RSA Fellow Christoph Warrack, helps disadvantaged individuals and communities to move from exclusion to participation by giving them an opportunity to watch, discuss and make films collectively. With friendly volunteers and free food, it's a safe and inviting space for those in need.

“We work wherever a community has a space and an interest to experience cinema,” says Christoph. “Each year, participants go on to education and work through our partnerships with universities and employers.” Pathways include bursaries for Open University courses and pre-apprenticeship programmes for participating companies. Last year, three individuals joined Cisco Systems and 11 gained full-time work in the company’s supply chain.

Since 2009, Open Cinema has opened 44 venues – from Cardiff, where it supports 56 nationalities, to Belfast, where it welcomes low-income families from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Open Cinema has been supported with £10,000 in RSA Catalyst funding. “We have had the opportunity to strengthen the purpose, methods and reach of our organisation,” says Christoph. With the grant, it has developed a strategy for longer-term national and international partnerships, built a new website and hired new part-time staff. In May, Open Cinema’s first country franchise was signed in Finland, where community cinemas will start opening later this year.

■ For more information, visit [opencinema.net](http://opencinema.net)



# MIND AND MATTER

*Metro-regions must not miss the opportunity to put mental health on a par with physical health*

by Tom Harrison

✉ @\_Tom\_Harrison

**D**uring the general election, the key parties committed to making changes in relation to mental health, ranging from additional investment in frontline staff and training, to increased access to talking therapies and a particular focus on children and young people. Aside from the moral case, this makes good economic sense.

As RSA research conducted in 2015 shows, the potential benefits of improving mental health care are huge. We found that not only are people with mental health illnesses a third less likely

to be in employment, but they are also anywhere between 10% and 45% less likely to receive physical health checks on things like blood pressure, cholesterol and cervical cancer. This failure to meet basic needs at the primary care level is contributing to the elevated mortality of people with mental health illnesses, who die 10–15 years younger than average.

The RSA's work on public services and mental health suggests that we need a combination of clear central political leadership – around parity of esteem between mental and physical health – alongside greater local decision making, capable of drawing together agencies to meet people's multiple needs, innovating and engaging communities.

TOM HARRISON  
IS A RESEARCH  
ASSISTANT IN  
THE RSA'S PUBLIC  
SERVICES AND  
COMMUNITIES  
TEAM

## **“THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH CARE ARE HUGE”**

Yet, the UK remains one of the most centralised political economies in the world, so while health services are increasingly commissioned at a local level, the priorities continue to be set by the centre, where mental health policy falls unfavourably between the Department of Health, Department for Education and the NHS.

Both Labour and the Conservatives have committed themselves to supporting further devolution, with the latter’s manifesto describing the UK’s approach as one that tends to “devolve and forget” and pledging to be more “supportive” – read interventionist. This is a potentially contradictory stance mirroring Labour’s lack of detail on whether it wants to stall or accelerate city-region devolution. Indeed an important question now is exactly how the new government makes these changes, and what purpose power transfers will serve.

### **CATALYST FOR REFORM**

While mental health interventions might cost more money in the short term, long-term savings arise elsewhere. Nationally, up to 25% of police time is spent on issues that stem from mental illness and the costs to the taxpayer across the public sector are significant. The new government needs to ensure that devolved regions that have the ability to innovate in areas of education and health, truly grasp the issue of parity and its cost effectiveness.

One area where greater localism offers opportunities to improve outcomes is our country’s prison system, which holds many people with acute needs. According to the Prison Reform Trust, 26% of women and 16% of men said they had received treatment for a mental health problem in the year before custody. Currently, the health needs of this population reflect the lack of investment in community-based support, and the prison reform agenda – which gives governors a role in co-commissioning health services – is a welcome step.

More broadly, the devolution process is already bringing about a significant disruption to the norm. In April 2016 Greater Manchester’s landmark devolution deal brought together all £6bn of health and social care spending under the new directly elected mayor, Andy Burnham, who has called for a new integrated health and care service. This provides a chance to drive and test service re-design and ensure that it is fully aligned with the rhetoric of parity of esteem.

