



**UCL**

**Relational renewal: a  
new way of changing  
policy for the better.**

With Danielle Walker Palmour,  
Hilary Cottam, Nick Kimber,  
Osian Jones and more.

**UCL  
Policy Lab**



# Extraordinary ideas and everyday experience

UCL is London's global university. We are rooted in our local community, with a view to the wider world.

We have a long tradition of creating space for difference and welcoming disagreement. We care about this because we recognise that speaking across divides and creates space for change and renewal. And that is why we are working so hard to bring people together, to find areas of agreement where we can, and to disagree well when we can't.

And these values go beyond political debate to the heart of human connection and community—ideas which cannot be neatly boxed in any one discipline.

As Chair of the Steering Committee, I am proud that since we launched the UCL Policy Lab, we've recommitted ourselves to these principles. We've brought together campaigners, business leaders, philanthropists, and researchers from economics and political science to tackle the big challenges facing communities in the UK and around the world.

In this edition of the Policy Lab magazine, we hear from just some of the leaders about how our connection across place, community and politics can help us reimagine people's lives. We hear the extraordinary ideas and everyday experiences which can inspire us to reform policy and politics.

I hope you enjoy it and I look forward to continuing the debate.



**Jennifer Hudson**

Chair of the Steering Committee

To find out more about our work and events programme, sign up for our newsletter. We are also very keen to hear from you, about ideas and collaborations.



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**Economics**



**Political Science**



## UCL-led coalition of leading voices outlines a plan for Britain's national renewal

A new publication from the Policy Lab's collaboration with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) sets out how politics can tackle Britain's biggest challenges by drawing on the untapped strengths of communities right across the country.

*Ordinary Hope: A New Way of Changing Our Country Together* features work by a number of very prominent figures, including leading political advisors Claire Ainsley, Tom Baldwin and Luke Tryl; a former senior civil servant, Paul Kissack; a former cabinet minister, James Purnell; leaders of new campaign organisations and social enterprises, Emily Bolton and Chrisann Jarrett; and UCL academics, Marc Stears and Wendy Carlin.

As the lead author for the publication, Marc Stears said, "This inspiring group has come together to offer an alternative to the failed visions of grand political projects of recent years. Their work is radical and innovative, but also builds on the long history of bottom-up politics and organising that has often led to major change in the past."

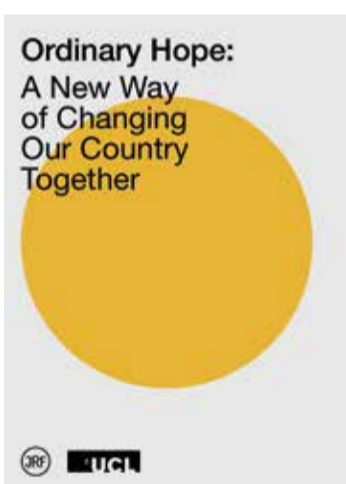
In her interview in the publication, economics professor Wendy Carlin explains how an overly narrow focus on the power of the state and the private market has for too long distracted economists from fully appreciating the role that ordinary people can play in transforming the country's economic fortunes. Carlin writes that by looking at the role of "civil society" in economic renewal, economists can learn to "recognise motivations of dignity, fairness and sustainability and help uncover drivers of growth and prosperity that lie beyond the confines of the restrictive state-market continuum."

The project from which the publication comes is a partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), whose mission is to help Britain overcome poverty.

Graeme Cooke, Director of Policy at JRF, writes in the Foreword of the publication that the Foundation welcomes the innovative way in which UCL and JRF have brought together a diverse set of talents and expertise, which has been central to the success of the publication and provides a template for how we can convene across differences.

The publication which was covered by both the *New Statesman* and *The Guardian* was launched at a special gathering of leaders from academia, philanthropy, media, community campaigning and business. Celebrated playwright, screenwriter with UCL Policy Lab Honorary Professor, James Graham as the guest speaker.

