Essay

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Tackling the 'poverty of aspiration' through rebuilding the Public Realm

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1. Public services – a new contract

Ronald Reagan famously claimed that the nine worst words are "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." At one level that was just a laugh line on a conference platform. At another, it captured a powerful idea – that public is bad and private good – which dominated politics in this country and many others for a generation.

But that consensus has shifted. The Conservatives now seek to match Labour in investing more in frontline public services. Landmark social reforms such as the minimum wage and the repeal of Section 28 would not be repealed by the Tories. These changes reflect the end of a Tory hegemony that lasted for more than a century.

When Labour entered government in 1997, we inherited two worlds. Public services which had been starved of investment; schools and hospitals struggling to maintain their physical fabric. Services under enormous pressure, staffed by demoralised and overstretched workers, while inequality and poverty grew around them. The middle classes who had the means to exercise choice were beginning to take flight, switching to private schools and health care, withdrawing into increasingly exclusive neighbourhoods. Public services were at risk of becoming "only for the poor", which, as Richard Titmuss pointed out 40 years ago, inevitably results in "poor services".

In a healthy and open society that promotes social cohesion rather than fragmentation, it is clear that public services – local schools, health services, parks and libraries – all serve as part of a shared public realm. These are living democratic spaces where people expect to be treated with 'equal respect', as RH Tawney put it. And with growing choice, flexibility and personalisation comes also the potential for deeper user involvement and the greater exercise of citizenship.

If we can understand the benefits to all of sustaining shared services and public institutions, then we can also understand the importance of a powerful new social

and political consensus based on flexible public services and the exercise of choice by every service user. People need and want services that work for them, in real time, and give them knowledge and confidence about the quality of what they experience. Where people are confident in public services they are also ready to support and contribute to them. When people are willing to accept shared reliance on common services, they are also strengthening the mutuality and solidarity on which communities are founded.

Increasing the quality and the flexibility of public services is part of what is needed to ensure that those who could afford to go elsewhere remain committed to the principle of public provision. But we have to go beyond the simplistic, Reagan-era choice between public and private, and incorporate them both into vision of a better society.

The solidarity brought by shared commitment to services that are good enough for everybody also creates a major new opportunity: to rebuild and enrich the wider public realm bequeathed to us by our Victorian forebears, in the image of the 21st century.

This public realm – broader than the state, but more than the sum of private interests – must serve, equally and simultaneously, people with many different needs, interests and backgrounds. I see this everyday reality – of social diversity and shared interests – among the people who live in my own constituency. One thing that unites them is their desire for services which meet their needs as people, and which they can access on terms that fit the pace and structure of their daily lives.

In this essay, I set out the reasons why I believe progressive political reform should focus on strengthening the wider public realm. This could not be achieved without a platform of stronger, more effective public services. But it is through the public realm that we can enhance quality of life and democratic participation and enjoy the fruits of increased prosperity. In so doing, we can deepen the roots of a progressive consensus.

2. Public services and personalisation

Much modern political debate, especially on the left, has rested on the relationship between public spending and the quality of public services. Maintaining universal access, while offering services capable of meeting each individual's need, has always been an essential principle for Labour, since before 1945 and before – the quality of public services will suffer if those who can afford private options are dissatisfied and abandon state provision. That is why investment in public services leads logically towards their personalisation. Greater choice and flexibility, more information and involvement for the user, are means towards the ends of better outcomes and greater satisfaction. From choice

of hospital to online appointment booking, personal tutors for school students to direct payments for disabled people.

Public service reform needs to pursue the goal of personalisation further. The twin challenge, however, is to offer more personalised experience while simultaneously underpinning the shared life of communities. If a local primary school is able to serve the whole of its local community, rich and poor, then it can become a hub of local life, a creator of social capital, a foundation for other kinds of exchange and collaboration between families, community organisations and other public service providers.

Just as important, however, is the evidence that shows how much difference informal engagement by individuals, families and communities makes to achievements and successes in all the major public services. We know that parental involvement in learning and schooling has a huge, positive influence on children's attitudes to learning and chances of success. Again, we know from international comparisons that these informal factors – 'social capital' and 'cultural capital' – have a profound impact on levels of formal attainment. But we also know that, as well as influencing the performance statistics, these factors influence the quality of experience for people taking part. 'Cultural capital' is created by having access to role models, mentors, encouragement, and expectation. These are the kinds of experience and support that nourish a hunger for learning and confidence in life.

