



about rebuilding a society built on the values of cohesion, courage and

An apocryphal riddle for theology students goes thus: “Could God create a rock so heavy that God couldn’t lift it?” The problem of course, is that if God can’t, then he’s not omnipotent. If God can, he can’t lift it, and so he’s not omnipotent.

We face a few paradoxes of our own in 21st-century Britain. How is it that we are richer than ever, but the use of food banks hit new records last year? How do we have so many ways to communicate, and yet feel more atomised and isolated? We live in a time of unprecedented peace, but it feels like there is greater conflict. We feel caught between the powerful and the painfully vulnerable. It’s a bit of a catch-22: the sense that we can’t go back as we were, but we don’t agree on how to move forward. The rock needs to be lifted, and yet it cannot be.

Living together in society is never easy: it’s painful and frustrating. But the pandemic has shown us that the idea we can live in isolation and only care about our own welfare is an illusion—the rock is impossible to lift by ourselves. But our approach to the problem is wrong—the right question is not “what are we capable of?” but “how can we combine our capabilities to serve everyone?”

Let’s get the inevitable question out of the way—why is the archbishop of Canterbury writing about the future of the country? The Bible shows that God cares deeply about justice, mercy and how we love one another, as well as about money, power and poverty. Jesus didn’t exist in a political, social or cultural vacuum; he was executed because he represented a threat to the powers of the day. He was highly political, and Christianity is highly political, because politics is about how we live well together.

When I say something people agree with about how we do that, they say “bravo archbishop, encore!” When I say something they don’t like, I’m told to “stick to religion, stop meddling, mind your own business.” But especially in polarised times, we have to be prepared to listen to—and affirm people’s right to hold—opinions that we disagree with, and work out how to live with others and love them across difference.

In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, I felt there was an opportunity to be seized, a moment akin to 1945 when a group of people—many of them Christian like RH Tawney, my predecessor archbishop William Temple and William Beveridge—came together to reimagine a new country that could rise from the ashes of the Second World War. I developed this theme in my 2018 book *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope*. Three years on and the parallels are starker, because we really are standing on the ashes of disaster—the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the phrase “a new Beveridge” is everywhere. Politicians, policy wonks and the public all sense a moment to rebuild something broken into something much better. But what?

The country is today, of course, very different from the one Beveridge knew. We delight in our diversity, are significantly more secular, and celebrate a plurality of religions. But exactly as Beveridge grasped in 1942, some have once again been left behind or fallen through the safety nets; there are those for whom the current system doesn’t work and never has.

As we look at the “Five Giant Evils” Beveridge identified—disease, ignorance, want, squalor and idleness—we may be tempted to think “plus ça

change, plus c'est la même chose." Their precise form has often changed, but people across the country are still struggling with the 21st-century incarnations of these injustices.

Disease speaks for itself. Health inequality has come to the forefront of the national conversation as official statistics recorded a Covid-19 death toll more than twice as heavy in deprived than affluent areas. There are many dimensions to the social injustice here: six out of 10 people who died from Covid-19 between January and November 2020 were disabled. Mortality is disproportionate among those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Bad Covid outcomes correlate to poor housing situations. It's easy to imagine how overcrowding might accelerate the spread of infection, and how damp, cramped or otherwise dispiriting conditions might impede recovery. The National Housing Federation estimates that eight million people live in unsuitable, unaffordable, insecure housing. The Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community reported in February, concluding that many people's housing realities fell well short of what they should be.

And in a year when we've been confined to our homes, where we live has affected everything else. Home-schooled pupils have suffered when they haven't had access to the technology, space or tutoring that children from wealthier families have enjoyed.

The pandemic has had an impact on work too. That is not surprising when, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, 2020 saw the UK suffer its largest drop in output in 300 years. But again, the effect has not been equally shared. Women, minority ethnic and disabled people have disproportionately been made redundant over the past year. So, overwhelmingly, have young people: around one in 10 of them have lost their jobs.

This loss of work translates into more poverty—not just here but around the world, with the World Bank estimating between 88m and 115m more people were pushed into extreme poverty in 2020. Some of the pressure on employment should ease with the end of lockdown, but such is the prevalence of zero-hours contracts and the insecure gig economy that in-work poverty, which was already a fast-rising proportion of the total, could prove harder to shift.

In sum, the pandemic has worsened inequality in all sorts of ways, both nationally and internationally. Precarious and low-paid workers suffered, and higher-earners, often office workers, stayed at home and saved.

Covid-19 has, then, shown us how prevalent and enduring, but also how interlinked, the old injustices remain. But what of contemporary problems that Beveridge could never have imagined? People will reasonably disagree about precisely which new challenges press hardest. A good case could be made for giving top priority to, say, adult social care or legacies of misogyny and racism. But here, for illustration and consideration, I will nominate three areas.

First, we need to grapple with the consequences of the many social changes that have been accelerated by the pandemic—things we expected to happen over the next decade suddenly happened in months. Technological change has transformed the way we live and work, what and how we educate our children. The urgent task now is to make sure that the benefits of these developments do not accelerate the privilege of one group while leaving the rest behind, but instead benefit all.