The full-list of contributors to the publication are Claire Ainsley, James Baggaley, Tom Baldwin, Nigel Ball, Emily Bolton, Wendy Carlin, Anoosh Chakelian, Graeme Cooke, Nick Hanauer, Yasmin Ibison, Chrisann Jarrett, Paul Kissack, Maff Potts, James Purnell, Marc Stears, Jon Stokes, Ian Taylor and Luke Tryl. Original photography was by Jørn Tomter.



Use the QR code to read the publication



“The rules are something we have control over. And if we don’t like the way the economy is working, there are democratic ways we can change that.”



# Economics in a time of crisis

Interview: **Danielle Walker Palmour**, Director, Friends Provident Charitable Foundation and UCL Policy Lab Honorary Professor

## Meet the economist and foundation director taking responsibility beyond her organisation

The political, social and economic crises that we are confronted with are well known: political disengagement, disinformation and distrust; stagnant living standards and stubborn inequality; and climate emergency.

Most of the time, journalistic coverage suggests that it is mainly up to elected, senior politicians to address them. But everything we have seen in our time at the UCL Policy Lab suggests that the range of agents of change is, in fact, much broader. What if you are, say, a policy director at a major grant giving organisation? Beyond the causes you fund, don't you also have a wider responsibility to do something about these generational challenges?

Danielle Walker Palmour, founding director at Friends Provident Foundation (FPF) and newly appointed, Honorary Professor of Practice at the UCL Policy Lab, has thought about these challenges and these responsibilities far more than most. She has been a consistent pathbreaker, revealing how civil society organisations can turn outward to the communities they serve.

The FPF is an independent charity that explores how financial systems and money can support society better. It is a 'capitalised charity' - investing its endowment both to generate financial and social and environmental returns. It allocates 90% of its endowment to generate income to support its grantmaking and at least 10% to investments that generate social benefits, a 'social investment portfolio'.

In talking with the Lab, Walker Palmour explains how the FPF's current mission emerged from the financial crisis of 2008. "Previously, our focus had been on financial inclusion," she says, "which means helping low income people access money, advice, banking, and affordable credit. The idea was that the financial system is an engine for inclusion and growth so the main thing we had to do was hook low-income people up to that engine."

The 2008 crash – and the seismic hit to incomes and living standards that followed - changed that view. "We thought: 'hang on, we're not sure this financial system is all that good at distributing risk and reward. We were no longer convinced it was a system we wanted to hook vulnerable people up to.'"

The organisation's mission evolved. Instead of trying to include everyone in the financial system, it took on the deeper question of how to redesign it.

### Bringing outside voices in

The attempt to conceptualise a model of how the system should serve people led to a new question: what do ordinary people want from the financial system and the economy?

But efforts to address this question soon hit a barrier too. Many in the public tended not to feel comfortable talking about it. "People say things like: 'oh, well I don't really know about that because I'm not an economist,' Walker Palmour explains. "Whereas no-one says: 'I'm not a politician so I don't know about politics' or 'I don't know about society because I'm not a sociologist.' We detected a lack of agency in talking about the economy."

So, the FPF found itself reckoning with how to bring the perspectives of the public into the economic conversation. And that has been a primary focus ever since.

Walker Palmour makes the case for a dose of institutional radicalism from universities to address this. Economics departments, she argues, have a responsibility to turn their expertise outwards and help improve the public understanding of economics. She envisages a programme that gives people a chance to ask economic and financial questions, with universities holding the space and providing the expertise to answer them.

She draws an analogy with a programme proposed in the medical world in which patients had the opportunity to ask experts questions about their conditions. As well as improving patient understanding, the programme had another surprising result: sometimes patients asked questions about areas where there was a genuine lack of academic research. Sometimes that was because companies or other funders were less interested in these areas. Walker Palmour argues that, as in medicine, turning to the public to solicit research questions can unearth research topics that would serve the public better and produce more vital work.