In every major area of public service, reform therefore needs to encourage and nourish personal and community engagement as well as better professional services. Outstanding clinical care, more doctors and nurses, and new drugs and medical technologies are all critical to better health outcomes. But we also know that strong social networks and a sense of community and belonging have a profound influence on people's health over time.

That is precisely why we need public action, to change features of our environment in ways that create shared benefit and opportunity. Using public management to create better facilities, infrastructure and direct services is one part of the process. But many other features of our context are actually determined and held in place by the cumulative impact of our individual behaviour. For example, street safety is influenced not just by lighting and police patrols, but also by how well used a street turns out to be; on the flow of people walking through it, and on how confident residents feel about being vigilant. The costs of these cumulative processes are borne by us both as private consumers and as taxpayers. But creating different outcomes is not simply a matter of changing the mix of services and financial incentives that government provides.

In these areas of life, where personal behaviour meets public environment, a traditional model of public service reform that relies only on the consumer-provider relationship breaks down. It is for government to take action to remove

obstacles that individual action alone cannot remove. But in these areas, government action must rely on making the most of voluntary effort and civil society; on persuading people to make particular choices, and to amplify the value of those choices. In other words, across a wide range of policy areas that are of great public concern, government cannot succeed without engaging people as citizens in creating the solution.

3. Overcoming poverty of aspiration

Beveridge might have listed a sixth giant to be slain as part of the fight to create a just society. 'Poverty of aspiration' can be as destructive of well-being, optimism and opportunity as material poverty, and that we should treat engagement with culture, in the broadest sense, as seriously as we do basic standards of housing, community safety, health and learning. A working definition of culture in the artistic sense is that, in contrast to entertainment, it makes demands of its audience, as well as of its producers. This element of active engagement, and of challenge and stimulation, has much broader importance.

To live a full human life involves a degree of emotional and spiritual nourishment which is not accounted for even by the most excellent forms of traditional public service. Engagement with culture is important and it ought to be supported and defended for its own sake as well as for any positive instrumental or utilitarian benefits that it might bring; why it is central to Labour's timeless commitment to fighting inequality because every person (and not just the children of the confident middle classes) should have the chance to enjoy and appreciate culture and to build up their own personal resources of memories, of inspiration, of meaning and of sheer wonder and delight – what I prefer to call a 'heartland' rather than a 'hinterland'.

And giving everybody the chance to experience the very best of what heritage, culture, music and sport has to offer will not happen by accident. Take for example the very different experiences of schoolchildren in my South London constituency. Some of them are lucky enough to come from families whose diaries are full of special activities for them: violin lesson on Monday evening, ballet on Tuesday evening, Spanish class on Wednesday evening, trip to the theatre on Thursday evening, football training on Friday evening – with even more on offer at the weekends and during school holidays. And other children come from families that do not even have a diary, because for them there is no expectation of extra-curricular activities to plan.

This gulf in experience is a scandal, and we are slowly closing it with our record investment in art and sport since 1997 (increased by 70% and 100% respectively, in real terms). But if we are going to offer everybody more of these 'enrichment opportunities'; if we are going to use politics to create experiences which we value for their own sake, then we will need to make more visible and explicit the kinds of value which people get from these experiences. In other words, we need to

broaden the range of ways in which we account for the value of public institutions and public investment. To do so, we also have to understand that people access these kinds of opportunity through the conjunction of private, voluntary actions and places in which different people can come together to shared benefit. In other words, we cannot overcome poverty of aspiration without rebuilding the public realm.

4. The public realm

I define the public realm as those spaces, places and realms we hold in common, and which we access and share as equals. The public realm frames and conditions our private choices. It cannot be reduced to a single sector of society, or to a fixed set of contractual obligations. It needs to be nourished in a wider range of ways.

And I also believe that the public realm is essential to our identity, both individual and collective. Everyone has plural allegiances and different layers of loyalties – this is the case everywhere in Britain and indeed everywhere in the world, and not just in gloriously diverse places such as Tower Hamlets.

