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WHERE IS BRITAIN GOING? WHAT DO WE want for our country, each other and ourselves? Why are we wealthier but no happier? Why do we have so much more choice in our lives, but still seem unable to choose the things that really matter? How can we tackle the big collective problems, such as crime and environmental threats, while retaining our personal freedoms? How can we rebuild a sense of community in an increasingly atomised world?



The honest answer to these questions is that we don't yet know. We fail to even ask the questions, because we can't comprehend an existence beyond the disjointed, anxious and only occasionally uplifting one we have. It's not that life is without joy – the issue is where the strenuous effort required to live in the 21st century is taking us.

As a society we are wealthier than ever before. We benefit from more material goods, the huge opportunities created by new technology and our horizons have been widened enormously through international travel. But we are not a happy society. Individuals and families feel pressurised and anxious. We face worrying new threats and challenges, such as climate change. In the midst of all this, politics seems to offer us fewer clear-cut choices. Our horizons often feel like they have shrunk to the next payday or shopping trip. We have more choice as consumers, but often feel powerless to control the big things in our lives.

It's even becoming difficult to know who 'we' are. Society is being so stretched by uncontrolled free markets that any notion of solidarity or togetherness is reaching a tipping point. The middle classes are beginning to feel some of the anxiety of those on lower incomes. The working class has been ignored, patronised or even vilified. Our lives have always been

complex and differentiated, but threads traditionally bound us together: from accessible health, decent education and good public transport to a tangle of cultural connections such as sport, music and television. These are fast disappearing.

Leaving the free market unchecked has left us with all kinds of problems – chiefly, a far too unequal society where the super-rich and victims of poverty are both cut adrift from the majority.

There are all kinds of reasons to celebrate 21st century Britain, but too many of its positive aspects are overshadowed by a sense that we are going in the wrong direction. In 2008 all this has been amplified by the first big breakdown of economic confidence in over a decade. Now that we face the prospect of recession, beliefs that supposedly ensured stability, prosperity and happiness are turning toxic. Leaving the free market largely unchecked – an idea at the heart of the governments led by Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown has left us with all kinds of problems, chief among them a far too unequal society where the super-rich and victims of poverty are both cut adrift from the majority. It is no wonder that the government is in such trouble. If all

politics can promise is prosperity, then what happens when rising living standards are snatched away? Politics, like our lives, needs a higher purpose.



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COMPASS is the high-profile democratic left pressure group with over 2500 members across the UK, we campaign for a more equal and democratic world, working in partnership with a range of people and progressive organisations on a wide range of issues. For information on becoming a member please visit www.compassonline.org.uk/join.asp

POLICY COMPETITION

We believe in a new kind of politics that reaches out, involves and engages people - and that at the heart of public policy, there has to be democratic debate and dialogue. As an integral part of the **How To Live In The 21st Century** project, we'll soon be launching a wide-ranging policy competition, which will

develop a set of symbolic policy ideas and help forge a new progressive consensus.

We want to hear what you think. Anyone can make a submission, and we want to consult and hear from as many different people as possible. Ultimately, it will be Compass members who have final say through a democratic selection process.

We want you to help identify the big issues and challenges, and to hear your policy ideas for how we win support for a new vision of a more equal, democratic and fairer Britain – essentially, your suggestions for how we change the future of our country for the better. For more information, visit www.compassonline.org.uk in the coming weeks.



This is a country with both a long history of entrepreneurial flair, and a tradition of neighbourliness and mutual care. At times of crisis, we come together, but we have a profound respect for the rights of the individual and a hatred of arbitrary power, whether it is wielded by the market or the state. We have huge potential to set an example that other countries could follow. Yet it is far from being realised. The paralysis is caused by our own doubts about what we want, and the fact that we have stopped imagining that anything better is both desirable and feasible. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that politicians have lost the confidence to present these alternatives to us.

MOST OF US WORK HARD AND PLAY BY THE rules, yet many of us still feel that our lives are missing a solid foundation. We put in the longest working hours in Europe but have almost twice as much personal debt as other Europeans. Our sons and daughters have to wait until their mid-thirties to even begin to afford their own home. The pressures of unchecked consumerism now affect even our youngest children. When a three year old recognises the McDonald's symbol before they know their own surname, something is going wrong.

High levels of immigration mean some of our communities are changing fast, but supposedly 'flexible' labour markets harden divisions between British and foreign workers, and the media and too many politicians resort to the language of fear and division. When pension schemes are scaled back, white collar jobs are outsourced abroad and no one knows how they will deal with long term elderly care, it's little wonder few of us feel confident about the future.

Half the UK's population shares just 6 percent of Britain's wealth, while the top 1 percent own a quarter of it. 11 million people – among them 3 million children live in poverty. The rich and powerful hold out the hope that with enough initiative and hard work we may be able to join them. But their privileges seal them off from the rest of society and ensure social mobility has all but ground to a halt. The very rich have become the new untouchables through the creation of a myth that their massive wealth accumulation will somehow flow to the rest of us, or that if we dare to tax them fairly they will jump ship to another country. As with all myths, there is no evidence that either holds true.

