

# FAILING SOCIETY

The Liberal Democrats had better define their idea of community before someone else does it for them, warns Simon Titley in a review of a new Rowntree study

What do the Liberal Democrats mean by ‘community’? It is a term they are fond of using but it is hard to discern any real meaning beyond a vague nostalgia for a time when people nipped in and out of each other’s houses to borrow a cup of sugar.

This is not an academic question. ‘Community’ defines the ways in which people bond, not just in neighbourhoods but also on other shared ground such as their work, education or pastimes. Human beings are social animals and, to thrive, they need a degree of solidarity and mutuality.

Yet our sense of community has weakened significantly over the past forty years or so. The pillars of society on which most people relied are disappearing. Extended families have scattered; we are scarcely on nodding acquaintance terms with our neighbours; local pubs and clubs are closing down; people are retreating into their private spaces; and social relationships are being replaced by economic ones.

Of course, traditional communities have their disadvantages. They can be oppressive, intrusive or censorious, limiting people’s freedom and opportunities. But as individualism has flourished, it seems we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. As a result, people feel increasingly isolated, face common problems alone and are made to feel that these problems are their own individual fault.

It is has not helped that the term ‘community’ has been debased, ‘care in the community’ being a particularly egregious example. And if we’re honest, ‘community politics’ rarely means what it says. A couple of years ago when I was writing a chapter for the book *Reinventing the State*, I coined the term ‘the banjo playing community’ to satirise this abuse. Life imitates art. I looked up the term on Google only to find more than 200 websites where it was being used for real.

## DILEMMA FOR LIBERALS

The question of community presents liberals with a dilemma. Liberals believe in the primacy of the individual and the value of human autonomy. But we still value communities and do not wish to lose them in the process. This leaves liberals exposed to criticism.

Across the political spectrum, the disintegration of society is perceived to be a real problem demanding a response. Communitarians of both left and right aim to fix a ‘broken society’. But in their desire to revive some form of solidarity, they could threaten our individuality and autonomy. And they are blaming liberals for social breakdown.

Critics attack liberals in two ways. They blame the social revolution of the 1960s – with its emphasis on personal liberation – for many of the social ills of today, in particular the breakdown of the family. Or they conflate liberalism with the neoliberalism that has been the dominant ideology for the past thirty years. Neoliberalism has been the main engine of social atomisation, encouraging people to redefine their identity and human worth in terms of consumerism.

Understandably, the most common criticism currently levelled at neoliberalism is that it has been the bad idea behind the financial crisis. The economic theories of efficient markets and rational actors, once regarded as sacred truths, are now intellectually discredited. The moral critique of neoliberalism, meanwhile, has focused on the individual greed of bankers.

But it is also the case that neoliberalism has been a socially corrosive force. It elevated markets, merely an economic mechanism, into an ethical paradigm for all human behaviour. The values on which a healthy society depends – such as morality, love, justice, empathy, neighbourliness – were either abandoned or redefined in market terms.

## SIDELINED

The Liberal Democrats are being sidelined in the debate about society because they have developed neither a coherent critique of social atomisation nor a compelling vision of the kind of society they would like to foster.

Most people are acutely aware of the problem. They experience it less in spectacular acts of ‘anti-social behaviour’ than in low-level, day-to-day uncivil behaviour, a coarsening of relationships between strangers in which common courtesies have been forgotten. They experience it in the myriad of third marriages and step-grandparents that characterises modern family life. They experience it in anonymous retail chains and cloned High Streets. Older people, in particular, are aware of the loneliness – for example, there are in Britain today more than a million men over 65 living alone and if any of them wants to make friends, the chances are that their local pub has been taken over by a pubco, turned into a trendy bar for teenagers or shut completely.

So there is fertile ground for any political party offering a convincing remedy for these problems. The Conservatives will be offering a return to ‘family values’ (but they won’t warn voters that anyone not in a cosy nuclear family will miss out on the tax breaks). The Labour Party will be offering a form of communitarianism promising a friendly arm round your shoulder (but only if you belong to a ‘community’ defined by Labour).

What have the Liberal Democrats to offer? A knock on a million doors and, er, “why not tell us what you think?” They haven’t a clue.

The party used to know, before *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* was buried under a mound of leaflets. And it occasionally nibbles at the edges of the problem, whether it is Greg Mulholland’s excellent campaign against pub closures or Jo Swinson highlighting the misery caused by the promotion of unrealistic body images in advertising. But someone needs to join the dots.

