TOWARDS A GOOD SOCIETY

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Compass

#BuildBackBetter

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About Compass

Compass is the pressure group for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with top-down/state reforms and policy. The question we are trying to help solve, which we explore in the recent document 45 Degree Change, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

We are currently living through the most disorienting and frightening time that most of us can remember as we self-isolate or socially (physically) distance ourselves for an indefinite period in the face of a virus that is cutting short lives and causing heartbreak. CV19 has acted as a barium meal, revealing painfully depleted public services and social security benefits after a decade of austerity and exposing the unfairness of the unequal structure of rewards. But it has also illuminated the everyday decency and kindness shown by millions, which is the life blood of a good society – from NHS and care workers and others risking their lives on the front-line to civil society groups and neighbours looking out for fellow members of their communities.

'Decency' was the answer to the plague offered by Albert Camus in *La Peste* back in 1947, as Kenan Malik has reminded us[1]. However, Malik also warns that while 'decency is a necessary underpinning of the good society', it is not 'a sufficient one. Beyond decency lies politics. How decency is able to express itself, and what kind of society it can build, depends on political will and collective struggles'. This is the riposte to those who argue that now is not a time for politics. It is certainly not a time for tribal political point-scoring. But politics is in part about our individual and collective capacity to effect change at every level from the macro global to the micro level of our everyday lives. It is about how we build the kind of society in which we want to live good lives together. Even while trying to cope with all the difficulties and stresses of the present, many people are starting to look to a future in which we 'build back better' to quote Barry Knight[2].

Now is absolutely the time to talk about how we envision a good society. Indeed, I have been struck by the number of commentators, from across the political spectrum, arguing that 'we cannot go back to normal', to quote Peter C Baker in the *Guardian*[3]. To take just two examples: the first, from the Chief Executive of ConservativeHome:

'Surely this is precisely the right time to question whether what comes next should just be business as usual? Everything is changing and is being changed, so those who have the luxury of good health and time on their hands should seize the moment to use their imaginations to the full…Let's take this chance to think big, rather than pledging to go straight back to normal – without a thought as to whether "normal" was the best way to do things[4]

The second comes from the Financial Times editorial board: 'Radical reforms -reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades – will need to be put on the table…Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix'. Referencing the Second World War and the Beveridge Plan, 'the same kind of foresight is needed today. Beyond the public health war true leaders will mobilise now to win the peace'.[5]

Keir Starmer, too, made clear in his victory speech that 'we must go forward with a vision of a better society'. Of course, such a vision and the future 'normal' will be fiercely contested. We must do all we can to prevent a repeat of what happened after the financial crisis of 2008 when the Right seized the moment. And even before CV19 turned our world upside down, in the UK our exit from the EU following a period of political turmoil raised fundamental questions about the kind of society we want to be, whatever one's position on Brexit. For Compass the debate around a good society has always been our lode star, helping us to prioritise social ends over economic means. It allows us to imagine how things could be different. It could provide an inspiring vision for change, which combines the social and collective with what is needed for each individual to flourish in their own way. We cannot decree how another person's good life should look, but we can work to enable each person to achieve that good life for themselves (provided it is not directly at the expense of others' good lives and what is loosely described as the 'common good'). In this paper I offer a personal sketch of what I see as the main building blocks of a good society – material, ethical/emotional, political and cultural. I then relate these briefly to the individual life-course and our place in the wider world before some brief concluding remarks. You will find some questions at the end to encourage discussion.

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Material building blocks

I would argue that the material building blocks provide the foundations of a good society. Each individual should have enough money and access to decent public services to ensure material security as part of a fairer and more equitable distribution of society's resources. Instead widespread economic insecurity means those foundations are very shaky for many people, as the current crisis has revealed all too painfully. And endemic poverty and gaping inequality, which research shows are interconnected, represent a violation of human dignity and thereby distort economic, social and political relationships. They undermine our common citizenship and sense of community and social cohesion. One consequence can be damaged physical and mental health as a result of the psycho-social stresses experienced in particular by people in poverty who are deprived of the recognition and respect due to them as fellow human beings – a basic human need. Indeed, some people experiencing poverty talk of being treated as less than human including by those who administer welfare state services. Both the material and psycho-social impact of poverty can be aggravated by intersecting inequalities such as of gender, 'race', ethnicity and disability.

