The David Nicholls Memorial Lectures

No.3

2001

Citizenship, Democracy, and Morality

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Published by:
Publisher: David Nicholls Memorial Trust
Regents Park College
University of Oxford
Pusey Street
Oxford OX1 2LB

ISSN: 1740-1577

CITIZENSHIP, DEMOCRACY AND MORALITY

This is the saddest of honours to be giving this lecture. If he had not died before the three score years and ten of the Psalmist it would be easier to celebrate rather than to moum, for he was such a lively and humorous man as well as a deep and serious one. Someone tolerant, even of a card-carrying Humanist like me, because he was perfectly secure in his own beliefs and what he thought were, or ought to be, the beliefs of his fellow Anglicans. I valued the friendship of someone so genuinely tolerant, that is someone in firm but respectful disagreement, rather than that sloppy tolerance, better called permissiveness, even that now typical could-not-carelessitude, of so many who once knew better.

So I will try to give an address that, were he here, would draw from him both the vigorous nods of the head and the irritated shakings that was his wont in political philosophy seminars, either of which was preferable to his blank look of boredom that prefaced either his slipping out from the back or pulling a book out of the sleeves of the cloak-like garment he affected, not only in winter.

Beatrice Webb once said that "democracy is not the counting of ignorant opinions". I agree, or rather if at times that is what populist democracy has become, thanks to the de-elevating sound-bite sub-rhetoric of our party leaders and to the level set by that great diseducator the tabloid press. We need to stipulate some limitations on democracy if it is seen simply as majority opinion. Morality is, I suppose, the most general such limitation, law figures too (so long as the laws are reasonably just); and there is now almost a craze for the idea of human rights. Let me never be heard to mock the idea of human rights, only that I agree with David Hume that all ideas of rights – whether natural, human or civil – are human artefacts and not natural endowments. I simply want to draw a distinction between human rights that lay on us each a responsibility, an obligation even, to respect the rights and needs of others, and that modern idea of individual rights that can actually work against social responsibility. Some modem formulations of rights can lead both to Thatcher's "there is no such thing as society" and to the current outbreak of litigiousness, once called Californian but now spreading rapidly amongst ourselves. If you listen regularly to the BBC Today programme, for instance, you will soon learn that there is no such thing as an accident, a natural disaster or a risk reasonably taken: someone must be held responsible; even an optimistic belief that all death must somehow be put at the doctors' door. I will want to argue that there is a concept of citizenship, called by scholar's civic republicanism, that should mediate both common views of the primacy of democracy and even liberal views of the primacy of individual rights.

That democracy must be must be bound together with morality and citizenship could be

seen long ago by one of the earliest extant examples of what happens when they are not: the description of civil war found in Thucydides. I began the dark final section of the last edition of my *In Defence of Politics* by a quotation of which this only a fragment (the first text of my lay sermon):

> So revolutions broke out in city after city [provoking] still new extravagances of revolutionary zeal, expressed by an elaboration in the methods of seizing power and by unheard-of atrocities in revenge. To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man... Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect.... Family relations were a weaker tie than party membership... Revenge was more important than self-preservation...
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> As the result of these revolutions, there was a general deterioration of character throughout the Greek world. The simple way of looking at things, which is so much the mark of a noble nature, was regarded as a ridiculous quality and soon ceased to exist.... As a rule those who were least remarkable for intelligence showed the greater powers of survival....
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> Certainly it was in Corcyra that there occurred the first examples of the breakdown of law and order. There was the revenge taken in their hour of triumph by those who had in the past been arrogantly oppressed instead of wisely governed.... Indeed, it is true that in these acts of revenge men take it upon themselves to begin the process of repealing those general laws of humanity which are there to give a hope of salvation to all who are in distress, instead of leaving those laws in existence, remembering that there may come a time when they, too, will be in danger and will need their protection.

Thucydides in the 5th. century BC. painted his picture of horrific violence which is not entirely unfamiliar to our more decent civilised, modern, advanced age of the concentration camps, the gas ovens, Coventry and Dresden (to speak of little local incidents), Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, Tibet, Rwanda, Bosnia, Chechenya etcetera; and now add your own examples from the headlines of today -- September 11th.? and then the Thucydidean cycle of revenge. 'The progress of mankind', of which eighteenth and nineteenth century publicists spoke so warmly, has proved at least a little uneven in its development.

But there was also light at the beginning of the tunnel.