Mayoralities that can rise above technocratic localism provide an opportunity to set a clear vision at the regional level. These kinds of approaches enable the regional authority to cross the complex divide between NHS England commissioned services (which provide primary care for

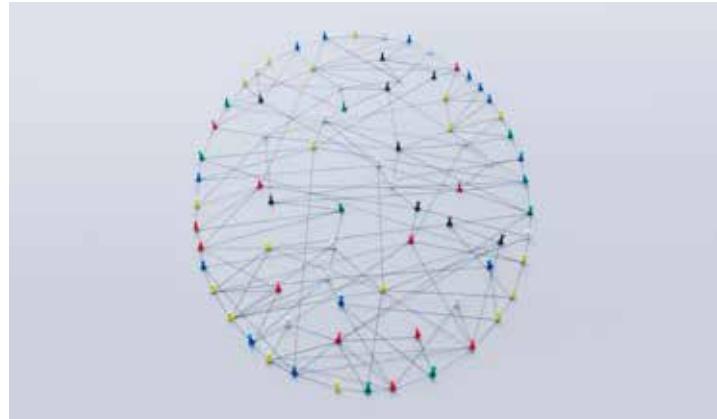
prisons), local authorities (which provide substance misuse support) and clinical commissioning groups (which provide services for prisoners managed by probation).

And as a new crop of city leaders settle into their jobs, it is not just in Manchester that opportunities lie. In Bristol, Mayor Marvin Rees has created the City Office, which brings together organisations from across sectors to address key issues and go beyond formal powers to ‘knock heads together’ in order to improve public services. Starting with a focus on rough sleeping, the model could also be used to improve mental health services that are letting thousands of people down, though this highlights the risk that devolution can be dependent on the individual priorities of politicians.

However, alongside service improvement, greater devolution can also be a vehicle for a higher profile ‘hearts and minds’ approach to mental health. Both Greater London and the West Midlands have expressed interest in the ‘Thrive’ approach developed in New York City. This blends public health and acute mental health provision – which, surprisingly, is very rare – while providing skills and training across institutions so that public servants understand how to signpost and direct support to those most in need, including providing emergency accommodation for people in crisis.

Leaders such as detective chief inspector Sean Russell, who has been seconded in to lead the West Midlands Mental Health Commission, embody the opportunity provided by region-led working, making way for greater co-commissioning between West Midlands Police and mental health and social care. He is overseeing delivery of a plan to reduce suicides and stem the flow of people with mental health problems into the criminal justice system through staff training and early interventions. The Commission, which estimates that the annual cost of mental ill health is in the region of £12.6bn, has helped to embed a new child and adolescent mental health service and up-skill the region’s teachers and support staff so that they are mental health first-aid trained. The RSA is actively working with Russell across seven schools within the RSA Academies, which are aiming to embed a ‘whole school’ approach to supporting young people with mental ill health.

The challenge now is how we mainstream these kinds of approaches and scale up action. Whatever the ‘new’ devolution agenda looks like in the coming years, we will need to revisit old debates about local variations, skills and investment. Amongst this, there is a need to exploit the political consensus that effective public services need to see parity of esteem of mental and physical health, and to drive place-based policies that seek to achieve this. ■



# THINK LOCAL

*To be effective, think tanks in the developing world have to adapt to political context, but more than that, they must have community roots*

by Natalie Nicholles

**A**cross the world, from Hungary to Bolivia, Turkey to Tanzania, the space in which civil society actors operate is rapidly closing. Since January 2012, governments have proposed or enacted more than 100 laws aimed at restricting the registration, operation and funding of NGOs. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, this closing space for civil society is not a short-term phenomenon, but the result of a much larger, longer term tectonic movement driven by two trends. First, the shift in power and relations between ‘the west and the rest’. Second, the recognition of the power of civil society to destabilise the status quo. It is within this context that the RSA is exploring how social change organisations can create impact. In a recent study about think tanks in the developing world, we analysed how they can remain vital civil society actors and found that the key ingredients are political nous and innovation.

Think tanks have the job of solving problems, not just diagnosing them. Once a solution is in sight, they try to get their recommendations implemented. However, the ability to influence is tethered to how well a think tank can adapt to the prevailing political context which, of course, changes. Think tanks therefore need to be attuned to shifts in the system and detect where both the opportunities and challenges lie if they are to be effective. For example, the closing down of political space in Bangladesh in recent years has forced think tanks to alter their approach towards new alliances and methods of influencing. In contrast, in Myanmar they are grappling with a potential opening of civic debate and what this means for policymaking.

