

The Common Good – what does it mean for people and places in poverty?

The Ebor lecture – 5 October 2011 – Julia Unwin

Introduction

We meet today in the third week of party conferences when we have been bombarded with quick solutions, easy responses, and ready answers to the troubles we face. I can promise that this lecture will not add to these easy and simple responses. Indeed I am going to argue that complex problems require complex solutions, and that attempts to simplify only obscure.

The second decade of the 21st century is proving to be an extremely interesting decade. Interesting, and terrifying. But I am going to argue that it is also enormously rich in opportunity and possibility, and that making it a decade of positive and lasting social change is in the gift of all of us, in perhaps the first time for many generations. And that failing to consider alternatives makes us all complicit in a crisis which will otherwise wreak havoc in all our lives, but will particularly and dramatically damage the lives of people and places in poverty.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Over 100 years ago, at a time also redolent with fear, with opportunity, with crisis and with change, Joseph Rowntree left a significant portion of his massive wealth to establish the group of trusts that still bear his name. The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, carrying forward his defining interest in democratic reform and in particular the Liberal Party; the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust with a focus on peace, on Quaker concerns, on vitally important work over decades in both South Africa and Ireland, and with a hugely important programme of social action in the UK, and the twin bodies of the JRF and JRHT, the two organisations I am currently privileged to lead.

JRF is a national, genuinely UK-wide foundation, exploring the causes of social evil, and identifying solutions. JRHT is a small developing housing association, running housing and care in Yorkshire and Hartlepool. Together we have a shared purpose:

JRF and JRHT together aim to achieve lasting change for people and places in poverty, to build communities where everyone is able to thrive, and to contribute to a more equal society. Now and for future generations.

And together we do this by searching out the causes of social problems, demonstrating solutions, in order to influence real and lasting change. Our focus is on poverty, on place (and we are deeply rooted in place), and in the coming three years, on helping to shape a society that can age with enthusiasm, solidarity and care.

We are also intimately linked with the history of **York** - the place where so much began. It is of critical significance that this series of Ebor lectures about the good society is taking place in York. York, the city which threads through social history. The city where so much innovation, (disruptive and challenging,) took place. The home of some of the first Guilds, those early mutual institutions of working men and women. York, which received its Royal Charter almost exactly 800 years ago, then a model for modern city government. York, the home of the Retreat, where, at the instigation of another hugely courageous Quaker, William Tuke, mentally ill women were for the first time in Europe kept unmanacled, and later provided so much profound humane and positive care for people suffering the scourge of mental illness. York, where Joseph Rowntree built the model village of New Earswick, providing housing in green spaces, replacing slums, which has provided a template for suburban living for so long. And York, where Joseph Rowntree, and later Seebohm, counted the people in poverty, and did it in a way that shocked Prime Ministers and clearly laid the path for the development of national insurance, one hundred years ago this year. And York, the base for the trusts that bear his name, continuing to carry out his wishes and contribute to building what we now call a good society.

For JRF and JRHT, and indeed for our sister trusts, change is a constant. No set of organisations that have thrived through the seismic changes since 1904 should ever balk at social change: it is always salutary to look back before looking forward and leading JRF and JRHT provides a wonderful prism. When Joseph Rowntree established his village of housing in York – known as New Earswick, and still managed

and held in perpetual stewardship by the JRHT, the overwhelming majority of people housed there worked in the same place, the Rowntree factory. Whether as managers or labourers they had one employer, and the fact that they were housed in decent housing, in proximity to each other, was revolutionary. They were all tenants, and would have worshipped on Sundays at one of three Christian churches. Joseph Rowntree's dream of a house and garden, with a fruit tree, for all workers looked impossibly, and perhaps foolishly, lavish.

Just in case even a sophisticated audience like this one is for one moment tempted towards nostalgia let us also recall the true horror of those times. In terms of income and consumption, I suspect that even the better off would have seemed impoverished to our eyes. At a time when divorce was impossible for all but the very wealthiest men, real domestic misery and pain prevailed, with untold violence and abuse behind closed doors. No penicillin, no antibiotics, no national insurance, and no compulsory, free education for anyone over 14. No anxiety about social mobility because there was so little. No concern about old age because men died within five years of retirement, and women not much later.