## **DISTINCTIVE POSITION**

The Liberal Democrats have the potentially distinctive position of recognising that community and individuality are not incompatible; that it is not a paradox that most people’s individuality can flourish only with the support of other people; that the healthiest communities are ones that individuals enter into voluntarily.

That seems like a sound liberal principle and so it is hard to understand why such a straightforward proposition is not being articulated more forcefully by the Liberal Democrats. The field cannot be left clear to communitarians who insist that our individuality must be smothered for the good of society.

To see what that field looks like, there is no better starting point than the new book *Contemporary Social Evils* produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The JRF initiated a major consultation among leaders, thinkers, activists and commentators – as well as the wider public via a web survey – to explore which underlying problems pose the greatest threat to British society in the twenty-first century.

The results in this book are drawn from across the political spectrum so there is not necessarily a consensus. There are certainly no quick fixes on offer. But there is considerable agreement on the nature and scope of the problem and it is refreshing to see this topic granted serious study.

Instead of a modish discussion of ‘issues’, the Rowntree book begins with a definition of terms because social evils have always been with us but their nature changes. Here, the web survey of more than 3,500 members of the public is particularly illuminating. While people recognise a corrosion of society, there is no widespread hankering after the past. People embrace modernity and freedom but feel that something may have been lost in the process.

## **ME, ME, ME SOCIETY**

A central theme is the growth of individual greed. A major difference between contemporary social evils and those of the past is that, while some people have been excluded from prosperity, a more significant problem is the nature of that prosperity itself, which has in some respects corroded interpersonal and communal ties. The web survey revealed a widespread feeling that we live in a “me, me, me society” and that human bonds have consequently weakened.

One survey participant hit the nail on the head: “We are in danger of losing sight of what is important in life, like kindness, playfulness, generosity and friendship. The immaterial things that can’t be bought or sold.”

Consumerist individualism and declining community are widely perceived as the greatest social evil. But six other major problems recurred in the survey results: the misuse of drugs and alcohol; declining values (a blurring or loss of moral boundaries); declining social virtues (such as

tolerance, honesty and respect); family breakdown and poor parenting; inequality and poverty; and the failure of democratic institutions and the sense of powerlessness.

Cutting across these and other concerns expressed in the survey is an overarching sense of unease about the pace of social change. It is not that people do not want change or do not appreciate its benefits. Rather, they fear the inadvertent loss of valuable things along the way, and feel like hostages to change rather than its controllers.

There is one Liberal Democrat contribution to the Rowntree book; Baroness (and rabbi) Julia Neuberger, with a chapter titled ‘Unkind, risk averse and untrusting: if this is today’s society, can we change it?’ Were she cruder, she could have titled her chapter ‘Why people should get off their arses instead of expecting someone else to do everything’.

Her chapter is a frank assessment of the degree to which overblown panics about such issues as the risks faced to children by predatory paedophiles have warped the human instinct of kindness, while “risk aversion has increased a natural human reluctance to get involved”. Neuberger is particularly scathing about therapy culture. “Fear of others has turned us inwards,” and the rightful place of psychotherapy “is in the clinical setting and not in the everyday encounter with self-examination that, at worst, leads to an inability to act.”

Many liberals will find Rowntree’s book uncomfortable reading because it not only expresses firm moral judgements but also insists that we make them too. Those with an inclination to moral relativism or an ‘anything goes’ definition of personal liberty may recoil from such demands.

But politics demands that we make clear moral choices. What kind of moral values should society uphold? There is an urgent need for such a discussion and the Liberal Democrats aren’t having it, because it is outside their comfort zone. They would rather have technocratic debates about service delivery and budget setting; tactical debates about local campaigning techniques; or trendy therapeutic debates that view social problems in terms of individual failure.

If the Liberal Democrats want to be relevant, they need to develop a coherent world view about the nature and function of society and its problems and solutions. There needs to be joined-up thinking rather than a disparate series of green papers examining problems in isolation. Only then can campaign messages be developed that might have some impact.

If the Liberal Democrats do not address people’s central concerns about social disintegration, rival parties surely will. And because these parties are not liberal parties, they will point to human autonomy as a curse and attempt to roll back many hard-won freedoms in the name of social cohesion.

If the present economic crisis does not improve, popular resentments will build up and the ground will become more fertile for authoritarians who offer the security people seek at a price we cannot afford.

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