Poverty, inequality and economic insecurity also undermine people's

life chances and reduce life expectancy, as evidenced by Sir Michael Marmot's latest report[6]. Equality of opportunity, regardless of social class, ethnicity, 'race', gender, sexuality, disability – axes of intersecting inequalities that can also threaten human dignity – is a foundational principle. However, that does not mean a good society should be a meritocratic society. Not everyone can or wants to climb the meritocratic ladder. In this case, they should still be able to count on a decent wage if they are able to contribute through paid work, which raises questions about the rewards attached to different kinds of work, of which more below. If they cannot contribute through paid work, for whatever reason, they should be able to rely on decent benefits as a socio-economic right. All must have the means for a dignified life in line with human rights principles, regardless of employment status. Relevant too here is the role of taxation, in particular of income and wealth, which I would argue should be seen not as 'a burden', as it is so often dubbed, but as our collective contribution to a decent social infrastructure of services and benefits and as a key component of a fairer overall distribution of society's resources.

We also need a fairer distribution of paid work and other activities that give life meaning. One aspect of this is the distribution of paid work and unpaid care work as between women and men. This is partly about the distribution of time, which is also a resource that is distributed unevenly in particular between genders. As a recent Oxfam report shows, world-wide unpaid and underpaid care work is undertaken disproportionately by women, especially those subject to other forms of discrimination[7]. Care work is typically undervalued – whether it is care for children or older people wage rates tend to be a pittance, yet arguably this work is worth much more to society than that of say the astronomically highly paid chief executives we read about.

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If nothing else, the current crisis has brought this insight home to millions. Writing about care workers and the many other low paid and insecure workers now deemed 'key workers', Sarah O'Connor of the Financial Times argues that 'once the economy has recovered, these jobs need to be made better. Insecure contracts and loopholes should be replaced with permanent jobs, better wages and more training and accreditation… Coronavirus has forced us to rethink who we value and how. Some of the workers we have left to languish in low-paid and insecure jobs are the very ones we cannot live without. It's not just time to be grateful. It's time to make amends'.[8]

The distribution of time also raises questions about the role of paid

work in our lives. If we are lucky it can give meaning to our lives as well as material security. And, at present because of CV19, many people have been thrown out of work or have had to reduce their hours involuntarily, aggravating insecurity and financial pressures. But what Philip Larkin called the 'toad work' can also squat on our lives squashing out other meaningful activities. A recent article, which struck a real chord, painted a picture of a 'world of total work' in which work totally dominates our lives and life is turned into an endless set of tasks[9]. The author, Andrew Taggart, argues that this 'taskification of the world' means we are 'always behind in the incomplete now' and feel guilty when we fail to keep on top of those tasks. Neal Lawson often likes to quote the economist, the late J. K. Galbraith: 'there are many visions of the good society; the treadmill is not one of them'.[10]

Recent discussion about possibilities for a shorter working week is therefore welcome. That does not necessarily mean moving straight to a four-day week, which was widely criticised when it appeared in the Labour Party manifesto as an immediate goal rather than a longer-term aspiration. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Valencia is planning just that, and Finland's new Prime Minister has recently called for a shorter working week as a way of allowing workers more family time. To quote her 'I believe that people deserve to spend more time with their families, loved ones, hobbies and other aspects of life, such as culture'. It could also mean more time to be an active citizen, be healthy, have fun or just be. And the Valencian vice-president has suggested it could help fight the climate emergency by allowing people to live a less 'resource-intensive lifestyle'.[11]

Growing support for some form of a universal basic income (UBI) speaks to these questions of time and material security. It could underpin any move to a shorter working week, facilitate a better balance between paid work and other activities and provide the financial security which today's labour market and social security system are signally failing to do for many people. Even a partial basic income could provide a modicum of financial security in the face of labour market, housing and personal insecurity. It is striking how enthusiasm for the idea of some kind of UBI, long espoused by Compass, has blossomed during the current crisis.[12]

Ethical and emotional building blocks

Together sufficient money and time enable most of us to live our lives with ease, which for me is the starting point of a good life. But good lives need more than just money and time. There is also a strong ethical and emotional element in how we live good lives involving an ethic of care, kindness and love.