A harsh, seemingly monochrome life, in which brave and courageous people made difficult choices, formed different sorts of associations, and fought for the social change that has brought us – in no particular order:

- a system of welfare benefits that works, even as it creaks, where changes in life circumstances may herald major hardship, but not, usually, destitution;
- the possibility of social mobility for some, even without the much prized possibility of mobility for all;
- the emancipation of women, not achieved but further than we might have feared;
- A society where racism, at least the overt kind, is greeted with disapproval, and multi culturalism, despite the passionate debate, is a given;
- A society where most of us have celebrated civil partnership, and the voices of hatred that brought us Section 28 have, at least for now, been silenced;
- A society which has enshrined the Human Rights Act;

- which has introduced the NHS and National Insurance, and;
- a society which gives all its children education – thanks in part to social reformers including William Temple, one of the many great Archbishops of this Minster;
- in which it is possible to live in household types of different sorts, in different patterns, and to raise children in ways that past generations would have simply not thought possible.

I say all this not out of smugness, nor out of a sense of self satisfaction, but as a reminder of how far we have all come, and how very much we have been able to contribute through common endeavour.

Because now we need that sense of common purpose, of optimism and steely determination, of shared drive, of solidarity, of new and free thinking perhaps as much as ever before, and, I am going to argue, while we can borrow some things from the past, and must never forget what we have learned from that past, our history will never provide us with a safe and reliable guide for the future.

The common good

I believe that with this history in mind, we can start to define a 21st century vision of the common good.

Now, we should not be under too much philosophical pressure here. There is of course a long history of thinkers trying to establish, refine and defend the conception of the ‘common good’, with vastly different perspectives. From Rousseau’s vision of the social contract united by a ‘general will’, to Mahatma Gandhi’s ideal human society being a shared quest for truth, different cultures and intellectual traditions have made their attempts to define the common good. I will not attempt to improve upon these great thinkers’ work, but will rather give a practical, working definition, and perhaps one that can allow us to think clearly about where to go.

The common good, in the context of this lecture series, can be rooted in that profoundly important belief, shared by people of all faiths and none, that every individual is precious, that everyone has worth, and that the hunger, need and despair of any, should rightly pain us all. A belief that

in a good society we share the risks of our own vulnerability, can identify that which makes us collectively strong, and can contribute to the flowering of everyone's capabilities, not just the achievement of the very few. A good society that recognises that what we hold in common is both important and valuable, and that jeopardising the common good for individual gain, diminishes us all.

At the heart of these concerns is the defining political debate of this decade, which is about where responsibility sits: is it the state, the market, the community or the individual and their family who is responsible for well being? And in the 21st century what does this mean? The whole paradigm that saw poverty and all associated curses as either, on one hand simply a symptom of system economic failure, or on the other hand simply a product of individual behaviour and weakness, must be dead and buried.

Much more complex questions challenge us now. Should we insure personally against all our vulnerability and risk? Or is this something better done more economically and more effectively in a pooled way? Can the market ever deliver housing in the right places, of the right type, at the right price, or does the state have a role in enabling, insisting and regulating? Should the state provide benefits which enable people in very poorly paid work to survive? Or is that simply a subsidy to poor paying employers? Is the responsibility for child rearing only that of the parents? Or does the community have a role? And so it goes on. In this debate there is no right answer – much more a question of balance and recognition that on all these areas we have a part to play, and there will be ebbs and flows in responsibility. Even more importantly these are not questions to which there is a left, or a right answer. No UK political party has an unequivocal answer to any of these questions, and even within the parties there is substantial and sustained disagreement.

My own view is that this uncertainty about response is nothing but good. It means there are no tramlines on to which this debate can be driven. It means that we need to innovate, experiment and design, if the 21st century social contract is to look different from that struck throughout the 20th century.

I would argue that with this in mind, we can develop a vision of the common good that could be based on what we know.

So what do we know?