"I wanted to do that for economics. I was thinking: can we ask a bunch of economic activists: what are the questions you need to ask to help you change the economy in your area?" She recognises practical hurdles to doing this, but thinks that something like it could be a model for grant making organisations like the FPF and universities to support the ecosystems of political engagement in communities around them to build progressive change.

The organisation has already done something similar to bring in voices that have traditionally been left out of the economic policy conversation. They have supported the Women's Budget Group and the Women's Environmental Network to build structures to bring traditionally marginalised groups into economic policymaking at the local and national level.

### Curriculum change

Part of FPF's work to catalyse new thinking about the economy has been to work with reformers in universities to teach it better. Walker Palmour explains how soon after the crisis, university economics students were being asked by their non-economist friends what just happened. And their answer was invariably: 'we don't really know.'

Although an endeavour like this could only be a long-term project and the operating framework for economics teaching remains conventional in many places, she sees progress. "People are starting to understand that issues like addressing carbon emissions and addressing inequality are not just political questions. They're also the work of economics." Moreover, she sees a growing acceptance that economic rules and institutions are human constructs that can and should adapt. "This is not physics," she says. "The rules are something we have control over. And if we don't like the way the economy is working, there are democratic ways we can change that."

### Skin in the game

Most of all, Walker Palmour believes that organisations like FPF have a responsibility beyond the organisations they fund, to improve the ecosystems in which they operate.

"As an organisation, we have taken that analysis and said: OK, we as a foundation are an economic actor. What are we doing?"

As a response, she created the Foundation Practice Rating to rate private foundations in terms of their diversity, accountability, and transparency. Without asking permission of the foundations they rate, the FPF looks at publicly available information on a hundred top UK foundations, gives them a mark from A to D, and publishes the result. This extends to the funders of FPF, she says, "so we are absolutely rated as well."

And the ranking has produced results. "This is our third year," she says, "and we have seen tangible change: a decrease in the number of D ratings and an increase in A's. But the key thing is that we are doing it to ourselves as well - so we are drawing people into this coalition, this is not 'us' and 'them'. I find that incredibly powerful."

FPF is trying out new ways for charities and foundations to take their share of responsibility for the political challenges we all face. Walker Palmour's experience underlines that civil society organisations have skin in the game here – after all, they are economic actors too.

Bringing new voices into the ecosystem to generate new ideas, solutions, and momentum for change is what Walker Palmour is all about. And that is why she was a perfect choice for an Honorary Professorship at UCL.





# Supporting an ecosystem for transformative change

with Gary Lubner

## We speak to Gary Lubner founder of This Day on why he thinks it is so important to support social changemakers in communities across the UK.

We all remember the feeling we had as a child, waiting on a package or a magazine we'd sent off for. The pensive checking of the letterbox, the hurried questions over breakfast – had it been delivered, had the postman been?

But to Gary Lubner, the arrival of an edition of the English football magazine *Shoot* to his Johannesburg home in the summer of 1973, brought more than just a moment of passing joy.

The 12-year-old Lubner had sent off for the magazine with his pocket money – an early protest against the apartheid regime, which had banned football from TV to shield its population from the possibility of integrated South Africa.

“I opened up the magazine; I couldn't wait, you know what it's like as a kid, and there in the centre page was the claret and blue of West Ham.”

Yet it wasn't just the kits and famous faces that captivated Lubner.

“There, standing right in the middle of the team, was Clyde Best” – the legendary player who graced the hallowed turf of the Boleyn Ground alongside Bobby Moore and other greats of the game. “I'd never seen that – a black player able to stand alongside his white teammate. That was it; I was a West Ham fan for life, and Clyde Best was my football hero.”

It was the day he glimpsed what might be possible.

And that dream of social change still burns strong.

Today, I speak with Lubner as he works to create opportunities for others to glimpse what lies beyond the darkness of indifference and hatred. His new foundation, This Day, funds, advises and support organisations, campaigns, and civic initiatives to foster a better world, both here in the UK and in South Africa.

