

A social vision for the world after socialism

By John Lloyd

Published: March 8 2010 22:05 | Last updated: March 8 2010 22:05

The late Michael Foot would periodically claim, always wrongly, that the time was ripe for socialism. Ironically, it may now be. Even as the long withdrawing roar of the left still sounds, it becomes more likely that some part of the British politician's hope may be realised – though perhaps too late.

For those societies that won in the industrial and post-industrial ages, Adam Smith was generally a good guide. "It is his own advantage, not that of society, which [the individual] has in view", he wrote, and that was good. To be sure, the rich benefited disproportionately; often, as now, hugely so. But when real socialism came along, it was a lot worse for everybody living under it. Francis Fukuyama was right: capitalist democracy won.

But Smith will not work for most of those who are now beavering away for their own advantage – the **Chinese and Indians, the Brazilians and Russians**. Even if we set aside the consequences of global warming as too uncertain to fret over, we cannot avoid those of other trends.

We will have to contend with the rundown of resources – not just oil, gas and coal, our most available and useful fuels, but also land, clean air and water. Strong population growth is likely to continue, especially in poorer regions. John Beddington, the British government's chief scientific adviser, warned a few months ago that we were heading for a "perfect storm" of escalating food prices, mass migration and droughts in the next 20 years. The number of **undernourished people** is approaching 1bn, (it was 832m in 1995, on United Nations estimates) and is rising.

Inequalities will grow wider as wealth flows to a global elite of resource owners, top executives and stars. The three sibilants – secrecy, security and celebrity – will disguise this for a time but cannot do so in the longer term as pressure rises everywhere, including on the middle and working classes in the developed world. Many of the new superwealthy have risen in the world of organised crime networks, hugely augmented by the collapse of communism and the vast expansion of market relations in China and India. Misha Glenny, in his book **McMafia**, estimates that crime now accounts for some 20 per cent of the world economy.

The most potent vision of the world that Smith theorised has been the US, long both beacon and magnet for the promise it held of advancement through work and merit. It is great and mighty still, but does not offer that any more – or no better than many others. It is easier to get ahead from modest beginnings in Sweden (and it is not that easy there). Americans still invoke their

dream, but it is now in a museum.

These and other ills cannot be solved through the assumption that good results will come from simply pursuing one's own advantage. The world is running down too fast for that. In *The Empathic Civilisation*, the economist and social innovator Jeremy Rifkin writes that we are in the grip of inevitable and increasingly rapid entropic forces, the product of galloping human demands upon the world. There is a counterweight: sympathetic identification with others. This, Mr Rifkin thinks, is what sustains civilisation, and in the contemporary period it has greatly advanced. We have brought within the sphere of our empathy whole groups of people previously regarded as outcasts, or contemptible. Empathetic feeling, he writes, is extending "to the far reaches of the biosphere and to every living creature".

Active empathy is not socialism, but it is *social*. It does not assume that a statist economy will replace capitalism, but it does point to stewardship replacing ownership. Capitalism need not conform to Smith's rules of marketplace behaviour as interpreted by our financial masters of the universe. Co-operation through networked working, with transparency replacing sharp practice, are now enabled by communications technology: zero sum calculations need no longer rule. In a BBC interview yesterday, the economist Robin Murray of the Young Foundation said that where the 19th century had been the century of the market and the 20th that of the state, the 21st would belong to social innovation. He, and we, wish.

Entropy may win. We may not change our behaviour, and our societies, in time. But if we do, we will perforce grasp a model that more actively seeks ways of sharing and distributing resources; that finds long-term and systemic answers to such issues as mass migration spurred by poverty, and organised crime spread across continents. At the core will be a renewed belief in the possibility of a society that can promote both responsibility and decency, and which has the popular and moral resources to oppose, more robustly than presently, those forces that leech away social capital for private and criminal enjoyment. If, in the next few months, **Britain elects a Conservative government**, judge it by how much closer it is to this social vision than its predecessor.

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