1. We know that **social capital is not equally distributed**, and does not correlate with wealth. Just as there are poor areas demonstrating extraordinary high levels of social capital, resilience and sheer will to survive, equally there are poor places in which isolation and alienation thrive. And we also know that the route to developing social capital is not linear, nor is it easy. And we know that people want to be able to influence their community without having to take responsibility for it. We know that communities which are extremely divided, by income and by wealth, by race or religion, will struggle to take control, while those that are more mixed can make difficult decisions. And that creativity and enterprise flourish in difference.
2. We know that **work, while a necessary part of any journey out of poverty**, is not in itself sufficient. More than half of all children in low income households have at least one parent in paid work. Work at very low rates, with no progression, and provided in a random and insecure way does not help people get out of poverty. It traps them in poverty just as surely as an ill structured, inappropriate system of welfare benefits. And we know that the **social wage is as important as the earned wage**. We all pay tax – on consumption, on housing, and – for those of us who earn enough, on income. Just as we all benefit from public expenditure, from schools and hospitals, rubbish collection and highway maintenance, and benefit income for those who earn too little.
3. We also know that without a **stake in your neighbourhood**, your city, your country, you don't fight to protect, you – either actively or passively – conspire to destroy. We know that denying people a stake in their communities is a dangerous move, a risky step, and one whose results we witnessed over the summer. We also know that in highly unequal societies we can readily poison the well of

social solidarity, and make it more difficult for people to identify what they hold in common.

It is around these things we know that we can construct a meaningful and contemporary notion of the common good and use it as our organising principle.

There are, inevitably, a number of obstacles to achieving this vision of the common good.

The first is the desperate grinding **poverty** of people across the UK. Hard working, hard caring people doing their very best are forced to lead lives of constant insecurity, constant anxiety, with all the attendant risks to aspirations, freedom and choice that JRF's research has so graphically illustrated over many years. Poverty remains a shocking, disturbing and hugely wasteful aspect of modern British society. Trapped in low paid work, moving from no pay to low pay and back again, vilified and described as idle, people who live in poverty experience the attenuation of their capability, the wasting of their potential, and entirely artificial limitations to their power to contribute. While we as a society tolerate this, our ability to address the common good, is hugely challenged. And yet the potential of people in poverty, their massive contribution, and the flowering of capability is essential if we are to organise to address the major challenges that we face.

The second obstacle is the nature of the **communities and neighbourhoods** in which we live. One of the adventures of our time, and I use the word carefully, is how we learn to live with difference. The former, far more homogenised public realm, formed and shaped by a single cultural norm and set of expectations, in which everyone knew their place, may have provided security. But our current diversity and difference offers us the ability to shape families as we wish, to opt in, or out of social norms at will, and to lead lives of apparently easy autonomy. For those of us concerned about the public good this brings opportunities, but threats also. We all know of communities, both rich and poor, which are now so fragmented, so atomised that identification of the common good, let alone taking steps to achieve it, seems almost impossible. But we also know that in communities of hyper diversity, the mixing of ethnicity of faith, of attitude and lifestyle, of aspiration and

behaviour, brings challenges for sure, but it also brings creativity, imagination and the prospect for change.

And the third obstacle is the dangerous and damaging development of **tensions between the generations** that erode solidarity, and weaken social bonds. If the baby boomer generation (of which I am of course a member) have used the world's resource, and left a planet, and a country, more troubled than the one we were born onto, we leave a shaky legacy indeed. If the privileges and freedoms we benefitted from leave future generations exposed and at risk, then we can indeed be blamed. But if that sense of responsibility becomes expressed in hostility between the generations, and an inability to combine the experience of age with the capacity and capability of youth, we have recreated an obstacle indeed.

The common good at the crossroads

But if these are obstacles to the common good, we also face a period of crisis – or if not crisis, then at least strain.

I would argue that as each generation faces its challenges, its own version of the common good will come under threat, but each generation will also face new opportunities.

I would now like to outline some of our current challenges – and suggest that while we should remain ever-vigilant about hubris, we face challenges which are genuinely unique, and that previous generations have not faced on a similar scale.