Fundamental to Lubner's vision is inspiring young people.

“This Day is all about creating opportunities. If young people feel that there's something they can do and that they can contribute, then the future becomes much brighter.”

There are deep roots to this commitment.

Gary Lubner's early life growing up in South Africa was within a family that had witnessed the darkness of fascism and despotism in Europe. His paternal grandmother would later give her own testimony of witnessing her family's murder and being left to fend for herself. It was in South Africa where the family ended up as refugees. It was there that his grandfather eked out a living by selling glass from a wooden cart.

“They knew what it was like to have nothing and what small acts of kindness meant,” Lubner says.

“My grandfather grew up in Johannesburg and had never seen the sea; his family could never have afforded that – but a charity enabled him to go to the seaside.” It is in both the small and large acts of kindness that Lubner believes change can be born.

The family worked hard and did well. And when Lubner came of age – it was in a very different world from that of his grandparents, yet that belief in social justice had been passed on.

“I grew up in a very liberal family as a result of my grandparents and what they had experienced. They were very charitable. They got very involved in different charities.”

When Lubner went off to university in Cape Town, he became more involved in the struggle against Apartheid. He witnessed what courage in fighting for a cause meant, and one man's courage in particular.

“Nelson Mandela was an ever-present figure in our lives. In those days, we never saw him – but for the banned photos we managed to get hold of, and yet we knew he was there on Robben Island.” From the campus in Cape Town, Lubner and his classmates could see the prison from which Mandela had been held – while Mandela lived and fought for freedom, hope was alive.

“In the white community, many people were calling for him to be executed. I mean, there was the death penalty. And so, that was one of the things that I remember – getting into many fights with business people who were saying ‘he's a terrorist’ and all of that. And so it was very important to me to do all I could.”

Having continued to push for change at University in South Africa, Gary took on a new challenge, moving to London to do an MBA. During that time, he worked with Belron and was urged to stay on and work for the firm he would eventually help build into a global brand. He made a home in London, but he never lost his passion for fighting for justice in South Africa. When Mandela was freed, Gary jumped at the chance to work with others to rebuild the country.

His business success, building a global company in Belron, enabled him to do the work he does today. This meant taking the financial success and the lessons he'd learned in building teams and coalitions. Once again, Lubner brought what he'd learned from his family and his time in South Africa.

“I was heavily influenced by my upbringing in South Africa and took that into the business. I feel that every business has an absolute obligation, a very strong obligation, to give back to the communities in which they work.”

Focusing on building a community and recognising the value of a team once again brought success. In 2021, Belron's leadership team received a financial payout for the company's success. But Gary felt that some of this should go to all employees, regardless of their position in the business.

“What we did was give nearly 30,000 people €10,000 each, €1,500 in cash and eight and a half thousand in shares.”

It was probably one of the biggest share distribution to employees in corporate history, effectively 300 million euros. Having found great success, Gary Lubner realised he wanted a way to give back, a way to find his cause once again, his team.

“I've never felt comfortable with the wealth I have. I don't think I deserve it, frankly. But it's the system we work in. And so I decided that I was going to give it all away. And hence This Day.”

As I sit and speak with Gary, images of those who inspired him adorn the walls, from presidents to family and the organisers he supports in South Africa. In all of them, there is a recognition of the gift they gave to Gary – the inspiration and lessons they taught.

Yet his work with This Day is as much inspired by the next generation as those who came before. When he first told his children he would dedicate his time and money to the foundation, it was they who drove him forward and inspired him.

“My kids loved it, they all did. Once I had told them the plan, my son would call me, ‘have you done it yet? Have you got going with this foundation?’ They have all inspired me to do the work.”

Throughout Gary's life, finding power in coalitions and teams has been key, and it sits at the heart of This Day's philosophy.

“The only way you can bring about lasting change is by engaging with government and civil society together. And that's why we support hundreds of different charities and work with political systems.”

What Gary and This Day call the ‘ecosystem’ is crucial to bringing about positive and lasting change. And it's already having results, inspiring thousands to campaign and organise.