We all need care at some stage of our lives and being human is in part about our ties of inter-dependency. An ethic of care is about taking care of both others and ourselves and also the environment. It is in part an attitude, but it also has implications for how we organise society. The

need for time to care, a fairer distribution of caring responsibilities and a rewards structure that attaches greater value to care work – both paid and unpaid – in turn has implications for care services. If those providing these services are paid a pittance, it speaks volumes about the value we place on care and not surprisingly is all too often associated with high turnover and poor quality services, despite the commitment typically shown by low paid care workers.

One good thing to have come out of the proposal for a new points-based immigration system, which prioritises the 'skilled' over the low paid, has been an intense debate around who counts as skilled workers. Caroline Abraham of Age UK among others has pointed out that low pay does not equal low skill. As already noted, the current crisis has now made the case in neon lights. The Executive Chair of the National Association of Care and Support Workers explains that care workers need three kinds of skills: organisational, clinical and soft skills of empathy and patience.[13] It is hard, demanding work. When governments talk about investing in infrastructure it should not just be the physical infrastructure but also the social infrastructure, which includes caring services for both children and adults in need of care, as the Women's Budget Group has argued persuasively.

An ethic of care is at heart about an attitude of compassion, kindness, tenderness and love, as a recent Observer piece by a woman who had helped care for her brain-injured brother articulated movingly[14]. But an ethic of care goes beyond the act of physical caring for others. In an article about nature writing, Patrick Barkham described inspiring local actions as 'a flowering… of positive care' and an 'explosion of local kindness' in response to a need to build 'the basic building blocks of a good life', that political institutions and mainstream charities had failed to do[15]. We have seen just such a flowering in civil society in response to the CV19 crisis as neighbours and community members look out for each other. The ethic was also exemplified by the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's response to the Christchurch atrocity last year when she said that 'the answer lies in our humanity' and evoked the power that lies in 'our daily acts of kindness'. And her statement that 'you are us' was a powerful statement of that common humanity in which she identified the whole nation with the Muslim community.

Although she did not frame it in such terms, it spoke also to a culture of human rights in which every human being is treated with genuine dignity and respect. This represents the essence of a human rights culture even if the words have become something of a cliché in management speak. A genuine culture of human rights premised on respect for human dignity and the equal citizenship of all service users can be transformative according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission[16]. The Scottish government has spelt this out as an explicit principle in its social security legislation (and supporting charter) which states that 'respect for the dignity of individuals is to be at the heart of the Scottish social security system'. And it has built user-involvement into the new system in

acknowledgement of growing demands among poverty activists for people with experience of poverty and of claiming social security to be treated as 'experts by experience'. I and others have argued for a human rights approach to poverty in part because it challenges dominant narratives which treat 'the poor' as Other or different from and inferior to the rest of society[17]. A human rights culture also challenges intersecting inequalities associated with 'race' and ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality and age.

Democratic/political building blocks

An ethic of care and kindness has implications too for how we do our politics. Compass describes itself as practising 'a politics of kindness, openness and compassion', which involves genuinely listening to others, curiosity and a willingness to try to see the world through others' eyes - or at least that is what we aspire to. In parliament a new All Party Parliamentary Group for Compassion in Politics was inaugurated recently. Its aim is to put compassion, cooperation and inclusion at the heart of politics and policy-making. Although not explicit, it is rooted in a human rights approach not a paternalistic top-down understanding of compassion. Tim O'Riordan's definition of compassion, in an article on a compassionate transition to sustainability, encapsulates this democratic understanding of compassion well: 'the kindness of self-aware generosity and the sympathetic joy of acting morally for the benefit of all'. It 'embraces attributes such as sympathy, care for well-being, empathy, sensitivity for others' distress'[18].

A kinder politics does not, however, mean there are no conflicts or arguments; it is a question of how they are pursued and resolved. And politics is not only what happens in Westminster, Edinburgh or Cardiff. Compass talks about 45 Degree politics i.e. bringing together the vertical axis of mainstream politics and the horizontal access of more informal forms of politics, with an emphasis on participatory deliberation and involvement. The growing interest in citizen assemblies is encouraging. As is the gradually widening acknowledgement, already noted, that policy-makers can learn from 'experts by experience'. But there's a long way to go before we have genuine participation in policy-making particularly in the case of marginalised groups such as people in poverty. That said, not everyone wants to get involved in this way, so it should not be required but rather it should be encouraged and facilitated as wider and deeper participation would strengthen citizenship as well as improve policy-making.