Our overlapping identities are formed by our individual personalities, by the relationships that we have with close family and friends, and by our relationships, too, with the villages, towns and cities that we grow up in, live in, study in, work in and visit; and the regions and the nations we come from are part of our identity as well.

And although it is our most intimate personal relationships that probably have the greatest impact on our identity, the public realm has an impact, too – it contributes a sense of belonging, it shapes our beliefs and it adds new colour and dimension to our experiences and our understanding of who we are and what matters to us. Many of the seminal moments of our lives will have occurred in one dimension of the public realm or another, whether it was related to art or sport, whether it was something seen on stage on in a museum, or whether it was just being part of some momentous national occasion or a great gathering in one of our historic public squares or parks.

And all this matters even more, not less, as the world changes more rapidly than ever. Here in Britain, a sense of national belonging and a rooted belief in the nation of which we are all a part – our Britishness – is deeply connected with the public realm and is a critical part of creating the confidence and the security that we need, individually and collectively, if we are to deal with the accelerating pace of change.

Of course, the public realm is not a new idea. Current thinking about the public realm draws upon longstanding debates and practices, starting with the – far from perfect – theories of direct democracy developed in ancient Greece, and Plato's ideas of public reasoning through participation in the 'res publica'. Each age has

had its own take on the idea of the public realm, and in most civilisations it has been religious ideas that have dominated conceptions of the role of the state, the distribution of power and the role of citizens (usually men, and nearly always men of property) in community affairs.

In our own times, a number of distinguished thinkers (Richard Sennett, David Marquand, Will Hutton, Julian LeGrand) have looked at the health of our public realm, and usually found it wanting – under threat from both an over-mighty centralised state and from unwarranted intrusion from the market; under threat, in other words, from the ideological rigidity of both the Old Left and the New Right.

But we do, nonetheless, have a real legacy to draw on. In the Victorian period, 'civic institutional innovation' created new ways to meet public need during a period of dramatic economic and social change: a clean water supply, sewerage, public housing, a public health system, public baths, libraries, museums and galleries, canals, railways, town halls and other public works. These inventions shaped the public realm on which we still rely, and conditioned our social imaginations.

For the Victorians this was through measures to protect public health, the creation of parks – what Octavia Hill called "open air sitting rooms for the poor" – in our cities, and before that the British Museum and the National Gallery, neither of which have ever charged for entry.

Then came the welfare state, the National Trust, the BBC, the Arts Council (whose first Chair was JM Keynes), the NHS, the Open University and more recently the National Lottery, which provides venture capital for community groups all round the country as well as funding fantastic new public institutions such as the Eden Project, Baltic, Tate Modern and the Lowry. Even the internet can properly be classed as a dimension of the public realm. All are landmarks of the past century, and all show clearly that the public realm is far deeper and broader than the state itself.

And they all belong to the people if a far more tangible way than the old nationalised industries ever did. In my constituency, Brockwell Park is part of the warp and weft of the community's life. It, the BBC and the NHS as an ideal of the just society belongs to us all in a profound way._Throughout this public realm, both physical and virtual, people engage as equals.

5. Connecting political choices with everyday experience

The public realm also presents a chance to strengthen public support for progressive political values; by showing how a better quality of life for individuals and families rests on respect for 'commons'; those goods and services we access through the public realm.

Having a high quality of life matters almost as much as income to most of us. The NHS, crime and education feature consistently among people's highest priorities when they are asked which issues matter. To live good lives, we depend on the actions and opinions of others. Our opportunities in life are therefore shaped by social influences and commitments that go beyond our immediate ties of family and close friends because they are in the context of a wider and richer community.

But the institutions of the public realm can be touched directly by individuals. This means that our political and policy agenda needs to focus on strengthening the public realm; not just the services that government provides directly to members of the public, but the settings in which people encounter one another, have shared experiences and meet their own personal needs and aspirations.

The public realm is made and re-made through our use of it. Its overall state reflects our underlying attitude towards it. If people disregard the cleanliness of a local park, its value to a community soon diminishes. If yobs terrorise our town centres, if museums and galleries operate in isolation from the wider community or charge too much for exhibitions, if our public service broadcasters allow quality to decline, if our media pursues celebrity and gossip at the expense of accurate reporting; if the poor quality of public services means that they become services only for the poor then the depth and diversity of our public realm suffer.