It is this drive that leads This Day to support a whole range of otherwise disparate organisations and individuals, from political parties – he has thrown his support behind Sir Keir Starmer – to academic researchers like those at UCL envisaging different futures, and large independent charities and small community groups making change on the front line.

Working across such differences, in small acts and big, building an ecosystem for change is the core of his aspiration.

It is what Gary Lubner is energised to do, fuelled by the joy and love he learned from so many who have made him who he is, inspired by those he cares for and works with today. To once again get on the pitch and play his part.

“I'm going to carry on standing up and doing something because I think it's always easy to say why you shouldn't do it. There's always a reason not to.” Lubner says energetically.

“It's not the right time, not the right person. I'm not sure, you need to check more things. I need more data. Yes, sure – we need to do that. But, you know, This Day, the name is exactly that. I don't want to wait. So, this day is the moment we choose to make change.”

That's the thing with discovering the courage to make change. We find it in moments.

Just like the one that followed the arrival of *Shoot* in that young boy's house all those years ago. Showing just what might be possible and proving we can always find the most extraordinary hope, in the most ordinary of places.



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A radical  
humanity:  
how connection  
and care can  
help renew  
Britain with  
Hilary Cottam



## What has sustained the renowned social entrepreneur and global campaigner for better public services, Hilary Cottam?

What has given her the energy and hope to build alliances, reimagine the state, and battle against failing systems? When I sit down with her at Peckham Levels, a community space where she rents an office, I'm confronted with an untrampled generosity of spirit—a capacity to recognise each person's humanity and connection to others.

It's a joy not always present in politics and policy, yet it seems critical to Cottam's recipe for change. A change that today we are invited to partake in.

Cottam, whose work has inspired a generation of researchers, politicians, and thinkers from around the world, believes in the innovation that comes from human connection. This belief is born out of recognising that each and every one of us come with a history, a story that hasn't always been linear or straightforward and must be respected and connected with if we are to flourish and grow.

In truth, I had been slightly nervous about this interview. First, because Cottam is a giant of contemporary policymaking; she has influenced governments around the world, including ministers and shadow ministers here in the UK. Sitting down to speak with her about her life and work felt like a big enough challenge. But also asking anyone to opine on the failings of the modern state last thing on a Friday night is a tough ask, Cottam having just spent the day speaking to European leaders about how they could design and deliver better public services.

Ours was to be the last job of the week, and frankly, Cottam would have been within her right to come to keep it short and transactional. And yet, nothing could be further from this. We had scheduled 90 minutes, and we ended talking for longer. Cottam's energy and ideas for how we build a better society were infectious.

'I'm running a big work project at the moment on labour markets and good work, and it means spending a lot of time across five different places in the UK.' Cottam says, alerting me to a desk full of sticky notes from her travels. 'I'm endlessly inspired by what people think and dream about. The things they are making happen against the odds.'

It is this kind of inspiration which led her to write her seminal book, *Radical Help*. It is no exaggeration to say it is a book that has reshaped how the world thinks about public services and how they might be reformed. In it, Cottam alerts us to the unfulfilled promise of the welfare state, building on the legacies of her fellow reformers such as Beveridge. One memorable passage set out the unshed business of reformers:

Relationships were allowed no place in the welfare state because they were thought at best not to matter and at worst to be a hindrance to social progress. But Beveridge realised he had made a mistake, and now, when our human connections determine the social, emotional and economic outcomes of our lives, this omission matters more than ever.

Today, Cottam invites us all to lend our hand to a shared mission to put this omission right.

Part of what Cottam is calling on us to do is to tell stories, stories which allow us to wriggle free from the constraints of outdated dogma.

'The reason we got a welfare state in the first place was because we told a very big story in a moment of transformation, a moment of economic transformation with the industrial revolution that was creating all kinds of problems in the labour

market'. It's a point Cottam stresses when talking about today's political moment. 'One story could be Ordinary Hope' (speaking to the Policy Lab and Joseph Rowntree Foundation's recent collaborative project) '...it could be relational welfare, but it has to be a big story, giving us a direction of travel.'