Thinking more ‘politically’ about change means leveraging popular support, an approach regularly employed in the RSA’s projects. This could entail supporting individuals’ campaigns or building alliances with other civil society organisations. It requires think tanks to be more creative in how they engage with people and how they reflect public opinion back to policymakers. In practice, that can mean moving beyond facilitating debate towards identifying collective interests and coordinating actions across different stakeholders to help bring about policy change.

Think tanks therefore need to be embedded in their local polities to fulfil their potential; only then can they understand both the change that is needed and how this can be brought to bear. By being locally rooted they can, and often do, have the legitimacy and credibility that external actors lack. This principle drives the RSA’s approach to global impact; we are guided by the opportunities local Fellows and partners in country identify.

There will be moments when large-scale change is possible – major economic change, often on the back of crises, or political transitions, for example – but think tanks usually achieve success when working incrementally. This means identifying and recognising the potential for a series of ‘small wins’, which are fully embedded and accepted by the wider system, and building up to larger scale change. At the RSA we call this way of working ‘think like a system, act like an entrepreneur’.

The RSA’s global Fellows aspire to counter the closing civil society space and create open debate about progress. To learn more, please contact [natalie.nicholles@rsa.org.uk](mailto:natalie.nicholles@rsa.org.uk). For the full report, visit [www.thersa.org/innovation-in-think-tanks](http://www.thersa.org/innovation-in-think-tanks). ■

## NEW FELLOWS

### CLAIRE HAIGH



Having worked in public services for 10 years, Claire is interested in how we think about, shape and connect public services in a more inclusive way.

She previously served as director of improvement for North West Employers, but is currently co-founding a community interest company, Collaborate Out Loud. This explores and discusses the challenges facing public services to develop new ideas, as well as implementing prototypes that bring those new ideas to life. "It's about how we use the space between public services to help people come together in a really democratic, open and free way," explains Claire.

She sees the future of public services as a balancing act between technological advancement and humanistic values. "It's going to take bravery, it's going to take a different kind of leadership and it's going to take people working together to make that happen."

By joining the RSA, Claire hopes to connect with a network of like-minded people and those with common interests. She recently held a Fellowship event, 'How can we enable public leaders to flourish?' She is interested in the RSA's work around inclusive growth, as well as the recent Good Work initiative.

### JOHN MINTO



John is Managing Director of Gede Foundation, a non-profit organisation that works to shine a light on underserved and stigmatised health issues in Nigeria. "Through research, partnerships and advocating government policies, we're working to bring health problems out of the proverbial shadows," he explains.

John has been working in the field for around 30 years, gaining experience in both development and humanitarian work. During that time he has assisted in the training of midwives in Somaliland, been involved with research into the African diaspora and worked with the Nigerian government to undertake studies into the mental disorders associated with HIV/AIDS.

One of the biggest challenges the Gede Foundation faces is a lack of awareness of mental health nationally and, consequently, inadequate resources. "There are so few healthcare professionals around to address the issue; Nigeria has 175 million people and maybe around 400 or 500 clinical psychiatrists and psychologists."

By joining the RSA, John hopes to open up dialogues around the role of NGOs in the development process. "It's time to encourage NGOs to work much more closely with other constituencies, like businesses and academia," he explains.

### IN BRIEF

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

**Donna Baddeley** has worked in social housing and care services for 30 years. She is an executive director at Curo Housing Group, an organisation that provides around 250 new homes every year, for both sale and rent, along with support for vulnerable people.

**Jason Sydoriak** is district staffer for Congressman Seth Moulton in Massachusetts's North Shore, where he's involved in economic development research and conducts casework on veteran issues. He took part in Colorado's Citizen Review Board, fostering community relations with the police department – as well as volunteering for disaster response organisation, Team Rubicon.

**Paul Plant** is deputy director at Public Health England (London). He is also a Fellow of the Faculty of Public Health, part of the Royal College of Physicians and a Visiting Professor at University College London.

**Marion Lawie** is community engagement programme leader at Logan City Council Queensland Australia – and led the team that won the 2015 IAP2 Australasia Planning Award. She has worked in outback Australia, the UK, Russia and Italy and is the Local Recovery Coordinator for Logan, South East Queensland.

### 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)

# HOW TO RESIST SELF-IMPROVEMENT

23 February



**Svend Brinkmann**  
explains why he has  
written the antidote  
to self-help books

As a professor of psychology, I am interested in the impact of psychology on our lives in the western world and the phenomenon of ‘psychologisation’: the fact that psychology has influenced how we think about ourselves. I see two problems related to this.