Without influencing people's everyday behaviour, government cannot change much. But people are only prepared to listen and respect public leadership if they can see the relevance and legitimacy of what they are being asked to do. In turn, they are only likely to see this if they are actively involved in shaping the public realm, and have some kind of direct share in it. This is one reason why the idea of a BBC in which licence-payers have a direct decision-making role, and a National Lottery whose players can influence its long term direction have struck a chord. These are just two examples of how national institutions in the public realm can develop their governance to involve people more directly.

Other questions that test how well the public realm is working at a practical, local level include:

- Whether local schools operate in a way that enables parents to meet and get involved in their activities – is every home time a mini-parents evening, with teachers willing to talk? Do parents sign-off their children's homework?

- Whether local public institutions (council offices, schools, medical centres, etc.) are open to community groups using their premises for community activities, during and after normal hours of business

- Whether people feel safe enough to enjoy their local park in the summer, or to attend local community events during the dark winter months

- Whether people feel confident enough in what local public institutions tell them to take an interest in what is happening – do people bother to read their local paper or visit the Council website? Can they name their local Councillors?

- Whether cultural events and festivals attract interest, involvement and support among local communities, for instance street parties, summer fetes or special events to mark the Golden Jubilee or the Olympics

- Whether or not people are prepared to take part in schemes such as recycling, home zones and parking control which depend on respecting common rules and adjusting personal habits

- Whether or not people are prepared to look out for each other's children and help maintain places to go and things for them to do

- Do people know their neighbours' names? Does mis-directed mail get hand-delivered to the right address or does it get binned? Are people happy to ask their neighbours to keep an eye on their home when they go on holiday, or do they hope their neighbours don't notice they've gone away?

As Richard Sennett has pointed out, another definition of the public realm is a 'place in which strangers can meet in safety', a space which is secure enough for people to take the risk of engaging with the unfamiliar. Keeping such spaces open, literally and metaphorically, is vital for us and the times we live in as society becomes increasingly diverse, as inequality remains a serious concern and as freedom itself is threatened by new forms of terrorism.

6. Public value

We need to sharpen our definition of the public good as the benefit that ensues from the public realm. Measures of 'public value' are probably the best available tool to date.

At its simplest, to quote the Harvard academic Mark Moore, public value is 'what the public values: what it is prepared to give time, money or freedom for'. Public Value is emerging as an alternative to Public Choice theory, in providing a conceptual framework to inform institutional reform of public services. And it is important to note that the idea of public value does not mean people must don the guise of almost super-humanly public-minded citizens when reflecting on what government should offer. Yes, public value implies that the interests of all

the people in a community should be taken into account. But it does not deny people's individual and personal needs as consumers of services and experiences.

The benefits of a public value approach include:

- Public value helps to define added value in the public realm, not just in the private market;
- Public value focuses attention on what the public values, not just what producers value;
- Public value highlights the process of "co-creation" which is necessary for the production of positive outcomes in much of the public service sector, including culture, arts and sport;
- Public value highlights longer-term outcomes not just short-term activities and outputs.

The challenge is to find more tangible ways to register such value so that it becomes a clearer part of public policy and institutional decision-making. Crucially, a framework based on public value allows us to treat satisfaction, respect, trust and well-being as outcomes of public investment or intervention, rather than seeking to measure its effectiveness solely in terms of 'objective' outcome measures (such as cataracts removed or GCSE passes obtained) or numerical value for money indicators.

In other words, it allows us to take subjective experience seriously without reducing it solely to anecdote. It offers a way in which to make people's experiences and value judgments about public resources an integral part of the way in which the public realm is shaped and governed. Developing and applying a public value framework to the governance, stewardship, reform and inspection of key institutions in the public realm will be a vital part of a future progressive agenda.

7. Ways forward

During the 20th century the idea of the public became increasingly bound up with the direct power and functions of the state, of government itself. Now, government often works best through organisations and relationships that it does not directly control. This is the 'enabling' state, focused on empowering people to take action for themselves, and on building partnerships that create more than the sum of their parts. For example, confidence in local policing increases through crime reduction partnerships which bring together community organisations with police and other agencies.