Again, this is about Cottam's core humanity. She sees the need for stories, a context in which citizens and individuals operate. She reminds us to be aware of our shared past and care for our joint future.

For Cottam, narrative and story enable us to operate simultaneously, both big and small. If it is about working with senior politicians, it is also about seeing the power and energy that comes from small-scale innovation and experience.

'It's really important that we support new forms of practice. This is often very small and very often those innovating at a local level feel they are fighting against the grain, struggling against the system.'

Cottam's work is full of examples of small-scale projects that transform how we think about public services and the welfare state. From social care to employment, Cottam has designed and explored big ideas shaped by small-scale experience, solutions which foster citizen's capabilities.

It is care, both formal and informal, that best gets to the heart of Cottam's work at the moment and, in many ways, captures the challenges of the modern state. As Cottam explains, everywhere, care has become more complex in nature and more frequently in demand. Yet the way in which the state values and responds to this need for care remains transactional and deaf to difference.

'Care has to be one of the areas we focus on if we're looking to improve things in the coming years properly,' Cottam says. The challenge, as she sees it, goes beyond the current emergency. It's also about recognising the worry people feel about the future, how we will nurture one another, young and old. 'My current work looks at the instability people feel from a widespread lack of support for good care and the anxiety this creates. This is partly material, partly about services, but it's also deeply social and about wider structures and patterns at work. We find ourselves asking who is going to take care of us?'

As discussed in an earlier edition of the UCL Policy Lab magazine, supporting good care is good for both individuals and the economy. Citizens are undervalued in the care they provide at home, which leads to exhaustion and frustration at work. It is a recipe for economic stagnation and social ill health. And yet, Cottam is hopeful. She has been speaking to political leaders who are keen to learn.

'Currently, the state has a narrow and outdated idea of what a human is. Yes, we do want to compete, and we do want material security. But academic research increasingly shows we are wired for social bonds. And so, we need to have a mindset and culture in government that allows people to value and express these wider motivations and humanity.'

Understanding the value of care, be it parental, elderly, or friendship, is key to these complex developed ideas.

Much of this was touched upon by the American public service reformer, Tara McGuinness, when she visited the UK as part of a tour organised with the assistance of Cottam. As head of domestic policy for the Biden-Harris Transition team in the United States, McGuinness set out to achieve a more human government. Inviting McGuinness to join policymakers of all kinds in discussions at UCL is a testament to Cottam's belief in collaboration and innovation to generate social change.

The willingness to collaborate and share is also driven by an understanding that the challenges facing the country and its public services are much bigger than one think tank, researcher, or idea – that it does to something much larger. And that it gets to the relationships between us.

'We saw during COVID that the Prime Minister set up a national support system. Millions of people signed up and nobody wanted to help. In the meantime, every street had a WhatsApp group helping each other. The WhatsApp groups worked because they were reciprocal: some of us needed more help but we were not labelled as 'needy' and we felt part of something. Fundamentally, it's about recognising the immense power of existing relationships and supporting them. To harness our capacity for shared humanity.'

Throughout our conversation, Cottam refers to crisis and challenge, aware of their magnitude but also their ability to bind us and imagine something better. More than most of us, Cottam has seen first-hand state and societal failure. Yet, she has also witnessed humanity's capacity for love, compassion, and care. She draws on this untapped spring, which she believes our political leaders can call on as they seek to lead us from our current crises.

Returning to care, she invites us to imagine what a 'relational' Prime Minister might say on Day One of a new government.

'Imagine it now. A Prime Minister on his first day in office. He comes out of Number Ten. And he says 'we' not 'me' but 'we are going to be a nation that cares for each other. And I'm going to put every penny I've got, which is hardly anything, towards making that care possible. And I'm going to ask each one of you to reciprocate'. Cottam says. 'Just remember how we cared for one another during the pandemic in our darkest time – how we served one another'.