How do we civilise ourselves? Aristotle said that we must enter into the *polis* as citizens, into political relationships with other citizens. By politics and citizenship I mean what I take Aristotle to have meant. It is an activity among free men living as citizens in a state or *polis,* how they govern themselves by public debate. But political rule was not necessarily, at any given time, democratic. A *polis* should have a democratic element in it, but he advocated mixed-government: the wise and the able rotating and governing in turn with the consent of the many (and to him that many, that the Romans called *populus*, excluded slaves, foreigners and, of course, women – all of whom were to enter the polity much later, but as extension, I think, not a refutation of his manner of thought). A pure democracy, Aristotle said, would embody the fallacy that because men are equal in some things, they are equal in all. However, the special sense of polis or civic state was to him a conditional teleological ideal: both a standard and a goal to which all states would naturally move if not impeded, as well they might be impeded, by folly, unrestrained greed, power-hunger by leaders lacking civic sense, or by conquest. Aristotle brings out the intense specificity of the political relationship (and I will soon say its inherent secularity) when, in the second book of *The Politics,* he examines and criticizes schemes for ideal states. He says that his teacher Plato made the mistake in *The Republic* of trying to reduce everything in the *polis* to an ideal unity; rather, it is the case that:

> ... there is a point at which a *polis,* by advancing in unity, will cease to be a *polls:* there is another point, short of that at which it may still remain a *polis,* but will none the less come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse *polis.* It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the *polis* is an aggregate of many members.

Politics, according to Aristotle, arises in organized societies that recognize themselves to be an aggregate of many members, not a single tribe, religion, interest or even tradition. That is why in my old book, *In Defence of Politics,* I defined politics as the activity by which the differing interests and values that exist in any complex society are conciliated. Politics arises, then, from a perception of differences as natural. This perception has both an empirical and an ethical element. The empirical element is a generalisation that all advanced, complex or even (just say) large societies contain a diversity of interests - whether moral, social or economic, and in fact usually a complex blending of each, hard to disentangle. The ethical component, whatever its

precise nature, always asserts limits beyond which a government should not go in attempting to enforce consensus or unity. Perhaps no limits can be demonstrated in general. They may all be specific to time and place – here the relativist is half right. But the relativist is also half wrong because the principle of *limitations* is general and the empirical distinction is usually clear, allowing for deceit, rhetoric and muddle, between constitutional regimes that strive to limit power and thus to govern politically and those regimes whose rulers strive after total or at least unchallengeable power. That my definition of politics, or rather Aristotle's, is not an empty truism can be seen at once if one sadly remarks that most regimes even in the modern world are not political: they hunt down or suppress politics rather than encouraging it as a civic cult. If they act politically at all, then only between these four palace walls or else when facing a superior rival power. They allow no public politics – the *res-publica*.

Aristotle certainly held that a man to be himself at his best must be a citizen. But he did not hold either that that was all a man should do – he could be a philosopher or a merchant, why not? Nor did he hold that to be an active citizen ensured that one would act rightly, act ethically. To be an active citizen was a necessary condition for the good life but not a sufficient one.

Now let me come down to earth. Suppose one had to construct a curriculum for school pupils to learn to be citizens? What would follow from this way of thinking – not that I wearied the committee I chaired with Aristotelian presuppositions. I had to be very practical, but I am not sure if they all grasped that behind any pretence to be purely practical there lurks a theory or a doctrine. Right from the beginning in constructing a curriculum one has to presume that we are living in a society which contains different codes of morality and also different interests, and that it was or would be the practices and processes of citizenship itself that could hold them together peaceably and by consent, even if never by perfect agreement. The aim of political life may not be to determine a single ideal of *the good* and then ask the state to impose it (even your ideal or my ideal), but rather to see how different ideas can coexist in peace with some mutual understanding and respect. I think, by the way, that this is at the heart of the pluralist critique of the theory of sovereignty that David Nicolls did so much to revive "harmony not unison". My committee boldly declared without much philosophical debate (I mean without any):

> We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves.

But how to achieve such a change? The report recommended three strands of learning, Based, of course, on the hold trinity of educationalists: knowledge, skills and values. They were: *social and moral responsibility*, *community involvement* and *political literacy* – a far cry from old Civics as teaching facts about an alleged British Constitution and the remaining powers of local government. Well, to be politically literate certainly implies some general knowledge of what are the political, social and economic institutions of our country and the world as it effects us; and some broad notion of how they work. But it also implies learning the skills and values needed for active citizenship. Even the knowledge component is best learnt not by being taught from the front, so often the primrose path to ever-lasting shut-eared boredom, but by introducing such knowledge when the need to know arises in discussion of real issues and problems. Discussion was the very origins and the continuing essence essence of citizenship; and, by the way, I can think of no real discussion of political issues or problems that do not raise both practical and moral issues. *Can* it work and *should* it work?

Let me give two examples of how the principles of a report appear in the statutory order. The order for Key Stage 3 (that is for 11-14 year olds) contains nine brief sentences under the first of three headings "*Knowledge and Understanding*". Then follow two more headings.