Cultural building blocks

The cultural, in the broadest sense of the term, also plays an important role in a good society and life. Writing about his hometown Stevenage, Gary Younge recently quoted from a post-war vision for the new towns that they should be home to 'a new type of citizen, a healthy, self-

respecting, dignified person with a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride'[19]. We should all be able to enjoy culture and beauty in whatever form resonates with us including the beauty of the natural environment. An understanding of the social determinants of health has involved growing recognition of the importance to mental health of being able to enjoy both the natural environment and the arts, again broadly defined.

An inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Well-being took inspiration from Raymond Williams' description of culture as a whole way of life within which arts are a process of discovery and creative effort, in other words 'everyday human creativity'[20]. The report cites many instrumental arguments for how the arts can help meet major challenges facing health and social care, ageing, loneliness and mental health. But running through it is also appreciation of the arts' intrinsic value. It quotes my colleague in the Lords Joan Bakewell: 'I have always believed that arts need no other justification than their own intrinsic value, their capacity to lift the spirit and give us experiences of transcendental and inspirational power'. David Hockney lifted many spirits recently with his iPad pictures of Spring and observation that the source of art is love. In the words of a theatre group working in a deprived area of Leeds, 'access to culture is a fundamental part of a happy life'. This all has important implications for our education system.

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Another recurrent theme in the APPG report is the importance of the arts to those who experience social disadvantage and to marginalised groups generally. Typically, marginalised groups have less access to culture and natural beauty. ATD Fourth World, a human rights anti-poverty organisation, argues that 'access to art is a human right'[21]. Human rights are about what we share as human beings, respect for the dignity of each individual. The arts and natural beauty can transcend social divisions in the capacity to lift the spirit to which Joan Bakewell referred. And to quote a family member with whom ATD worked, 'even though I live in an area which isn't beautiful, I can still appreciate and create beauty. The right to beauty is part of my right to dignity'[22].

The life course: from childhood to older age

The arts APPG inquiry's findings are presented in a life-course framework – from birth to the end of life. A good society would enable

people to flourish throughout their lives, with special emphasis perhaps on childhood and older age as periods when people are more likely to be dependent on others. The structural and intersecting inequalities mentioned earlier shape how both childhood and older age are experienced but can too easily be obscured by a focus on inter-generational divisions that are in danger of encouraging conflict.

A Fabian commission some years ago argued that 'perhaps the most fundamental of all life chances is the chance to live a fulfilling and rewarding life, beginning in childhood… Children must be given the chance to enjoy a happy, flourishing childhood and to continue to thrive as they grow up'.[23] From a material perspective, that means at a minimum a strategy to eliminate child poverty, which is currently growing and intensifying. More broadly, I currently chair a British Academy programme on childhood policy and one of the emergent themes from discussions with academics, policy-makers and civil society organisations is that policy tends to treat children as 'becomings' rather than 'beings': we need a better balance between the two. That means, as well as a focus on children's opportunities and futures, promoting children's wellbeing in the here and now – for instance through decent play facilities and access to open spaces. It also means treating them as child citizens, in line with their right to be heard under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as many children do want to be heard. Indeed, when it comes to the climate emergency many children have taken things into their own hands and have made sure they are heard – very effectively.

At the other end of the life course, we should all be able to look forward to a comfortable old age, to be enjoyed not dreaded. As noted, that involves much that I have already mentioned but also of particular importance is ensuring that older people are able to remain full members of society, not isolated or lonely. Again, engagement in the arts can help here.

Outward-looking/solidarity

The final dimension of a good society I want to emphasise is that it must be outward-looking, demonstrating solidarity with and fulfilling its responsibilities to the wider world and also the planet. As J. K. Galbraith emphasised 'the good society cannot set itself apart' from the poverty and suffering experienced in poorer parts of the world.[24] Without global action, the impact of CV19 on the Global South will be to worsen dramatically this poverty and suffering.[25] An internationalist, solidaristic perspective has implications not only for international development but also immigration and refugee/asylum, and environmental policies.

