**Comments on Matthew Taylor’s paper “Reprogramming the Future”**

For many years I have held the view that nothing short of systemic, root and branch change will do and I found an echo in Matthew’s introduction where he states that “our entire social system is in need of renewal”, and urges us to “create a model of change that balances state, market and civil society.” While I prefer radical reform to “renewal” I found much in Matthew’s essay that chimed with my own anxieties and aspirations.

I shall begin by outlining the key ideas as I see them in Matthew’s paper (with some interpolations on my own behalf, highlighting what I believe to be **Key Themes** and **ideas** that need persuing) and go on to set out some of my own prescription for a fairer, more productive and happier society.

Matthew asks whether technological advances we have made, and which we continue to make, will benefit us all, given that software developments have already led to workers in certain roles losing their livelihoods and that the race is on to produce robots that can both think and act like humans.

This leads into my first **Key Theme**, which is that there must be a moral context for all social, technological and other changes deliberately wrought in our lives, including careful consideration of the implications for individuals or classes of individuals. I shall call this “**rehumanising**” our society and will return to this point later, as it goes further than the example of job losses due to the replacement of humans.

The context here includes the importance of replacing humans engaged in repetitive or physically demanding and dangerous activities with non-human systems. Think of all the lives lost or blighted by working down a coal mine for example, which could have been spared by the judicious use of robots or other intelligent systems had they been available. Decisions to move in this direction depend on current levels of technological knowledge and capability but also on economic imperatives and within a capitalist society they will include the possibility of maximising profit.

Matthew identifies three pillars of broadly liberal societies like ours and he goes on to identify the strands in an assault from various quarters on each of these pillars.

1. WELFARE: and this covers payments, services, personal security and the maintenance of social cohesion

The new right’s focus on the free market, its identification of poor outcomes and structural failings of welfare systems, the lack of impartiality of politicians and bureaucrats, the impact on availability and distribution of investment and suggested malign consequences of the welfare system.

The left’s dissatisfaction with a bureaucratic approach and the concomitant inhumanity in so much decision making within our welfare systems and their preference for focusing on causes rather than consequences of the problems the welfare system is meant to address.

1. MODERN MARKET: including property rights, competition and consumer culture

The recent but historically grounded critique of capitalism which recognises its strengths but identifies clearly its structural frailties. The credit crunch of some ten years ago appears to have reinforced this critique, strengthening scepticism about the ethical integrity of capitalist enterprises and underlining the seemingly systemically inevitable outcomes of their behaviour as experienced in the economic stagnation and deprivation of large parts of our society.

1. DEMOCRACY: which depends on fair elections, freedom of speech and assembly, the rule of law and, I would add, access to trustworthy information of various kinds

Our political institutions and those who populate them have lost our trust, due to a failure of leadership and seemingly widespread misbehaviour. I would add my own suspicion that during my lifetime successive governments appear to have accepted that their rôle is to manage our decline. I also flag up here the issue of **discipline** to which I shall return. Matthew goes on to suggest that comparison of our own social system within a global perspective throws into doubt the robustness and efficacy of representative democracies in ensuring social progress.

He claims that “there is as yet no viable or popular alternative to these systems” and suggests that we need to renew them.

Matthew is determined to see the problems he describes in a global light and adopts an action plan based on the ideas of Mary Douglas. I prefer radical replacement over renewal and recommend a focus on our own solutions here in the UK as a replicable model while still acknowledging the global reach of the problems we face.

The Mary Douglas approach identifies three active routes:-

1. Hierarchical, state led
2. Solidaristic wherein a shared civil identity is key and
3. Individualistic, based on the dynamism of the market

and a passive route, namely 4) Fatalism.

Not surprisingly Matthew prefers the three active ways citing post war renewal as a successful example of this approach.

Some cautionary observations are aired.

From

* the tendency of technological change in our history to make things worse for most people before making them better, to
* the inadequacy of government-imposed solutions, to
* the claim that the trend of rising inequality has only been stemmed in the past by plague, war or bloody revolution.

My second **Key Theme** is that in my view the success of worker-oriented policies, for example, has been due not only to a particular political party gaining power through election but to **a movement** which became irresistible. A movement is not a political party or a caucus within one. It encompasses political agents responding to its own imperatives for change.

Matthew claims that the starting point for a modern progressive programme has to be the attempt to renew each dimension of social co-ordination……i.e. the state, the market, the site of civil society. My view is that these areas are indeed in need of radical revision, but that the starting point is in fact to **tell a NEW STORY** about what our society can become and build a movement around it.

Starting where Matthew suggests we start may lead to overly cautious and possibly inadequate innovations such as “further devolution of power to cities” as he proposes.

While this proposal has the ring of the intuitively attractive about it the broader principle at work here is the location of decision making closest to the people affected by it, my third **Key Theme**, namely **subsidiarity**. This suggests a more ambitious restructuring of the framework for all areas of decision making from individual enterprises to government, an approach that goes well beyond mere “devolution of power to cities” and stands a far better chance in my view of “adding to the resilience of civil society”.

