

Establishing Compassionate and Sustainable Localism in a post Covid-19 and Emerging Net Zero Era

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This essay complements the excellent contribution by Geoffrey Hosking to the vision of how society might emerge from the Covid-19 era.

I wish to combine the essential ideas of Geoffrey Hosking with my own vision of sustainable and compassionate localism. I also wish to extend the post Covid-19 age into the emerging era of achieving net zero carbon equivalent emissions by 2050. This is the official legal UK commitment to the Paris Agreement signed under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015. It will be reinforced by the UK in the forthcoming Conference of the Parties to that Convention (COP 26) in Glasgow in November 2021.

Geoffrey Hosking places essential and proper emphasis on public trust both within people as individuals and neighbours, and within its governance and economic institutions, including all aspects of business. There is plenty of evidence both in terms of shifting and contradictory political allegiance and in the myriad of behavioural responses to safety measures to avoid infection from the virus, to indicate that public trust in governance generally is distressingly eroding. As vaccines begin to be distributed it is vital that serious effort is made to reinforce societal commitment and belief in overall trust. This is the mainstay of a well governed and attentive society, as it characterises a secure and caring populace. Trust will have to be re-earned as it cannot either be taken for granted, or be magically be reinstalled.

I advocate the case for sustainable and compassionate localism as the vital framing for the future geography of British society, whatever the outcome of devolution. Its aim for fruition should be the year 2030. This is the year of the global commitment to all 17 sustainable development goals, and to a global compact for both human and ecological rights enshrined in international law, as well as a half way point to global net zero for 2050. Sustainability encompasses many of the points raised by Geoffrey Hosking. It champions equality of treatment and opportunity, based upon the pursuit of human and

ecological rights being wholly interconnected, and ensures that those currently most disadvantaged and most left behind are first in the queue for receiving the support and guidance to enable them to live sustainable lives. The key to sustainability lies in the twin objectives of wellbeing and the ability of all future generations to be sure that they have the skills and the capabilities to pursue their own wellbeing forevermore. The ultimate failure of the current paths to non-sustainability is that we are denying many of our future generations of the ability to survive with wellbeing and dignity. Wellbeing applies to security and safety for each person and for all communities; to adequate prosperity and the capacity to achieve that level of comfort through endeavour and education; to physical and mental health for everyone; to caring and sharing amongst all families and neighbourhoods; and for the profound and universally held sense of embracing the life forces and ecological nurturing processes of the natural world.

My vision of sustainable localism therefore begins with wellbeing being placed at the centre of the measure of prosperity and of betterment. This in turn should be established as a central metric of what is now termed economic performance, and which should become social and ecological resilience. It cannot realistically displace gross domestic product (much as it is derided) as one central measure of economic activity as GDP is just too deeply established. But wellbeing should have equal status so become embedded in the ecological/economic performance of all government, of all business, of all community activity, and of all aspects of regulation and guidance, such as in planning, and the management of commercial and public affairs. It should also be the lifeblood of all education, including the learning for all students of how to become social and ecologically responsible citizens for all of the world and for all time.

The emphasis on localism is offered as an antidote to the current obsession of centralisation, and of political and regulatory control over all forms of living and working. Localism places its emphasis on shared identity and shared caring of neighbours and nature. This may sound both idealistic and mad. But think about it. A net zero age will require much less mobility except by foot or by short range vehicle (e-bicycles and scooters, e-vehicles and community e-vans). It will require collective forms of renewably sourced combined heat and power for most new buildings, and considerable redesign of the heating and insulation of all existing buildings. It will rely on locally produced food with an emphasis on a vegetable diet, and locally provided services covering the areas

of health, caring, education, cultural creation and enjoyment, and economic transactions. The emerging notion of the “15 minute city” and the “20 minute neighbourhood” encapsulates all of this, and reinforces the vision that even large metropolises can become “sustainably local”.

Localism brings with it crucial assumptions over the capability and willingness of individuals and groupings to live close to each other in peace and with compatibility. This will not be easy and I feel that one of the spin-off tasks for the BA will be to assess how best that localism both as a “gut feeling” and as a spatial reality can be helped and supported. I feel learning for compassionate sustainable localism must be given centre stage in education at all ages. I think that the deeper values of sharing and caring as a basis for personal comfort and spirituality should be given a fair wind. I hope that the very act of a national and local governing (not government) commitment to this vision will assist its passage, and that providing for reliable incomes to support compassionate localism be given full attention. Geoffrey Hosking mentions various forms of living wages and tax reform. I adds to this the likely widespread increase of home based working, and the emergence of a three or four day working week. All of these moves should be considered as a totality and be one of the tasks for the BA arising from this initiative.