One first step would be to end the hostile/compliant environment which underpins immigration policy, and which was largely responsible for the Windrush scandal. It still permeates employment and housing practices. Wendy Williams' independent Windrush Lessons Learned Review for the government calls for 'a full review and evaluation' of the policy and

'measures – individually and cumulatively'. Her overall analysis and recommendations provide a template for action. She sums up:

> the Home Office must acknowledge the wrong which has been done; it must open itself up to greater external scrutiny; *and it must change its culture to recognise that migration and wider Home Office policy is about people and, whatever its objective, should be rooted in humanity* (emphasis added).[26]

This last wise counsel is particularly apposite given how CV19 has shed light on the diversity of health and social care workers, many of whom are first or second generation immigrants, as they risk their health and lives on behalf of us all.

A parallel first step would be a more inclusive approach to asylum-seekers and refugees. Particular policy examples include allowing asylum-seekers to take paid work after 6 months, more inclusive family reunion rules and ending the rule that requires newly recognised refugees to claim mainstream social security within 28 days after which they lose their asylum support, leaving too many destitute just at the time they should be feeling happy at having achieved the security of refugee status. With the support of the British Red Cross I am promoting a private members bill in the Lords to extend the period to 56 days.

It goes without saying that a good society has to be a sustainable society. A combination of recent weather catastrophes of floods and fires together with the international schools strikes and Extinction Rebellion is making it that much harder to ignore that message. The lead taken by young people has been quite inspirational. One example is a group who organised a recent parliamentary reception to promote a Bill they have drawn up to require educators from primary to tertiary education to integrate the climate emergency into the curriculum – they call it Teach the Future.

As ideas like the Green New Deal acknowledge, environmental policies cannot be divorced from the socio-economic inequalities mentioned earlier. According to the Green New Deal UK, the programme it proposes would 'transform our economy and secure a liveable climate while building a fair society'.[27] Environmental and socio-economic justice must go together. As Maisa Rojas, scientific coordinator for COP25, has observed 'we know that the climate emergency acts as an amplifier of social inequality, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable'.[28] It is therefore crucial that the transition to a more sustainable future is a just transition that protects marginalised groups.

Concluding comments

This kind of thinking informs the approach of Scotland's Just Transition Commission, which is responsible for helping plan and deliver a just

transition to net zero that protects groups in vulnerable circumstances. It will, we are told, focus on the provision of environmentally and socially sustainable jobs, with particular regard to poverty alleviation. Its approach chimes with the growing number of governments committing to promoting well-being including that of future generations. The Welsh Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act has been something of a path-breaker. John Bird is currently trying to build on that legislation for the UK through a private members bill in the Lords. Last year New Zealand pioneered a wellbeing budget, which prioritises wellbeing indicators over GDP when it comes to spending decisions. The Finance Minister, Grant Robertson, explained that for him 'wellbeing means people living lives of purpose, balance and meaning, and having the capabilities to do so'.

What we do now, during this terrible crisis, will matter for what comes next.

When I read about such developments and now see so many examples of the 'kindness of strangers' and of decency and love towards fellow human beings in the time of corona it gives me cause to hope. As does the sense that CV19 has caused many people to ask fundamental questions about the kind of society we are and want to be. However difficult the circumstances and however strong the forces against us, to quote the civil and human rights activist Harvey Milk, as Compass does on its poster for new members 'Hope will never be silent'. The importance of hope is brought home in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation picture exhibition of the experiences of people in poverty. When participants were asked what was the one thing they couldn't live without, Joy Pocock of Leeds, after some thought, answered 'hope [as] the one thing that stops me from saying my life is meaningless enough to end it'. In the words of the American writer Rebecca Solnit: 'Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists adopt the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand'.[29] So, if we believe in building a good society, what each one of us does – individually and collectively – to make it happen matters.

What we do now, during this terrible crisis, will matter for what comes next. Through our everyday actions, supporting each other with care and kindness, we can sow the seeds of a good society. Through our thinking and writing we can try to offer a compass to help orient ourselves so that when the time comes, we are ready to show the way to a good society based on Compass' values of equality, democracy and sustainability as well as an ethic of care and love. To this end, I offer this paper as the basis for discussion and debate.

Questions

1. There are obvious gaps (for instance education) – what are the most important ones and how would you fill them?
2. Is there anything you disagree with?
3. Without being over-prescriptive or turning it into a technocratic list of policies what might be the key policies – either already included or not – that could act as a signpost or stepping-stones to a good society? In particular which policies could be transformative?
4. What ethical framework should be pursued in a good society when interests or rights clash and when people breach its laws or norms and do not respect the rights and well-being of others in both the public and private, domestic spheres?

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