

In Praise of the Public Realm

I knew Eve for eighteen years, having met her through David shortly after their marriage. Like me, Eve was from a working class, Catholic background, and as with me, higher education changed her life. Socialism ran in our blood, warmed by childhood experience; feminism we had added to our ideological compass in the seventies. We immediately empathised with each other, sharing not just a political perspective but a passion for words, a love of the arts, a penchant for witty men and a small woman's preference for stiletto heels. Even at a time when that was frowned on by the sisterhood.

Eve was always great fun, and I remember not so long ago being with her when she introduced me to a male colleague who said, "Ah yes, you're the lawyer who represents all those women who kill their husbands". And I said, "Well, actually I do also represent husbands who kill their wives". And she said: "Yes, but she doesn't get them off".

In the years since our first meeting many occasions stand out. Mainly parties, I have to say: first night parties, her fortieth birthday, parties in London, parties in Birmingham, Labour parties, miners' parties - I remember coming at the call of Eve to defend one of her Asian ward members, Pino Khan, in what became a local cause celebre. He was the victim of prolonged racial harassment, and ended up in the dock charged with GBH on one of his assailants. The unswerving commitment of Eve to his case and the glorious triumphant celebration when we won was a shared experience which consolidated our friendship.

When Eve was dying she planned this memorial and asked that I might give a short address on the importance of the public realm, to which she had devoted much of her life. I do so with pride and with love.

Why praise the public realm? Isn't that the part of our firmament filled with self-seeking local politicians, feckless social workers, poor quality teachers, inefficient bureaucrats, wasteful health-workers? Isn't it the private sector which we now must laud as it presents us with its models of efficiency, effectiveness and measurable outputs? Even in our brave New Labour world, isn't praise of the public realm something worthy only of a passing flourish before extolling the virtues of private enterprise and the thrusting, competitive world of business, whose virility can invigorate tired, old, state structures? Aren't we founding the magical but elusive Third Way: the market with a heart, and injecting it into the public services? In effect, isn't praise of the public realm a bit old Labourish? Ah, Eve, was there a touch of wickedness in your choice of subject.

I come to praise the public realm because, like Eve, I believe in it. It's the place where concepts like society, community, solidarity and indeed the collective are nurtured and given reality. It is the place where doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, probation officers and civil servants, policemen and firemen work. It is where the BBC broadcasts, it's where playwrights have their plays put on, it's where artists and actors provide us with new ways of seeing. It's where local authorities exist, and usually seek to improve the lot of local communities. It is a realm where salaries are not high, but where the rewards are measured in ways other than pecuniary, by people who believe in an ethic of public service. It is the seedbed of social wellbeing and inclusion. It was, therefore, no accident that it was one of the central battlefields on which Margaret Thatcher fought her ideological war.

We should be clear that Thatcher's assault upon the public realm derived not just from her belief in the minimalist state nor her conviction that people should be self-motivated and self-providing in a deregulated world, functioning only in response to the unseen hand of the market. She also saw the

public realm as the vile manifestation of incipient socialism and her atavistic hatred provoked her outburst that there was no such thing as society. For her "society" was a construct of the Left rather than a response to real human desire for community.

However, we should not underestimate the impact of those attacks. The denigration by the last administrations of those who chose to work in the public realm has fed into the national psyche. Public servants were deemed to lack the entrepreneurial drive that was being so idealised. Their motives and abilities were suspect. Who would choose to work for such low remuneration if they had real talent, was the question posed. The public service ethos of which Britain was right to feel proud was constantly derided and consequently has been eroded. Many students in our universities now want only to be corporate lawyers and merchant bankers.

My concern is that despite the overwhelming rejection of Conservatism at the last election we are still too ready to buy into the myths which were promulgated by Thatcherism. We still seem to believe that public services should be run like businesses rather than that they should be business-like. We still seem to accept that the only valid relationship is contractual, with purchasers and providers. We seem to have swallowed in large part the notion that competition will raise standards and even the losers in the race will be improved in the process. The theories are fundamentally flawed because market principles cannot translate very effectively into areas of public service. Competition between schools and colleges, for example, is inevitably at the expense of those who are less advantaged. How can it be beneficial to the health service if heart surgeons have to compete with cancer specialists for beds?

Whether we are talking about the BBC or the NHS or education, the success of each and the maintenance of quality within them depends on trust and collaboration and commitment. The invisible hand of the market is no more conducive to producing the best of every individual's potential than the dead hand of the state. The market as we know does not respond to those who have no voice.