Sitting with Cottam, I am inspired by the thought; not at the idea of a political leader giving a speech from the centre, using their own power, but at the idea that a leader might express humility and compassion in inviting us all to contribute.

It's a kind of radical help that is about agency, love, capability and connection. It is the kind of generosity of spirit that so encapsulates Hilary Cottam.

After all, Cottam is not inviting us to be heroic citizens, swashbuckling bureaucrats, or monumental political leaders. She is inviting us to be human. She wants us to accept that in our differences and frailties, we also find the innovation and magic that might just enable us to overcome the challenges we face. And to do so, one very human step at a time.





# Remaking conservatism with Adam Hawksbee

We sat down with **Adam Hawksbee**, one of the most influential and unusual voices in contemporary conservative policy-making and someone widely tipped to play a major role in developing Conservative thought after the general election. Hawksbee has spent his career arguing for a conservatism which takes human relationships, belonging and place seriously. In our discussion, we wanted to know how successful he thinks he has been and what he thinks the future includes.

**Policy Lab:** You have written a lot about the need for politics to recognise the power of communities, beyond a simple reliance on the traditional mechanisms of the state and the market. Why do you see these ideas as so important?

**Adam Hawksbee:** I think there are two reasons, one intrinsic and one instrumental; one as a means and one as an end. The intrinsic reason is that these community ties are the foundation of our democracy. Democracies are only as strong as the solidarity between strangers that share citizenship. They rely on me being willing to pay taxes that help someone who I've never met in, say, the Orkney Islands or Land's End, and for them to do the same for me if I fall into hardship. Those ties are built over generations by a shared sense of history, and sometimes by shared institutions and common values and characteristics.

But even though those connections are very macro, they begin at a hyperlocal level: with the people we bump into in the supermarket, at the school gates, while we're walking down the street, waiting for a bus, and so on. And those shared connections underpin our willingness to make sacrifices for one another. So, the intrinsic reason politics should mobilise the power of communities is that it is these ties that build the generalised reciprocity which is an important foundation for democracy.

But it also matters in the instrumental sense, as a means. There's a basic bargain involved in democracy that we don't talk about much: that it just makes things better in a practical way. Right now, if we asked someone in China or Russia how they tolerate living in an autocracy, they might give all sorts of arguments, but one would be that for them, things around them are just getting better. For example, if you've lived in China for the last decade or so, you're likely to have got massively richer. So, democracy needs to deliver a good economy, health and education system, access to leisure and culture, and so on to maintain public support.

But if you want to do all that, then as a practical matter, those things are just best delivered from the bottom up instead of from the top down. So the instrumental reason to harness communities is that they are a much better way to deliver services and to help make people's lives better. And over the last two decades, we saw both Labour and Conservative governments realise that after a few years in office. So for those two reasons, I see a communitarian slant on politics as pretty essential for democratic renewal.

**Policy Lab:** Do you see that agenda as key to the revival of the Conservative tradition?

**Adam Hawksbee:** I do see communities and communitarianism as a really important part of where the Conservative Party needs to go next. David Willetts used to talk about the Conservative Party as being about both 'roots' - security, family, and belonging - and 'wings' - a sense of liberty and opportunity. Any parent will say that they both want their child to feel like they are completely rooted in a particular home but also have the ability to go out, succeed, and achieve whatever they want to do. And, of course those things are linked; you can't really seize opportunities unless you've got a foundation of security.

But over the last thirty years or so, the Conservative Party has been much more focused on the 'wings' side - on liberty and individual freedom - and not as much on security and belonging. In a world that's becoming much more unstable, particularly economically, with old forms of labour pulling apart, the rise of China, all sorts of things that lead to instability are making it understandable that people want more of that security and that belonging. So, I think that over the next five to ten years, the Conservative Party needs to rediscover the sense of security it's famous for.