We face demographic change on a scale we have not experienced before. It is not just that there are 12,500 people over 100, and we can confidently predict the moment when there will be 100,000. It is not just that a child born today has a good chance of living to 125. It is not just that a severely disabled child born today has an infinitely better chance of surviving to healthy and productive adulthood. It is not just that the ethnic and religious make up of our country is more diverse than at any stage in our history, and will only become more so, whatever the fulminations of politicians. It is not just that we will witness our first minority majority cities in the next decade – those cities which can boast of a majority population drawn from those who were once a minority. It is

not only that people suffering terrible mental distress can, through the use of advance psychotropic drugs, lead full and engaged lives – it is the combination of all of these changes that make the demography of future decades in the UK, and across the developed world both a huge opportunity and a massive challenge

We have worried about demographic change at other points in our history before – not least in 1904, when, as JRF came into being, public intellectuals grappled with fashionable, and ultimately desperately destructive, theories of race and demographic foundations for social success. So unease about demography is nothing new – even if we consider it in less destructive terms than the early 20th century. But the scale of change will be unlike anything previous generations have seen: and it will be permanent. There will be no going back. We have never faced this sort of demographic change before.

We face a period of deficit on a scale and in a form we have not faced before. Whatever your own political and personal perspective on the causes, there is little money left. We are not, by any description, facing a period of growth, and it does not look as if that will change any time soon. We have borrowed from future generations at individual, household and national levels and we are in a state of indebtedness that is causing us trouble. We look at Ireland, at Italy and Greece, and recognise that there is no room for great smugness or confidence. I choose my words carefully because this is not, for me, the moment to discuss what should be done economically, but rather to think about what the scale of the public deficit, and the absence of growth, means for those of us concerned about the common good.

But although I am not going to analyse the economic situation, let us just be absolutely clear about the facts.

Britain's economic horizon is darkening. Michael Saunders at CitiBank now foresees unemployment rising from 7.9 per cent to 9 per cent – touching on the 3m unemployed of the 1980s. Saunders has halved growth forecasts this year and next, to 1 per cent and an anaemic 0.7 per cent respectively. Inflation may persist, and we could end up with a Britain where people eat less food because they can't afford so much. Sustained economic misery, the like of which post-war Britain just hasn't

seen, may now be upon us. In case this seems like a piece of liberal minded, left leaning alarmism, let me just admit that that paragraph is a direct quotation from the Spectator, and even a cursory glance at any journal or newspaper will produce some very similar responses.

We don't have to look very far to know that that misery is very near. What we know already is that the cost of living is rising and rising fast. I promise not to pepper this lecture with facts but the work we have done at JRF about the minimum income required to have a decent, but by no means lavish, standard of living indicates that families with children would typically have to earn 20% more in 2011 than in 2010 to meet the shortfall for childcare costs. And we know that with some of the scenarios predicting price changes, the minimum cost of living could rise by 34 per cent by 2020.

A staggering increase at a time when most wages are static.

In 2008/09, 13½ million people in the UK were living in households below this low-income threshold. This is around a fifth (22%) of the population.

Youth unemployment is 20%, the highest level since the early 1990s. In total just under 1 million young people are unemployed. This compares to overall unemployment of all adults of 2.5 million, or 7.7%. Last year IPPR research suggested that 48% of black young people were unemployed. And this weekend we were told that 4 million people face food poverty.

Of course, we have faced deficits before. But we leave behind a decade where times were good, growth seemed limitless and we face a future where it is entirely possible we will have two or more decades of economic stagnation. This is not historically unprecedented – but it is new to a country used to growing.

The deficit is not simply financial, although financial is quite challenging enough. We also face a major deficit in the other resource of the world which we have so merrily plundered. The requirement to conserve our use of fuel, to manage our footprint on the planet, to cope with rising oil

prices, rising food prices. And to accept that it is probably too late to reverse some of the shocks that will inevitably hit us as a result of the damage already done – the climatic shocks that we will face, the pressure on us as environmental refugees turn to our borders, and the hardship that will ensue. We need to focus on what climate change does to social justice – what it does to the poorest people and communities who will be asked to pay ever more for the scarce resources of the planet.