New technology was supposed to liberate us with more leisure. But quality time is the one thing that we never have enough of. What we really crave is more time and space in our lives, so we can tell our children a bedtime story, spend time with family and friends, stop and talk to our neighbours, relax or get fit. A country renowned for its Sunday league football, book groups and pub quizzes increasingly finds itself snatching at precious moments, only being allowed time for those things that turn a profit; work and consumerism. Small wonder that as many as one in six of us will at some time suffer from anxiety or depression.

In many ways we have simply not adjusted to the huge change which saw women entering the labour market rather than staying in the home. This was a liberation that very few people would now wish to see reversed. Women were the glue that held our families and communities together; that glue needs to be provided in new ways. Men and women need to reclaim, share and celebrate these essential caring roles as a central part of being human.

All around us are clear signs of a social recession. Treasured local institutions such as post offices vanish in front of our eyes. Our neighbourhoods are less neighbourly. Crime figures are falling, but we live in fear of violence. Think about one of modern Britain's most symbolic petty crimes: if children carry a mobile phone, the consumerist sheen quickly wears off, as it makes them a target for attack by people who want the same status such gadgets bring, but lack the financial means to get it. The result is a pervasive sense of fear and suspicion, particularly focused on the young, from whom we demand respect but offer too little sense of hope or belonging in return. In some of our cities almost half of 16-18 year-olds are not in education, employment or training. Sadly, their predicament reflects the values of the world they are born into: those of acquisitiveness, materialism and above all, competitive individualism.

But the glass isn't always half empty. There are reasons to be cheerful, and pointers to the society we could be living in. We live longer than any human beings in history, and many of us have access to a level of information that our ancestors didn't even dream about. Not only have women's lives been transformed, but rights have been extended for other groups such as gay people, in a society that in many ways is far more open and accepting. It is undeniable that greater choice and wealth have brought us many things that we value. The last decade has also seen a cultural renaissance, displayed most prominently in Britain's revived cities. Our musicians, film-makers and artists are world renowned.

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Moreover, there remains a spirit at odds with the me-first ways of the free market. Millions of us do voluntary work, involve ourselves in charities and NGOs, and set great store by doing our bit for the environment. Two million of us came together to march against the invasion of Iraq; eight million wore wristbands to show they wanted to make poverty history. In our biggest cities people from trade unions, faith groups and community organisations are pushing for a better deal for some of Britain's most exploited workers. Quintessentially British institutions from the NHS to the BBC are still founded, for the moment, on a collective ethos which recognises that private interest sometimes has to be held at bay. Even right-wing politicians have been forced to accept that the state of our public services is more important than tax cuts.

The 21st century is creating the potential for people to be empowered as never before. Google puts power at our fingertips. We can converse, share expertise, learn, organise and campaign at the touch of a button. Power can no longer be held at the centre, and is being devolved and decentralised. People are no longer deferential; we won't take orders without good reason. We want our voices not just to be heard but heeded, not just in formal politics, but in our communities and at work.

But the overriding social and economic story of life in Britain is how the risks of living, surviving and thriving have been transferred from something we do together to something we struggle to do alone. This creates a fundamental paradox: we cannot ensure safe streets, a decent education for our children, secure housing or a sustainable planet through individual action. These challenges, and many more, demand collective action. The issue is how we bring this about.



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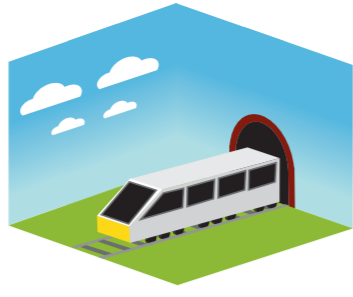


The last century was defined by a centralised welfare state that put in place a safety-net, stopping millions falling into poverty. Despite huge benefits, this became stifling and unresponsive. Recent years have seen a drawing back of blanket collective provision and the growth of individualised services. Yet much of what we want can only be delivered collectively. This does not mean a return to the old one size fits all centralised state, but neither does it mean embracing the uncontrolled free market. We need to harness the many opportunities that we have in our modern society to build a new collective ethos that gives us choices over the things that matter most: our environment, communities and public services.

WE HAVE TO WORK OUT HOW TO BRIDGE the gap between individual aspiration and our common interest. How do we take back control over our lives? How can we turn ourselves from spectators of the world into participants who shape it?

Utopianism has been given a bad name by those who want everything to stay the same. But all that we hold dear - the NHS, full employment and even the minimum wage - started out as someone's dream.

The new politics of hope must start with idealism and the belief that another world is possible; a world where we can get on, prosper and make the best of things. But also where the wealth, income and opportunity differences between the top and the bottom are reduced, leaving no one behind. Whether at home or abroad, no-one's life should be compromised by the brute luck of birth. Instead, we need collective insurance against falling ill or falling through no fault of our own. More



than ever; in the future we will need real social security against misfortune.