> *Developing skills of inquiry and communication*
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> Pupils should be taught to: (a) think about topical political, spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues, problems and events by analysing information and its sources, including ICT-based sources; (b) justify orally and in writing a personal opinion about such issues, problems or events; and (c) contribute to group and exploratory class discussions, and take part in debates.
>
> *Developing skills of participation and responsible action*

> Pupils should be taught to: (a) use their imagination to consider other people's experiences and be able to think about, express and explain views that are not their own; (b) negotiate, decide and take part responsibly in both school and community based activities; and (c) reflect on the process of participating

Notice that there is neither specification about what are the "issues, problems or events" to be discussed, nor about what form participation "in both school and community" shall take. In the very nature of free citizenship it was judged not right for either the government or its agencies to give precise prescriptions on some politically and morally sensitive matters. Government should neither prescribe how best to discuss issues nor what issues to discuss. The devil may be in the detail but detail should be kept at arms length from the state. In the very nature of learning for citizenship (after all, somewhat concerned with enhancing freedom) there must be local discretion. Hence David Blunkett called the new curriculum (unlike all the others) "a light touch order", or what I glossed as "strong, bare bones".

To act freely among others must, of course, imply acting responsibly; just as there is that distinction between having rights and exercising them in a moral and responsible way. The report said that the concept of responsibility is both moral and political because it implies: firstly, care for others; secondly, premeditation and calculation about what effect actions are likely to have on others; and thirdly (and too often forgotten) understanding and care for the consequences – especially if our actions do not achieve the intended consequences.

But what about that weasel word in the order – many of you will have pricked up your ears and suspected that I ran over it somewhat quickly– "spiritual"? "Pupils should be taught to "think about topical political, *spiritual*, moral, social and cultural issues, problems and events." I was happy with "moral" alone -- and, by the way, so was Dr Carey when the Archbishop invited me to discuss the Interim Report that had remained merely "moral" and did not intrude on or tamper with the spiritual. I suspect that Blunkett himself inserted "spiritual", although whether for spiritual or political motives I never cared to ask him. *Possibly* this is where David Nicolls and I would have begun to differ. But I am *not sure* whether or not he thought politics was a secular activity, subject to moral principles but not to spiritual ones; or in Thomist terms, part of natural law but not of divine law. I never discussed with him a book that had some influence on my own view of politics -- a darker view than you would guess from my habitual good humour because it accepts that politics is a limited vision of the world, will not by itself

create the good life; and, indeed it accepts that human nature is not perfectible, or, in terms of Christian mythology, the fallen nature of man. I refer to Reinhold Niebuhr's book *Christian Realism and Political Problems,* based on a particular reading of Augustine that stressed the division between the City of God and the civitas terrenum.

Nonetheless Niebuhr was much concerned with the long but inconclusive debate between Christians and secularists on the question whether democracy is the product of the Christian faith or of a secular culture. The debate has been inconclusive because, as a matter of history, he claimed, both Christian and secular forces were involved in establishing the political institutions of modern democracy, and the cultural resources of free societies today are jointly furnished by both Christianity and modern secularism. There were, he said, enough traditionalist non-democratic Christian cultures to suggest that Christian faith does not inevitably yield democratic historical fruits; and equally obviously there were totalitarian secular regimes that claimed to be democratic simply because either were popular or could claim to be working in the interests of the majority.

'The evidence for each position is mixed', Niebuhr said. Indeed. He famously wished to build bridges between the two positions. But in so doing, of course, he had to ignore or reject the early history of the church, which was largely hostile to memories of classical democracy and civic republicanism – a few medieval monks electing their abbots was hardly a general incitement.

Aristotle thought that inherently only some men were fit to be citizens, and even the seventeenth century republicans, while they saw no necessary limitation, advocated or assumed formidable barriers of education - which involved leisure and therefore the possession of property and income. It was when republicanism and Protestantism became involved with each other that the Christian belief in the spiritual equality of man (not a belief in equality in much else at that time, heaven knows) took on a political dimension. The first person actually to argue that every human being has a right to be a citizen simply by virtue of being human, not even educated - indeed, better just to be simple, uneducated and natural - was Jean Jacques Rousseau, hating and hated by the Catholic Church but deeply influenced by Protestantism, a kind of crypto-proto Unitarian.