Moving from a period of surplus to a period of deficit is the hallmark of this exciting, and terrifying, decade.

I would argue that this challenge of deficit, in this combined form is not one we have seen before. And the attendant risks, of a political deficit that allows for mean minded, divisive fights about scarcity are ever present.

We are experiencing a digital revolution that has made us - paradoxically - both more connected than ever before and at the same time more disconnected than at any time in our countries' history. Just as young men growing up in Bradford can be in daily contact with the political developments in the Kashmir, they frequently feel less connected with the ward politics of their own neighbourhood. Just as young people can create networks of knowledge and support across boundaries, they can also congregate in ever more finely delineated tribes. And just as the language of friends and followers, networks and sites, develops its own vibrant and lively virtual meaning, report after report shows that real loneliness is as corrosive in many people's lives as income poverty and the fast deteriorating public realm. Ironically as we become more and more connected, lose our privacy in ever more disturbing ways, we also seem to feel more lonely than ever.

And the digital revolution, where I suspect we are only in the early throes, divides us into those, mainly young people, who are fluent digitally, for whom it is very much a first language, and those of us who are limping along trying to keep up.

These major challenges, of demography, of deficit, of the digital revolution, come at a time when there is more uncertainty than for many

years about our role in the ever more interconnected world, and at the same time far less trust in the institutions that might help lead us out of it. As banks, as politicians, as the police and as newspapers have let us down, and revealed a weakness at their very core, the age of deference which abandoned the monarchy, the Church of England and the trade union movement, is clearly very much over. We are now, unequivocally, a secular nation, with no shared or easy recourse to shared religious institutions when other institutions fail. And at the same time we can no longer claim the confidence of primacy – it is not just that the global economy has reminded us with terrifying force that our lives are interwoven and inter-connected, it is also that we cannot claim leadership of that global economy and need to look to China, to Brazil, to India.

Confidence and trust has always needed to be earned. As we embark on this second decade we know that this is as true now as it has ever been.

Facing these challenges – of demography, of deficit, of the digital revolution, we have no automatic pre formulated responses. Traditional political responses look superficial, ill informed, shallow and disturbingly short term. Allowing the market to let rip once more is seen by all but the most fervent pro marketeers as a tad too dangerous. Leadership feels tricky, and uncertain. And those of us concerned about people and places in poverty need to assert, as never before, the importance of getting it right.

What makes these challenges so big is that we don't know how any of them will develop. In previous crises, it was possible to discern the beginnings of the new order, if not to accurately predict exactly what form that would take. York in the 1980s was primarily a manufacturing city – and while no-one knew exactly what would happen, the shift from industry to services was one that people sensed happening; there was an awareness of living through creative destruction, as one economic order superceded another.

We cannot be sure how climate change will affect us. We simply don't know what will happen.

So, even if each generation has come up with its own definition of common good, that was challenged, and debated, and refined through

the stresses of their time – our definition of the common good, and our desire to preserve the common good, faces a uniquely uncertain future. Our times are marked not just by difficulty, but by the seeming impossibility of working out what comes next.

Where does this leave the common good? How can this cocktail of forces possibly sustain those three principles that can define the common good?

We face two options, both terrifying.

We can accelerate our rush to individual survival. Retreating into our homes, behind gates either real or metaphorical, we can try to construct individual units of safety. In terms of the world's resources we can decide to do what we have always done, and what most of the world already does, and simply ration fuel on the basis of ability to pay. We can decline to look at reducing our footprint, oppose any alternative approaches, and simply decide that only the wealthiest have access to fuel. That is what happens, after all, across the planet already. As the price of heating, water, food goes up - it will become increasingly available only to those who can afford the escalating prices.

We can choose to justify this by creating a new relationship between people who have money and those who do not. Or rather we can make sure that there is no relationship.