What compassionate localism also requires is some form of compatible and synergistic relationship between local forms of community governance and higher governmental structures. The logical variant for local governance in England is the parish which includes the town council for mid-sized communities. In the other national administrations other local governance arrangements exist and this set of circumstances requires much attention in any subsequent BA task mix.

At present the governing arrangements for parishes and town councils are not ideally suited for this setting. They are legal governmental bodies with elected representatives and with powers to raise funds for local purposes. Admittedly any parish/town council can opt to take on a General Power of Competence which gives the parish council the right to do anything that a person can do. Indeed many parish councils already make use this power, which in turn can enable them to form delivery partnerships and use joint funding streams.

Over the coming decade there is considerable scope for enhancing these financing connections between central and regional government and the parishes. In any post covid-19 and net zero age there will be much emphasis on

wellbeing. Wellbeing is nurtured by local support and caring, and enhanced by the knowledge that there are those who will look out for you and look after you.

Earlier this year and gratifyingly quickly, all over the county, towns and villages came together in a spontaneous strengthening of community solidarity. Parish Councils were at the hub of this community effort. The Parish Clerk was the link to county and district councils. They established all manner of help hubs, created avenues for funding, and identified the vulnerable of all ages. Overall, parishes became kinder more thoughtful communities.

The volunteer teams collected prescriptions, did shopping, took mail to be posted and organised information about the people in their community. They learned who were the most in new danger, those suffering established and unaccustomed poverty, those who found it difficult to ask for help, and those who were so isolated, either living alone or caring for a family member where all too often they did not feel the offers of help applied to them.

The coming six months may witness much more of this desperate need as more and more experience what they have never experienced before.

I have no doubt that the parish is the most suitable form of government for compassionate sustainable localism. But radical reform of all governance and economic relations will be required for this to take place. This should be another task for the BA portfolio.

It is vital to establish some form of shared responsibility for sustainable localism throughout all forms of governance and economic transactions. There is a strong case for collaborative delivery partnerships between central, regional and local governance on the basis of some form of “wellbeing contracts” offered to all local communities. The crucial point here is that such initiatives save huge potential costs of social deprivation and suffering where such pain and loneliness can be spotted early and brought into the ambit of local compassion. At present over three quarters of county council spending in England is directed at social care and children’s services. Compassionate partnerships in a framework of sustainable localism could possibly halve that. The BA task stream should examine this claim.

At the heart of the net zero journey is the willingness of everyone to embrace three very challenging hurdles. One is the unfamiliar comfort zone of the plug in car and access to electricity plug in points. A second is to convert home

heating (and commercial property heating) to heat pumps with higher costs and very variable and inefficient performances. A third is to change diet and other consumption so the overall personal carbon footprint is halved in consumption by 2030. On top of all this is the massive political and social issue of the increasingly larger number of the less well off being expected to pay the price. Here is where localism may help. If individuals acted collectively, if everyone felt pride in achieving paths to net zero living, if the common good became a central social value, and if every parish and urban neighbourhood established and widely displayed its own carbon footprint calculation, then it may be possible to move into the as yet uncharted territory of moral commitment to net zero transitions. But all of this will require politically and economically tricky redistributive equity, and a real deep-seated sense of compassionate solidarity.

At the heart of compassionate sustainable localism is the essential notion of discovering ways of investing early to reduce the huge social and economic costs of subsequent and certain personal struggle, family pain, and structural destitution which blight many of our communities today. This may sound “goody-goody” but it is not meant to be so. If we as a nation were properly to embrace wellbeing for future generations as a guiding governing and personal learning and indeed moral value, I am convinced that compassionate sustainable localism can become central guiding principle of the emerging sustainable age. Frankly there is no other option to achieve human decency if we genuinely seek to forge a sufficiently prosperous and universally trusting society which should be replicated in the myriad national cultures of the globe as we reach 2050 in only thirty years’ time.

Possible policy and reporting tasks for the BA Covid and Society programme

Meanings of localism

Democracies of localism

Governance of localism

Compassion and localism

The geography of localism in a post covid age

Linking basic income options, income support variants, four and three day working and homebased working as a basis for localism

New forms of compassionate joint partnership financing and community interest companies linking local government to business to charities, all to localism