Sean earlier this evening spoke of Eve's politics, forged in the 60s. Indeed, public service is currently led by many who reached maturity in the sixties, characterised by the Right as decadent sixties liberals. The advent of moral decay is placed at the door of this generation yet it seems to me that for commitment to unrepentant individualism the eighties and early nineties should have greater claim to social destructiveness.

The demonic characterisation of the decadent sixties takes no account of the concern with moral imperatives such as war and peace, racial and sex discrimination, poverty and corruption - moral imperatives which were Eve's imperatives, imperatives with which a generation became passionately engaged. There was no shame then in having a social conscience, no dismissal of commitment to such issues as a manifestation of wetness or the display of a bleeding heart. The sixties was the decade in which it was recognised that our society was no longer homogeneous and that anti discrimination legislation was necessary in pursuit of equality and justice. Imposing one's view upon the unwilling was deprecated and a need for tolerance was identified as crucial to a inclusive community. The relegation of some children to a poorer quality of education at the age of 11, with the word failure engraved upon their hearts forever, was seen as reprehensible and inimical to the ideal of the just society. The commitment to comprehensive education derived from that aspiration to value every child. Instead of decrying the sixties I would like to hear us talk again about the ideal of the "Just Society", and how it can be created.

The victory of Labour on May 1st 1997 was a reassertion of the belief in society. But respecting the autonomy of the individual, there was recognition of the crucial role of the collective, though

nowadays we choose to call it "partnership". Labour is attempting to change the political discourse and anchor people with new definitions and new cornerstones of thought. And in that process we all have a role.

The old ideologies of the left and the new ideologies of the right can no longer be articles of faith. The socialist assumption that central planning and public ownership were more efficient than market co-ordination has - sad to say - been found wanting. It holds no hopeful vision for those who have witnessed the travesties performed in the name of socialism in the Eastern bloc and elsewhere. But we should be emphatic that free market capitalism has failed too. The absence of a vibrant public domain during the Thatcher and Major years testified to that failure. The shocking division between rich and poor could become a permanent legacy.

The American sociologist Robert Putnam undertook a pioneering study of why certain Italian towns were more economically successful than others. He examined many contributors, finally coming to the surprising conclusion that the factor which made an overwhelming difference was the development of what he called social capital, the high level of mutual trust and reciprocity, and the strength of local networks and associations. Basically, he was speaking of the collective.

Putnam's ideas are now echoed in the work of leading thinkers around the world, who see that social capital is directly linked not just to the wellbeing of civil society but with economic performance. In the new South Africa, a concerted effort is going into the establishment of social capital or "ubuntu" (people richness). Desmond Tutu often quotes an African proverb when he speaks about the need to engender a sense of belonging and sharing: "people", he says, "become people through other people".

It is the coming together of people which has such effect. This is one of the reasons why a vibrant public realm is at the heart of any revitalising project, because in our modern world it is in schools, colleges, community centres and health centres, in all manner of local initiatives, that the most effective ways are found of bringing people together.

There is no doubt that we have much to learn from the world of business, and this can be done by means appropriate to public services. The way to avoid destructive competition in the public sector is to unite people around a clear and common purpose. A process of continuous discussion creates alignments and collaborations as the sensible answer to the challenge. The public services should be well managed and efficient, our citizens deserve nothing less. However, the private sector also has lessons to learn from the public sector. Lessons about ethics and values and responsibilities to people other than their shareholders.

All the public services - the National Health Service, social services, education - are struggling in this time of change to forge that third way, a new synthesis, a blend which is true to the public service ethos with its commitment to the public good, but at the same time exploits business as a fruitful model of effectiveness. Finding that synergy, in the right balance, is one of the wicked problems facing us all now.

It is my belief that if we fail to value and sustain the richness of our public realm the social and economic consequences will be grave. What can we do? Well, we must recover the full force of the public good. The public good sometimes means subsidising things which are not profitable: parts of public transport, cottage hospitals, adult education. It means maintaining some slack in the national health system of spare hospital beds, so that decisions do not have to be made as to which patient is more critical. Where there is a commitment to the public good there is a recognition that legal aid has to be preserved for the less well-off if justice is to mean anything at all. In the public good there

is a belief that the state should be an enabler, like the wise parent. We also have to start talking again with pride about public service, praising its traditions of honour and probity, which have so long been a valued feature of the civil service and of local government in this country.

In the desire for modernisation of the welfare state, in our determination not to turn the clock back, we must never forget to cherish and praise the public realm, which is so crucial to the ideal of the just society.

So, Eve: defender of the disadvantaged, passionate champion of equality, dear friend. In praising the public realm, we also praise you.

Helena Kennedy