Utopianism has been given a bad name by those

whose want everything to stay the same. But all that we hold dear started out as someone's dream. The NHS, full employment and even the minimum wage were all initially decried as hopelessly utopian but people had the courage and the desire to struggle to make them a reality. The utopia we desire is a world where people are free, not just free from unjustifiable interference over their lives - but free to take the fullest possible control over their world by building and rebuilding the institutions that influence and shapes us. Our goal should be free people, not free markets.

This is the case for greater equality. Because we are different and all deserving of the right to make the most of our lives, we need the resources to ensure this can be achieved fairly. In theory, we all have the chance to rise to the top, but the reality is that most of us don't have the means to do it. Too many people are denied their freedom because they are denied the resources to be truly free.

The only basis for true freedom is fairness. But fairness can only be achieved through democracy. Through democracy we meet each other as equal citizens through processes in which all our voices are valid. If our lives are out of control, democracy is the means by which we can reassert influence. We have too little control because others - usually located in politics, business and the media - have too much, and they must be held to account. The very act of working together to shape our lives transforms our aspirations and ambitions, helping us come alive to new possibilities and creative talents. By working as equals with others we start to fulfil our human potential.

It would be easy to be overwhelmed by the scale of the changes we need to make, but there are plenty of areas in which new policies and approaches would point Britain in the right direction: a direction in which our society becomes more equal and therefore free, the quality of our lives is determined by us not for us, and we reach agreement about where markets and consumerism work in our interests, and where they should be kept at bay.

We need, for example, to move from demanding that employers pay a minimum wage to insisting on a living wage - so that people can be sure that work enables them to live on the same basic terms as everyone else - and companies do not compete by racing right to the bottom of the labour market. We should insist on the right to meaningful flexible working and use regulation to put an end to Britain's imbalanced long hour's culture. Even more ambitiously, given the fact that few people have a real say in how their organisations are run, we should examine how to bring some democracy to our working lives.

There is a strong case for a ban on advertising to children under 12, so that the crucial years in a child's life are as free as possible of the pressures of consumerism.

To draw an important line that the ever-more insatiable market cannot cross, there is a strong case for a ban on advertising to children under 12, so that the crucial development years in a child's life are as free as possible of the pressures of consumerism. To ensure that Britain's politics and culture are open to new ideas and a diversity of voices, we need to reform our laws on media ownership. In another area, we should ensure that companies do not shift their operations and sack their people according to which country charges the lowest tax rates by beginning a dialogue with our European partners about harmonising corporation tax across the EU.

The tax system must address the fact that Britain has become so unequal. One innovative idea is a tax on land, to get to grips with the fact that big property owners receive huge windfalls through no effort of their own. Addressing this issue would begin to stabilise house prices, slow speculation and rebalance wealth inequalities. There is also a strong argument to be made for a new top rate of income tax, pitched at a level that would begin to correct one of our society's most glaring imbalances: that as things stand, those at the very top of our society pay a much smaller proportion of their income in tax than those at the bottom.

These ideas are meant only as a beginning of a hugely important conversation about the future of Britain, but there are plenty of other changes demanding to be made. We need to ensure that

solving Britain's housing problem is not subject to the ups and downs of the property market, and instead use the strength of national and local government to make sure all of us have a decent and dependable place to live. Instead of the only 'reforms' of our public services being about forcing them to adopt the ways of the market, we have to think about introducing new ways of involving people in the services they use, and ensure that education and healthcare are things delivered with people rather than just to them. And as climate change becomes a reality, we need to phase out our reliance on oil, address the shocking state of public transport outside major cities including our decrepit and extortionate rail system and accelerate the development of sustainable energy alternatives.

Finally, one set of changes would arguably set the stage for everything else. When it comes to our system of politics Britain needs not only to move towards a fairer electoral set-up in which every vote counts, but to end the dominance by central government of our lives, and revive and democratise the way that our cities, towns and villages are run.

There are countries and societies from which we can learn a lot not least the social democratic states of Northern Europe - that are further towards the good society than we are. They are fairer, more democratic, more equal and have lower rates of crime, social breakdown, debt and illness than we do. We are too unique a country to simply copy them; but we need to understand what we can take from their example.

Our challenge is to transform a demoralised society into a remoralised nation and unlock our potential as individuals by acting together. If politics is to inspire us it has to be about more than good administration and competence. People are crying out for a different quality of life, real well-being and sustainability. When our principles define what we think is practical, there is no limit to what our country can achieve. We need to start a debate about the big things that matter to us and how we can build the kind of lives and society that we want.

Political leaders are reluctant to take the lead. They play it safe, caught in the trap of electoral timidity when the moment demands bravery. This is not a surprise; history teaches us that lasting changes in our lives: from the vote and the NHS, to greater gender equality - were not handed down from on high by benevolent politicians, but fought for by millions of people, convinced that the time for change had come. This is the nature of democracy. Politicians will be cautious until they realise that there is a real groundswell of opinion for change. But once they know, they will fall over each other to deliver it.

We cannot wait for our leaders to do it. It's up to us to do it ourselves. There has always been a progressive consensus waiting to be assembled. It is time to make it happen.

HOW TO LIVE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BRITAIN'S FUTURE AND THE CASE FOR REAL CHANGE

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