Matthew refers to “alternative forms of control” with regard to ownership of enterprises. My view is that this would be best addressed by ensuring the engagement of the work-force in each enterprise by giving it a systemically assured say in influencing decision-making and by including such influence as an intrinsic part of the work-force’s reward. This is the real basis of social inclusion and justice, equality, human worth and dignity. The basis of our new story, therefore, must be **CO-OPERATING**.

This ties in well with Tawney’s view, cited by Matthew, that the story must be about “what the good society requires of citizens as well as what the state promises them.”

This is a story, then, that is deeper, more ambitious, more long term and which constitutes the next major leap forward. And in promoting this approach it is important not to be constricted by the binary capitalist versus socialist choice, and this is my fourth **Key Theme**. An alternative exists which, properly implemented, will meet all the dimensions of our NEW STORY.

It turns out that our NEW STORY is not exactly new. Indeed I recall the fanfare of Tony Blair’s appearance on the national stage announcing his “third way” and my excitement that we had, potentially, a new leader who would break the binary mould referred to above. My hopes were dashed, but some 100 years ago various thinkers, with a mix of motivations, some of them religious, all of them underpinning their hopes of a just social order, identified a range of themes the embedding of which into our social structure and organisation promised to offer greater individual engagement in and popular influence on decision making than that which then prevailed and than what seemed at the time to be the only alternative. These themes deserve consideration in addressing the ills identified by Matthew Taylor. The themes are:-

The right of all people to own property leading to widespread property ownership including the ownership of the organs of wealth creation, the means of production, i.e enterprises of all kinds in order to ensure that they would not be centralised under the control of the state as socialism requires or left in the hands of a few individuals or corporations.

This would provide for a systemically different social organisation from socialism AND capitalism (both equally flawed and exploitative) and allow us to work towards bringing about a just social order.

Around the start of the 20th century, [G. K. Chesterton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G._K._Chesterton) and [Hilaire Belloc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilaire_Belloc) drew together the disparate experiences of the various cooperatives and [friendly societies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friendly_society) in Northern England, Ireland, and Northern Europe into a coherent political ideology which specifically advocated widespread private ownership of housing and control of industry through owner-operated small businesses and worker-controlled cooperatives. This thinking is at the core of my view that the NEW STORY must centre upon CO-OPERATING.

The co-operative ideals are far more, historically and psychologically, at the heart of the British working people’s identity than Stalin’s vicious distortion of the class struggle. And they chime with both the deep and widespread desire for systemic change and our common hankering for social justice. The question is, “Do you trust the people?” Robespierre et al did not, Stalin and his fellow-travellers did not and do not. We must!

We can only guess how our society might look now had Clause IV had co-operating at its heart. Imagine:

“To secure for workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the co-operative ownership and direction of the means of production, distribution and exchange and of the best obtainable system of co-operative administration and management of each identified industry or service.

Each industry or service should be considered for co-operative organisation, ownership and management by the workforce within it, and decided upon by a majority vote of said workforce.”

**Private property**

Within the context described it appears odd that ownership of property (including enterprises of all sorts) should be incontrovertibly a bad thing. The "co-operative" approach entails that such property may be "co-owned" in partnership.

It seems intuitively unassailable that people are likely to work harder and better if they own the land on which they work or the company for which they work and the tools with which they labour.

**Subsidiarity**

To prevent large private organisations from dominating the body politic, I propose that this philosophy with its principle of subsidiarity be applied to economic and to social and political action.

**Political Structure**

Subsidiarity is the key principle behind the move towards devolving power over decision making to cities, but why apply the principle in such a piece-meal way when one of the jewels in the crown of governance in the UK used to be local government? I suggest that a thorough-going provincial devolution combined with a deep-rooted review of voting methodologies would answer directly many of the ills of our current model including remoteness, disconnect and poor answerability.

We have a structure and system in the UK and the USA, for example, where it is easy for apparently incompetent and even dangerous people to rise to the top. This makes it easier for extreme and ill-considered policies to be implemented.

Nicholas Humphrey, in “The Inner Eye” observes that “We are not ruled by wise men” and cites Bertrand Russell in his “letter to The Nation” of August 1914 in which he says “The highest offices of state may be held by sets of ‘official gentlemen, living luxurious lives, mostly stupid and all without imagination or heart’ “.

Is this just another Utopian idea (simply idealism) or can it be adapted to repair our broken nation? It seems to address each of the many areas of failure of our current system/society and especially its unimpressive political “leadership”. That all people should have their human dignity safeguarded systemically seems obvious to me, but with people dying in hospital corridors, groups at odds (even at war) with each other on racial or other grounds, schools in danger of plunging into mediocrity once more, and so on...... If this is not a time for idealism I don’t know when would be! This philosophy needs translating into the 21st century.

In a further paper I shall explore two other key themes ripe for exploration, the combination of which with the above will provide a coherent, salutary and ambitious programme of change:

* The re-humanising of how we live and go about our business including the notion of Human Dignity.
* Discipline as a positive concept in social thinking.

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