Second, the same transformative power of science must now be applied to combat climate change, which is already affecting people around the world and is the greatest problem we face. The events of the last year are but a shadow of the disasters that will occur if we do not take bold steps to tackle environmental degradation.

Finally, we face a crisis in truth. Seemingly infinite, instantly accessible information gives the problem a different complexion from the “Ignorance” of Beveridge’s day. But the truth can nonetheless be very difficult to pin down. Conspiracy theories can circle the globe, misinformation causes real-world repercussions. We need to learn to judge the information we receive, think critically (and kindly), and act accordingly.

The Beveridge report reads: “A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions, not for patching.” As the former “homelessness tsar” Louise Casey said recently: “if 25 per cent of your population is affected, then you can’t just tweak old policies, working out the least expensive, least challenging thing that can be done. You need big new policies.” The pandemic has exacerbated weaknesses, ripping the paper off the cracks on the wall. We cannot simply re-paper them. We need a bold, courageous vision for what life could look like instead.

Ideas abound, and so do passionate proponents: some see the future in a universal income that gives unconditional support to all; some strongly argue instead for a tailored safety net pegged to individual earnings so nobody suddenly falls too far. Others insist more specific steps, such as higher sick pay, could do most of the work. It’s welcome to see so much debate about how we can best support our fellow citizens, but it’s for the experts rather than spiritual leaders to adjudicate on how these policies rank on affordability and effectiveness. For me, the question is how—in a country with so much disagreement—we might start to build a consensus about which way to go. What principles should underlie decisions for the common good?

Former Bank of England governor Mark Carney, in his new book *Value(s)*, tells the story of a moment with Pope Francis, who said to him: “humanity is many things—passionate, curious, rational, altruistic, creative, self-interested. But the market is one thing: self-interested. Your job is to... turn the market back into humanity.”

Carney talks about how we have moved from a “market economy” to a “market society,” with no room for valuing the things—like beauty, happiness, joy, relationships—that make up the tapestry of a rich and wonderful life. To fix this, we need first to unearth our deep-rooted values, and then build up from them. In *Reimagining Britain*, I identified three such pertinent values, which I would argue spring out of our Christian

heritage.

First, cohesion: the assurance that we are all in it together. Individualism and autonomy always promise liberation, but can sometimes deliver slavery. Second, courage. It takes guts to reimagine, and boldness to work with those with whom we disagree. But as Beveridge wrote, winning freedom from want “needs courage and faith and a sense of national unity.” Lastly, stability, which encompasses resilience and sustainability.

In her new book *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract*, Minouche Shafik reviews where we stand, and quotes Yeats: “surely some revelation is at hand.” The revelation required is that of an inextricably interlinked society. Our essential interconnection has been exposed in the pandemic: it explains why millions of people have stayed home this past year. It’s why we owe such a debt to the key workers who have delivered food, worked on wards and collected refuse. Your life is lived with me and mine with you, and—as a Christian—I would call you my neighbour, even if we’ve never met.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that small acts of neighbourliness are the thing we need to harness to counter the great forces of inequality and polarisation. We must, for example, always approach labour in a way that foregrounds its human worth, and not drift into the commodified view of the worst employment practices.

A better society is not the job of governments alone. Edmund Burke spoke of society as a contract that takes the form of “a partnership... between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” The requisite partnership now will have to include governments, civil society, churches, charities, businesses, individuals—all of us have our role to play. We also need to recognise each other’s innate humanity, especially on social media, and we need to do that before we agitate, as we might, for changes to the algorithms designed to force us into polarity and create echo chambers of enmity.

In place of such strife, we need to rebuild relationships and trust at every level to build a new social covenant. We must ensure there are opportunities for the young to flourish, and value all those who are elderly, disabled or discarded and marginalised for any other reason.

I once gave a speech: “I dream that governments, now and in the future, put church-run food banks out of business. I dream of empty night shelters. I dream of debt advice charities without clients. When justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, the food banks close, the night shelters are empty, families and households are hopeful.”

In the past, times of difficulty have often also proved fruitful ones for dreams: we have collectively made choices that still define our nation.

Though it grew out of strife, the Magna Carta provided a framework for rights that lay the foundations for democracy. After we stood up against callous tyranny in the Second World War, we instigated the NHS, a symbol of the value of every human. This is another bewildering time, but it’s also a rare opportunity to reimagine, to take the best of our values and heritage and apply them anew.

The French Jesuit priest Henri du Lubac described paradox as a “view which remains incomplete, but whose orientation is towards fullness.” We find ourselves, as the young American poet Amanda Gorman said of her own country at the US presidential inauguration, as “a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.”

The promise of Jesus is a past redeemed, a present transformed and a future hopeful and eternal. The message of the resurrection is that we are not beaten by a broken world. We are those who transform it. In that transformation, the enemy of climate change becomes a lovingly tended environment, inequality becomes justice and conflict peace. A fractured society chooses to become a strong community. That is the spirit in which to face the future. And as for the rock that feels too heavy—we’ll lift it together.

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