Some of the key innovations in government over the last 8 years have created programmes through which people can access new and positive relationships. So, for example, in order to achieve a widening of opportunity to each new generation, we see programmes such as Sure Start, Connexions and the New

Deals which provide children and young adults with sustaining and instrumental relationships; learning mentors, SureStart volunteers, Connexions personal advisers and New Deal advisers to help them navigate opportunities and chart their own path in life. These relationships sit at the boundary between the state and the private, and they epitomise the argument that the quality of the interpersonal is the key success factor in public services.

This sense of connection between personal, public and community is central to any future approach to governing the public realm. In any sector, diversity of approach and organisation is likely to be a good thing. But it is equally important that public rules and norms help ensure that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and that opportunity is really accessible to everyone.

So while ownership of industry has largely returned to the private sector, regulation plays a vital role in shaping the conditions under which different industries operate, in order to serve the public interest. Indeed both the Communications Act and the Licensing Acts introduced certain liberalisations but they are tempered by tougher, carefully focussed regulation to protect the public interest, and the welfare of children in particular.

It is widely understood and accepted that a media free from direct state control is beneficial to society as a whole – in the public interest – but it is also clear that how the media conduct themselves, and how they are structured, is equally critical to the public interest. Increasingly, media literacy will be an important skill for participant citizenship, helping adults and children alike to understand the motives and methods behind what is printed or broadcast, and that is why the Communications Act gives OFCOM a statutory duty to promote media literacy.

In all these areas, private or voluntary organisations may play a major role in meeting private and individual needs, but the public realm nonetheless exercises a huge influence over the scope of those choices, and the opportunities and outcomes that they lead to.

So the energy of progressive government should be directed simultaneously to expanding and enhancing the range of choice and opportunity available to each individual, and to enriching and strengthening the public realm through which they can exercise that choice.

The benefits of economic growth are maximised when they are shared by all. Labour needs permanently to entrench this progressive consensus around economic stability, investment, and social justice.

But why do hard-working families work so hard? The answer is so that they can enjoy the fruits of their efforts through enjoyment and fun. The economy is not an end in itself; the quality of leisure time is an equally high priority for most people.

So I also want to argue that in a third term we can have a bit of fun. Our first term was mainly about repairing the damage of Tory mis-rule, getting the economic framework right and reforming the constitution. Our second term has been about securing the investment and reform that together are essential for our public services to give people the high-quality, highly-personalised services that everybody in modern Britain has a right to expect.

And our third term? Well the good work we have begun must continue, but there is also an opportunity for people to enjoy the public realm as never before; for people to have more of those enriching shared experiences that make life worth living, that nurture a sense of common humanity and that remind us that our shared citizenship goes a lot deeper than just the right to vote.

We should not forget the 1912 story of the women textile workers of Lawrence, Massachusetts, who began a nine-week strike for better conditions and for an end to discrimination against the immigrant workers among them. The women picketing their factories carried a banner with the slogan *bread and roses*.

This inspired the Ken Loach film of the same title, but at the time of the strike it inspired James Oppenheim to write the poem *Bread and Roses* with the moving refrain:

> Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes,
> Hearts starve as well as bodies –
> Give us bread but give us roses

New Labour – though investing in education and skills and by making work pay – has shown a modern industrial society how to provide 'bread' for everyone, and our task now must be to give people 'roses', too.

8. Conclusion: reinventing community

The meaning of the public realm has been radically different during different periods of history. The idea of 'the public' is not given but made – it has to be continuously created and constructed. Part of the role of democratically elected government is to take the lead in shaping people's ideas and experiences of the public, and what is of public value - what it means to be part of, and a participant in, the public realm.

The public realm is wonderfully broad and diverse. It covers public buildings and open spaces such as squares and parks; the streets of our neighbourhoods, which transmit so many signals about the health of a community; museums and galleries; iconic symbols of our heritage from Stonehenge through great houses and cathedrals to modern classics such as the Angel of the North and the B of the Bang; libraries and community learning centres; the media – the channels

through which people can access knowledge, information and debate – and public service broadcasters in particular; great sporting events and national celebrations such as the Millennium, the Golden Jubilee, the Commonwealth Games and, we hope, the London Olympic Games in 2012; and it covers our political institutions and the health of democracy itself.