We can make the Welfare State entirely transactional. Abolishing the core notion of risk sharing, we can instead describe it as a 'something for something society', one in which you receive benefits of all kinds, not just welfare benefits, in return for behaviour of a certain sort. We can make our relationship with the state entirely transactional – those who use hospitals, use schools, use roads, will pay for them, and those who don't, won't. And of course in order to do this we will have to describe the poor as entirely other. Victims of a self inflicted wound that the rest of us are far too clever to risk. No such thing as dignity in labour in this world – the poor have failed, and therefore deserve much less than the rest of us.

Poverty in old age? You should have thought ahead. Low paid work providing no route out of poverty? Get a better job. One of the one in

three households in Liverpool without work? Let's call you feckless and if you object you can be called feral. In low paid work so needing housing benefit to pay your rent? Then wait till you are 35 before you can rent something more than a bedsit. Got a job as a cleaner in a richer part of London? Well you can't live there. It's not fair we'll say, you are poor and you are getting things I don't get. My child bunks off school and I can shout at her. Your child does the same and you might lose your home.

This path is characterised by its transactional nature. You pay for what you get, and what you get is grudgingly given. Rights evaporate, and responsibilities prevail. We replace a view of shared risk, of common opportunities with a degraded public discourse in which taxpayers and beneficiaries are separated into separate, and competing categories, rather than descriptions of roles they become descriptors of people.

Now a transactional approach to welfare may be just what we want. Good thoughtful and deeply caring people recognise the sharp resentment felt by those just above the state benefits line. They do believe that those of us who receive benefits from the state should behave in a particular way in return. I have no quarrel with this, as long as we recognise that all of us, at all times, receive benefits from the state, and that the scale of the benefits I receive – road maintenance, school education, free healthcare and rubbish collection, dwarf the direct financial benefits received by those who are so readily reviled.

But if the transactional approach to welfare sees people in poverty as entirely other, if it allows for a retreat from the common sharing of risks, and the common sharing of benefits, I do believe we face risks, indeed a dystopia, which I conjure up not only as rhetorical flourish but because it presents us with a route through our current crisis, and a route on which we seem to be willing to advance. I think the destination for this route is genuinely terrifying. I know what happens in countries where a large number of people are destitute, and I suspect you all know too. Anyone who gives that a moment's thought will never again consider welfare benefits to be anything other than a universal benefit – a public service that benefits us all, whether or not we ever receive them. Any of us can find ourselves in poverty – there is no inevitability about it. We know from history that the sort of society described here fosters division and extremism. That intolerance thrives when resources are scarce and not

fairly shared. That poor, excluded, overlooked and ignored parents, raise children who can cause mayhem. We know from decades of research by JRF, and by others, that welfare benefits that are poorly structured trap people in poverty; that services exclusively for the very poor become poor services; that housing developments which have concentration of extremely poor, benefit dependent people on them are hard places in which to thrive.

So there is another way. Equally terrifying, hugely demanding, also challenging, but within our shared grasp.

In this vision we recognise and embrace the challenges we face. Fundamentally we recognise that there is no way in which we can simply snap back to where we were before. The scale of the crisis is too great, and if we imagine that there is a future which is business as usual we are not just kidding ourselves, we are also contributing to a future which is neither sustainable, nor just.

I believe that this route would be to ask ourselves several key questions, as we grapple with our disorderly times.

First – in order to avoid that dystopia, how do we turn private will and instinct into public good? The urge to preserve your own, to look after yourself, to take care of your own family before thinking of others, is the most basic of instincts. In tricky times, people turn inwards, and this is natural. It is also inimical to the common good. We need to constantly question ourselves how we can harness that private motivation - whether that is the urge to make money, to ration the essentials of life, or to look after your own – and translate it into public good.

Second – how can we turn demographic change into an opportunity, rather than just a threat? We can recognise that unless medical advances perform far more than the expected miracles we face a future where more people than now suffer from dementia, and indeed on current projections so many people suffer from dementia that we need to have an entirely new way of responding. We can explore, as JRF is currently doing with colleagues in York, what ‘dementia without walls’ would look like. What will it mean when all of us will encounter people with dementia in our daily lives? If all children learn first aid at school, should we not all learn how to respond safely, appropriately and

generously? We all know that the first people to identify someone with early stage dementia will not be a public service professional. It will be the man who runs the corner shop. Can we equip and empower him to do the right thing? We know that for many frail older people residential and nursing care is not the option they want. And yet autonomy can too often mean simply abandonment for many, many people. Can we develop a way of supporting people, as we are exploring in our five year programme entitled A Better Life, which envisages and actively plans for a different approach to care.