So what kind of moral philosophy should inform a citizenship curriculum? Some would say, not at all. They would call themselves "realists", telling us not to be deluded: politics is basically only and all about these differences of power and interest who gets

what, when how; always a matter of 'conflict'. Hard-nosed political scientists would accept at least half St Augustine's analysis: that any justice in the earthly city is simply self-interest. States hold together for the same reason that bands of robbers hold together: self-love and mutual interest. Others call themselves, or more often are called, 'idealists' and say that politics is basically about doing what is right: "where there is no vision the people perish" or "let justice be done though the heavens fall"' (as is most surprisingly written over the main door of the Old Bailey); and some say that there is no basis to judge what is right without religious belief – not always making clear whether any religion will do or whether they have a specific one in mind. But beware, as ever, of the fallacy of the excluded middle. It is possible to reject both: 'realism' for not allowing altruism and sociability; and to reject 'idealism' for being prone to dangerous chimeras of human perfectibility and compulsion. One does not have to be a Christian to hold a tender scepticism (or humility) about human perfectibility. George Orwell, an agnostic, once said that socialists should not claim to be perfectionist, "perhaps not even hedonistic":

> Socialists don't claim to be able to make the world perfect: they claim to be able to make it better. Any thinking Socialist will concede to the Catholic that when economic injustice has been righted, the fundamental problem of man's place in the universe will still remain. But what the socialist does claim is that the problem cannot be dealt with while the average human being's problems are necessarily economic.

So don't exclude the middle for a third school says that morality in politics is about reaching some consensus or agreement about civic procedures, about the institutional conditions of peace and justice, not about the very nature of peace and justice themselves: political institutions should build a ring and hold it fairly in which all corners can debate and attempt to get their way without violence (well, nearly all corners; not those who try to smash up the ring - as even John Stuart Mill agreed). I myself am obviously of this third school, a *politique*. Those who attempt to impose religious values on others through either the state or the practice or the teaching of citizenship may damage their own values more than they achieve a benign effect. An Anglican priest and scholar of this town once wrote:

> The Church [of England] does not have answers to all the problems the world sets itself. Its proper role is not to aim at being relevant nor to conciliate on all occasions, nor to 'influence society'. Its role is to proclaim the judgment, the

justice, the love of God and to co-operate with Him in the transformation of this world. In this respect the concerns of the church are otherworldly. The church should not reflect current values and trends, but exists to question and challenge them. Rather than attempting to answer current political questions, Christians might profitably contest the assumptions made by the questioner and examine the terms in which the question is posed ...

Church leaders do not have some privileged access to political and social realities . . .. Church leaders and synods should not feel obliged to make a statement on every issue of public concern. The misguided notion that they are so obliged leads to the half-baked, mealy mouthed and ambivalent character of many ecclesiastical pronouncements.

It is tempting to say therefore that church leaders should speak only of general principles and basic values, eschewing at all costs the particular. For two reasons this position is unsatisfactory. First, Christian moral judgment is made initially in the concrete case. The adequacy of a principle is assessed on the basis of the particular actions it entails. Secondly, bishops can talk till they are blue in the face about general principles, but with no discernible effect. It is when they speak of particulars - the miners' strike, economic sanctions for South Africa, the forcible repatriation of the boat-people - that people sit up and listen.

For all that typical burst of polemic against leaders, synods and the bishops, David Nicolls in a *Political Quarterly* article was picking his words carefully and thinking deeply. Moral generalities mean little until they become moral judgements on particulars. We infer the reality of the rule from instances; certainly children do; indeed to them rules learnt by rote are easily discredited by frequent examples of contrary behaviour by teachers, parents even, certainly those prominent in public life. Example, or let me be pretentious and say "mimesis", is the greatest of social mechanisms, for good or for evil. That is why, I believe, on grounds that I hope I have explained, and my committee adopted out of common sense, that citizenship, both as a practice and as part of education, should focus on participative activities and discussion of issues, problems and events; neither the learning of lists of values nor of the functions of institutions.

Consider only the first term of the three strands of the actual citizenship curriculum that I read to you: *social and moral responsibility*. It is a poor and incomplete

self that is not social. Morality is not the individual purity of standing aside with clean hands: it is responsible interaction with the problems of others. Our very self is a construct of how others see and react to us, which itself is a construct of how we see others, and how we are equipped to react to others. Is that not a true aim of education to be brought to recognise this? To be a good and active citizen is even helpful to the self.

I began this address with the darkest of possible passages from Thucydides *The Peloponnesian War* written right at the beginning of our distinctive civilisation – what was going wrong in his times, and could at any time, as we well know, recur. But to end by recalling that he also stated the perpetual practical ideal , once familiar to every educated person, now no longer. From the Periclean oration:

> Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, every one is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door-neighbour if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect....
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> Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of the things of the mind does not make us soft. We regard wealth as something to be properly used, rather than as something to boast about. As for poverty, no one need be ashamed to admit it: the real shame is in not taking practical measures to escape from it. ...
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> Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics - this is a peculiarity of

> ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated....

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Classical historians tell us that Pericles was a demagogue, a kind of democratic dictator. This may be a case, in Swift's words, of hypocrisy as the tribute that vice pays to virtue. But his motives are no longer the question; the point is what he felt he had to say when seeking to curry favour and gain support. Could this be said in any country now? But should it not still describe the future -- a perpetual and realistic ideal?