First, is that we are told by the culture that we live in that we are only all right if we are constantly developing, changing, adaptable, moveable. And I think this makes us miserable. Because this ideology is telling us that no matter how well we perform now, next year we’ll have to do more, do better, do something else. So we are never good enough and we only have ourselves to blame when we fail. We’re not allowed to put down roots. We’re not allowed to stand firm and live stable, secure lives.

Another concern is perhaps more philosophical. It was expressed by Paul Ricoeur, the great French philosopher, who argues that ‘self-constancy’ is necessary if we want to be ethical. Why? Because all the ethical values, all the moral virtues, only make sense if we can trust each other; if there is certainty that I am the same person tomorrow as I was yesterday. If I make a promise today, you have to be able to count on me living up to the promise tomorrow.

Commitments, duties, obligations, all these things make sense because of self-constancy. My concern about this whole rhetoric about change, development and lifelong learning is that it threatens our commitments and our status as ethical beings.

I have reviewed many self-help books about change and development, so I came up with the idea of writing a self-help book that told the reader how not to develop, how not to change. It includes seven steps that you have to go through in order to learn to stand firm. Cut out the naval-gazing. Focus

**“WANTING TOO MUCH IS NO LONGER OUR PROBLEM. NOW, THE PROBLEM IS WANTING TOO LITTLE”**



on the negative in your life. Put on the ‘no’ hat (that’s a Danish expression). Suppress your feelings. Sack your coach. Read a novel. And, finally, dwell on the past.

The book really only makes sense if you understand it contextually. It is not a book that would work in the 1950s, because the problems people had were entirely different. This was a culture of prohibitions: “Don’t do this, don’t do that”. “But I want to do it anyway.” “Well then, suppress your desire to do it.” Wanting too much is no longer our problem. Now, the problem is wanting too little. It is anhedonia – the lack of lust, desire – that is the central characteristic of depression: we have a culture of depression.

## REALITY BITES

We are mortal beings; we know that we are going to die. Life is short, people die. We suffer, we grieve. That is just reality. But everyone is telling us: enjoy yourself. Be happy. All the time, develop. The message is: you can become whatever you want to be. But what is it that you want? Is it worth wanting? Well, if you want it, then it is worth wanting because the subjective is the first, last and only authority about whatever is worth doing.

As an antidote, I would like to rehabilitate the Stoic philosophers. They often wrote in ways that resemble contemporary self-help authors, but they would recommend the opposite of what we see today. For example, Marcus Aurelius, the great philosopher emperor, recommends negative visualisation, which is imagining that what you already have now is something you will lose. Why? Because you will lose it. Everything we own, even our own lives, our relationships to other people, are finite. You know they will disappear, we will die.

According to the Stoics, this will give the individual a certain existential humility. We are not little kings or gods that can be whatever and choose whatever and develop in all sorts of directions. We are framed and situated and embodied and fragile, vulnerable mortals. It is important to bear that in mind if we want to develop some sort of common humanity, to be able to live together as ethical beings. ■

# AN ALGORITHM FOR HAPPINESS

10 April



**Mo Gawdat** applies a Google engineer's logic to the pursuit of happiness

I had my son Ali at a very young age; he was born when I was 25. Surprisingly, Ali was probably the one that taught me most in life. He was my best friend and my mentor. We always played video games together and read books together; he was the funniest man I ever knew. We developed my happiness model together, because Ali truly was the happiest person I ever met. He had that peace to him that you could not miss. And Ali, I think, was training me all my life with our happiness model, because unfortunately in 2014 we lost Ali to a preventable human error. Ali came to visit us in Dubai and he was diagnosed with an appendix inflammation and unfortunately they made several surgical mistakes in a row and within four hours we moved from planning the best vacation we can think of to losing our child. And to lose a child is the hardest thing ever; today I still struggle to understand what it really means. I struggle to understand the exact feeling that I am feeling, I just do not have words for it, there is no other event in my life where I felt the same way. And there was every reason to be miserable.

But we were not, we were okay. I would not say we were happy, just to be very specific, but we were peaceful. We spent the next few days being visited by friends until his memorial, where we had thousands of people who would walk in sad, crying, and we would hug them and explain to them what we understood about happiness, what we understood about death and life. And they would smile and go around our house looking at pictures of Ali smiling all over the walls and, you know, they would leave happy. And if you did not know the background to the event you would have thought it is maybe Ali's birthday or something.