We can move this aspect of our changing demography from our 'problem' in tray, to the 'opportunity' one, recognising that an ageing society brings wisdom and experience , provides people with an interest in the next generation, and while demanding some restructuring, could actually reap untold benefits .

Third – we must recognise the reality of a shortage of finance and all other resource, and as we do so must ask how we sustain common values through deficit?

We can recognise that many people are deeply uncomfortable with the levels of greed and consumption of the last few decades. They believe – as they said to JRF in our work on social evils a few years ago, before MPs' expenses, before the banks bought the world to its knees, - that excess consumption, damages us all. We know now that fraud and corruption happen at every single level of society. Why do we castigate the benefit scroungers, while accepting that other, much more ambitious fraudsters can carry on making money. Tax evasion costs the public purse £15 billion per year, and benefit fraud just over £1 billion. Instead of preaching to the poor that they should consume less, we can consider the footprint of each of us, and plan for ways in which we can all manage on less. After all, it may be a truism but a low carbon future will inevitably be a more equal future and we know from all the work done that the real extravagance, and the real waste, and hence the real costs, are incurred by those who have, and not by people and places in poverty.

We have no choice but to grapple with our deficits – but we will only sustain our vision of the common good if we constantly question how

addressing deficits can be done in a way in which the poorest in society are not harmed.

Losing our place as one of the leading countries in the world hurts some of us, of course it does. But leading the world did not bring comfort or joy to the poorest people in our society, nor did it create untold wealth. Becoming a second or third order country is hard, but not as hard or as expensive as continuing to pretend to be something we are not. As our fortunes are increasingly shaped by global forces, and we live in an inter-connected world, there are so many things we can do that make this a contributor to the common good. It will be the brave politician who argues that we can have a new position in the world, without being accused of encouraging decline.

But this is the fourth question: how can we turn our global position to advantage to enable the good society?

We can recognise that the digital revolution has brought us powers of communication and of analysis that our forbears could not have possibly imagined. Of course it brings us risks, (what social change doesn't?) but the ability to connect across the world, to understand other perspectives, to shine a bright light on what is going on, is a precious gift and one that can enhance trust and build solidarity. We saw in the Arab Spring the way in which communication can be aided, just as clearly we have seen that there is no hiding place for tyranny.

So fifth, and finally, how do we rebuild trust in our institutions, and between people? And how does the digital revolution enable this?

These questions will be difficult to answer. But if addressing them allows us to embrace our 21st century chaos, make the most of the change, without losing sight of our common humanity, we have the basics that we need to build the good society,

Conclusions

Want to end on some good news:

Despite media hype and conjecture following August riots, all our research shows that strong community spirit thrives in deprived areas – there is a strong attachment to traditional values of thrift, hard work and

independence; there is a reluctance to rely on the state; there is a concern to do one's best for one's children. There is no sign of dislocation from social norms; of a counter-culture of welfare dependency, of an unwillingness to provide for oneself and one's family – but many stories of striving to cling on and get by in challenging circumstances and, sometimes, challenging places.

But these people and places need help and support.

If we are going to rise to the challenges of our time – the challenge of demography, of deficit, of the digital revolution, – then we need to reorganise ourselves as a society. The development of the common good, gives us all the chance to revitalise our civil life, to make sure that we can survive the challenges that lie ahead. It was the great anthropologist Margaret Mead who reminded us of our potential:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

If we start by saying it is all too big, too complicated we will never find a route through this interesting, and terrifying, decade. The price of failure will be paid by all of us, but the heaviest price will be paid by the poorest. It is the purpose of JRF and all our partner organisations, to ensure that we can change the world, contribute to a good society and do it in a way that improves life for people and places in poverty.