In each of these areas, the quality of one's personal experience is actually integral to the quality of the whole – everybody gets something good out of it, and part of the joy is the sharing of the experience. But the public value of sustaining the whole system, and of people taking part in it, is *also* more than the sum of individual experiences.

In other words, people's own quality of life should be enhanced by having access to the right experiences and choices within each of these systems, but it is dependent on their active involvement; their readiness to invest time, effort and knowledge in it. There is a crucial link between the idea of public value and the need to reshape our democracy. A public value approach demands that we nurture new forms of civic participation which themselves create value and sustain opportunities for others to participate.

Public value cannot be defined by experts on the public's behalf – people themselves want and need to have their say and do their bit. The public realm and the public sector cannot be made to serve people by proxy – it really has to be governance *by* the people *for* the people. That is why, for me, the conclusion of this argument rests on empowering people to effect change in the public environment around them.

The Labour Party stands in a long and proud tradition of community activism, and itself emerged organically from the web of activists – from the unions, friendly societies, churches and co-operatives – who transformed life in the 19th Century. Then, as now, political parties and democratic institutions struggled to keep up with profound changes in society. And now, as then, it was civil society that sets the pace of reform and who provide many of the best ideas and the best people to lead society forward.

The current upsurge in new forms of political activism and civic engagement is something that I welcome, even if I do not always agree with every position being advocated. In fact, I want the Labour Party to become a lot smarter at working with this new generation and activists.

Of course, not everybody will want to get involved in local campaigns, or sit on the local hospital trust board or even be a school governor – Oscar Wilde was sympathetic to socialism but complained that it "takes up too many evenings" and Tony Crosland had to remind some of his over-earnest colleagues that "people are free to do the gardening if they want to." But there are many people who do want to have their say, do want to make a difference and do want to get

involved. In my own constituency there are a host of community groups, new and old, but one I want to describe a fairly recent initiative called 'Imagine Dulwich' which is tapping into that latent desire to become more active.

The 'imagine' model of community development comes from Chicago, and has been pioneered by a wonderful woman called Bliss Brown. She was a senior banker with the First National Bank of Chicago for 16 years but then decided to give up the corporate world and devote herself to empowering local people in Chicago. An ordained Episcopal priest as well as a brilliant manager and speaker, Bliss has worked with all sorts of community groups and 'Imagine Chicago' has acted as the catalyst for dozens of grassroots initiatives in over forty neighbourhoods of the city, from peer mentoring and civic leadership schemes through major educational and public health schemes to projects on the arts and the mapping of 'sacred spaces' in the city. And there are now 'imagine' groups in over a dozen cities around the world, including India, South Africa and Singapore.

Bliss Browne visited my constituency in November last year, and what I love about the 'imagine' approach is its optimism and energy. At its heart are two key questions: 'what do we already have that we can build on?' and 'what can we create together?'. The power these simple questions can unlock is extraordinary, and we are already beginning to see some of this through 'Imagine East Dulwich': There is an 'Imagine Health' project running from a parish church and linked to four local primary schools – this has started a youth club, is promoting healthy eating and, most importantly, is engaging the young people themselves to design their own life-skills training course; 'Imagine East Dulwich' is also now pioneering a local approach to the Government's overall strategy for children's welfare, 'Every Child Matters', and helping the Council work better with grassroots groups; and 'Imagine Kingswood' is developing an exciting new 'citizen leader' training programme for residents of the estate who want a greater say about their quality of life.

This approach illustrates perfectly the connection between public service reform, our starting point, and the re-making of the public realm; our goal. The principle that each person can receive what they, as an individual, needs from public services through personalisation creates an enormous potential; that they will equally be able to contribute, uniquely, to their wider community as a creative individual.

Our future depends on people feeling that they are agents of change rather than its hapless victims, owners and creators of public services rather than passive recipients of them; designers of the future rather than anxiously waiting for it to occur. The ownership of change, like the enjoyment of life, occurs partly through the institutions of the public realm. Our obligation as politicians is to make those institutions as open, fulfilling and secure as possible in the years to come.