

The Cult Of Me

Simon Burton-Jones examines the contemporary cult of the individual in modern Britain.

British citizens are overdue a fresh narrative of who they are and why they matter to one another.

The customs and shared morality which once bound British people together are losing their stickiness.

A decline in the power of the institutions which glued us and mediated values has exacted a toll. The Church is just one of these bodies to lose its former influence in society.

As Britain fragments and difference is celebrated, we are left with questions which few are making any effort to answer: what is our vision of the common good? What are the values which make up a good community and which policies help to create rather than undermine it? There was very little debate in the 2015 General Election around this; instead the political parties fine-tuned specific policies which would make the most difference to self-interested voters in the few marginal seats that would decide the outcome.

Where people express concern today around our shared life, it is often in terms of the rise in immigration and multiculturalism. Immigration can be managed well in any particular country when there is a dynamic process of assimilation into the host nation's culture. Yet, while most attention has been on rates of immigration in the UK and the alleged failure of some immigrant communities to assimilate well, few people have posed the logical question: do we know what such communities should be assimilating to? If the host nation cannot answer

influencing both public and private spheres of life.

If we hold to a view of society comprised of isolated individuals doing their own thing without the duty of thinking about others, we cannot form community. While many people would be appalled at the thought of such a world and try to live a very different kind of life where the duty to others is practised, our political and economic debate is predicated largely on the individual.

The lack of political vision can be traced back to this inadequate view of human nature. People need to be inspired to think about more than themselves, but political debate does little more than hold up a mirror to the individual, when it should give them a pair of binoculars to take in the wider community. As the decades pass, it feels as if there is less of a coherent set of ethics with which to shape our common life. Politicians and public leaders use the language



that question coherently, why should it expect new immigrants effortlessly to grasp what is required?

Britain is losing a sense of the common good partly because it is in thrall to the cult of the individual; the idea that every person should be unfettered by tradition, custom and other wearisome bonds and entitled to make their own way in life without un-chosen obligations. This is essentially the economic creed which governs us.

of community, but it feels evanescent, like the echo of a voice in a cave, rather than the voice itself.

Our common life is formed by a network of local and national institutions but as these bodies lose influence, there is less to hold us together and more excuse to enshrine the individual in public life. In fact, to suggest a different narrative today is to invite ridicule that one is freedom-denying, as if liberty were purely individual rather than one dimension of a collective experience.

Nations ultimately reap what they sow. One risk of the cult of self is that we become less merciful towards those who are not like us or do not share our circumstances. The tone of debate around a series of issues of which tax, welfare and immigration are only the

It has its roots in the strangely impractical school of economic thought which suggests that all people act always in their rational self-interest, having a perfect understanding of the market when making decisions.

As an economic theory alone, it is deficient and has been critiqued by the growth in behavioural economics, which factors in the frailties and quirks of human beings; however, it remains a pervasive influence in our thinking,

most advertised suggests a harshening of pitch. Despite claims of tolerance, there are coarsening impulses of judgment between us that make Britain a more spiteful place; an uncomfortable trend highlighted in our social media.

At the end of the Book of Judges, in an era of violent lawlessness in ancient Israel, the author makes the laconic observation: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes'. It would be a polemicist's exaggeration to say this summed up modern Britain, but a fool's denial to say it does not speak perceptively to our culture today.

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