And so my friends came to me and said you should probably write this down, it resonated very well and it is clearly working. But the businessman that I am and with my love for Ali I set myself a bigger mission; I gave myself a target to try and make ten million people happy.

So why is it so hard for happiness to be found? I do training where I ask people this question very frequently and you get lots of answers back. You get answers like life is hard, or people around me have expectations of me, and all of these



are right answers to the process of why we do not get to happiness. But at the core of the question truly was something I found very early in my research, which was this: we keep looking for happiness outside us, we keep looking for things that make us happy. The truth is every one of you, every child that has ever been born, is born with a default setting set to happy. And what happens is truly similar to what you do with your phones: you get them out of the box and they are set to work properly. Then you start installing weird apps and you have to charge three times a day.

Now that is exactly what happens to us. We come in to the world happy and then we install apps that help us reach success, but in the process they take away our happiness. And anyone who ever went to Tech Stop will know that the way to fix your phone if your battery drops to four hours a day: you reset. You remove the apps that made you unhappy. And that is really truly a very interesting engineering problem. Because while at a young age I was extremely successful as a businessman and an entrepreneur and a day trader and what have you, I was installing things in my life. I was trying to buy a beautiful car or get the expensive suits; I was trying to install more apps to make me happy and I wasn't, because truly what I should have done was remove the apps that made me unhappy. In a very interesting way happiness truly is the absence of unhappiness.

But what is happiness? This is a question that I struggled with. So I wrote down all of the instances where I felt happy and I tried to find the trend line between them. And the one common theme was you feel happy when life seems to be meeting your expectations. It's always that comparison in our heads between events and expectations, which you can put in a very simple equation: happiness is equal to or greater than the events of your life, minus the expectations of how life should behave. ■

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*Care plans and carefully crafted policies are important to mental health outcomes, but so is humour*

by Rob Gee  
 @robgeepoetry

**P**ranks in mental health units are very common: the Greek student nurse who I sent to pharmacy for some fallopian tubes has yet to forgive me. If a patient is involved in the prank, it has the bonus of making it therapeutic.

One striking thing about being a nurse on the acute wards in psychiatry was the cross section of humanity that found itself there: all walks of life presented with every psychiatric issue imaginable. The only thing they all had in common was that they were stuck in hospital. It was often laughter that brought them together.

Laughter has a vital role on any psychiatric unit. It diffuses tension, creates common ground and helps to put seemingly insurmountable problems into context. If you do it for the right reasons, it will always have a therapeutic value, because it transcends nurse/patient boundaries and allows you to relate to each other as equal human beings.

Many years ago I was obliged to chase a naked person through the maternity unit next door to the psychiatric ward. He ran right through a ward full of newborns and expectant parents, and out into the adjoining field, singing his heart out. The only reason I caught up with him was that he stopped to shake the hand of a passer by. Days later he was already recovering. I was on a night shift and I

think we were both a bit sleep deprived. Between us we created a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of *Sound of Music*-based nudity jokes. This was an important milestone in his recovery, albeit one you'd struggle to articulate in a care plan.

Once in a while, you find yourself on the receiving end of a patient's prank, such as the time I was supervising a student nurse giving her first intramuscular injection. The patient receiving the injection decided it would be hilarious if he pretended we'd hit his sciatic nerve with the needle. We thought we had paralysed him. When he did finally burst into laughter, both my student and I experienced the full emotional rollercoaster of relief, gratitude, disbelief and resentment. The three of us have never found ourselves in the same room since, but we all share that moment as a happy memory, now it's over.

Laughter reveals us to our patients as human beings, with the same flaws and idiosyncrasies they have. I remember the panel of a mental health review tribunal (which deliberates a patient's appeal against being sectioned) becoming overcome with mirth after it was revealed that the psychiatrist had filled out the paperwork incorrectly and accidentally sectioned himself.

The fact is that any of us can have a psychiatric episode at any time in our lives, and we all have our own unique and beautiful ways of being ridiculous, whether we're mentally ill or not. When life does take a serious turn, it's more important than ever to find joy in everyday absurdity. ■

ROB GEE IS A COMEDY WRITER, PERFORMER AND PSYCHIATRIC NURSE

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