**Policy Lab:** Let's reflect on what all of this might mean practically, for public policy. What might a modern policy for "neighbourhood renewal" look like, for example?

**Adam Hawksbee:** Onward did a report a few years ago called 'Turnaround,' supported by Local Trust, where we looked at Neighbourhood Regeneration policy from Wilson's Urban Aid Programme all the way up to Levelling Up. We found that three things really matter: that you get money down to the lowest possible level; that it is flexible enough to respond to local dynamics; and that it's there for the long term. The programmes that have worked, like the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, all combined those three elements.

In the past few months, I've started a role supporting the government on their long-term plan for towns, which sits squarely in that Neighbourhood Renewal tradition. It combines those three elements: it's at the Town level rather than the Local Authority level. It has Town Boards guiding it made up of local people and an independent chair. And the funding includes revenue as well as capital. One of the problems with a lot of previous levelling up programmes was that they were all about the shiny buildings and not the people that maintain them, bring them to life, and make them work.

So, this new programme is a long term plan for towns over ten years, with funding coming through at regular intervals over ten years, which

means that people can build a plan over time. So it's £1.5 billion for 75 towns over that period - similar to the funding that would go to a Metro Mayor. I think that's the beginning of a new approach that a future government, regardless of political party, will build from, that learns from what has and hasn't worked in the past.

**Policy Lab:** All of this, of course, depends on strong bonds in our politics. But this is a fractious time. You've spoken in public in the past about "disagreeing well", a theme the President and Provost of UCL, Michael Spence has also often spoken about. Why do you feel it's important to reaffirm this right now?

**Adam Hawksbee:** Given the scale of the challenges we've got, economically, environmentally, and internationally, there are some real trade-offs that haven't really been discussed domestically yet. For example, we might want to respond to the rise of China by onshoring supply chains so we're more self-reliant, but that means some goods are going to cost more, which of course adds to the cost of the weekly shop. There are many big debates like that that we need to have.

But we have to make sure that where there are people seeking to remove someone from the debate or change the way we debate through threats and intimidation, we're clear that that's just not appropriate. In recent weeks we've seen intimidation of individual MPs, for example by standing outside their home. I was really worried about the Speaker's decision to change Parliamentary procedure to not allow the SNP their Opposition Day motion, and even more worried by Harriet Harman's suggestion that we should go back to some elements of the covid-era remote Parliament.

We also have to be extraordinarily careful with the language that we use and the tone of those debates. That applies just as much to people on the Conservative side who can be very unconsidered with their language about debates on things like Israel and Gaza and trans rights. These are issues on which, even though I may agree with their underlying points, some have often chosen to conduct themselves in a way that makes it less likely that we can have a productive conversation on that topic.

For me, "disagreeing agreeably" is about being extremely clear where the lines are on threats and intimidation, but also about recognising that we can have really difficult debates in ways that are respectful and generous. That doesn't mean pretending to agree by going to a level of abstraction where we seem to be on the same page even when we're probably not. It means learning how to disagree profoundly while still being respectful.

# Citizen Portraits: high ideals and everyday connection

For this edition of the Citizen Portraits, we found a sense of place and connection.

York and Peckham have always been home to transformative ideals and institutions. They have held a space for radical thinking and human connection





For two days, as the rain stopped and people made their way around these two communities, we found joy and connection that comes from places that are alive with humanity in all its differences.

Our conversation with Hilary Cottam at Peckham Levels reminded us of the Peckham Experiment, a radical pre-war idea about how a genuinely community-based approach to health could support human flourishing and connection. This spirit remains alive and well in Peckham today, not just in the social enterprises and small businesses of Peckham Levels but also in the energy of its shops and restaurants.

Anyone who has been to Rye Lane will recognise the beautiful flow of energy that goes from the green pastures of the Rye in the south to the tower blocks of the Willowbrook Estate in the North. At its heart is Khan's the keeper of all everyday things—from plastic prams to birthday candles. The tools to mark any moment are stacked high on its endless shelves.

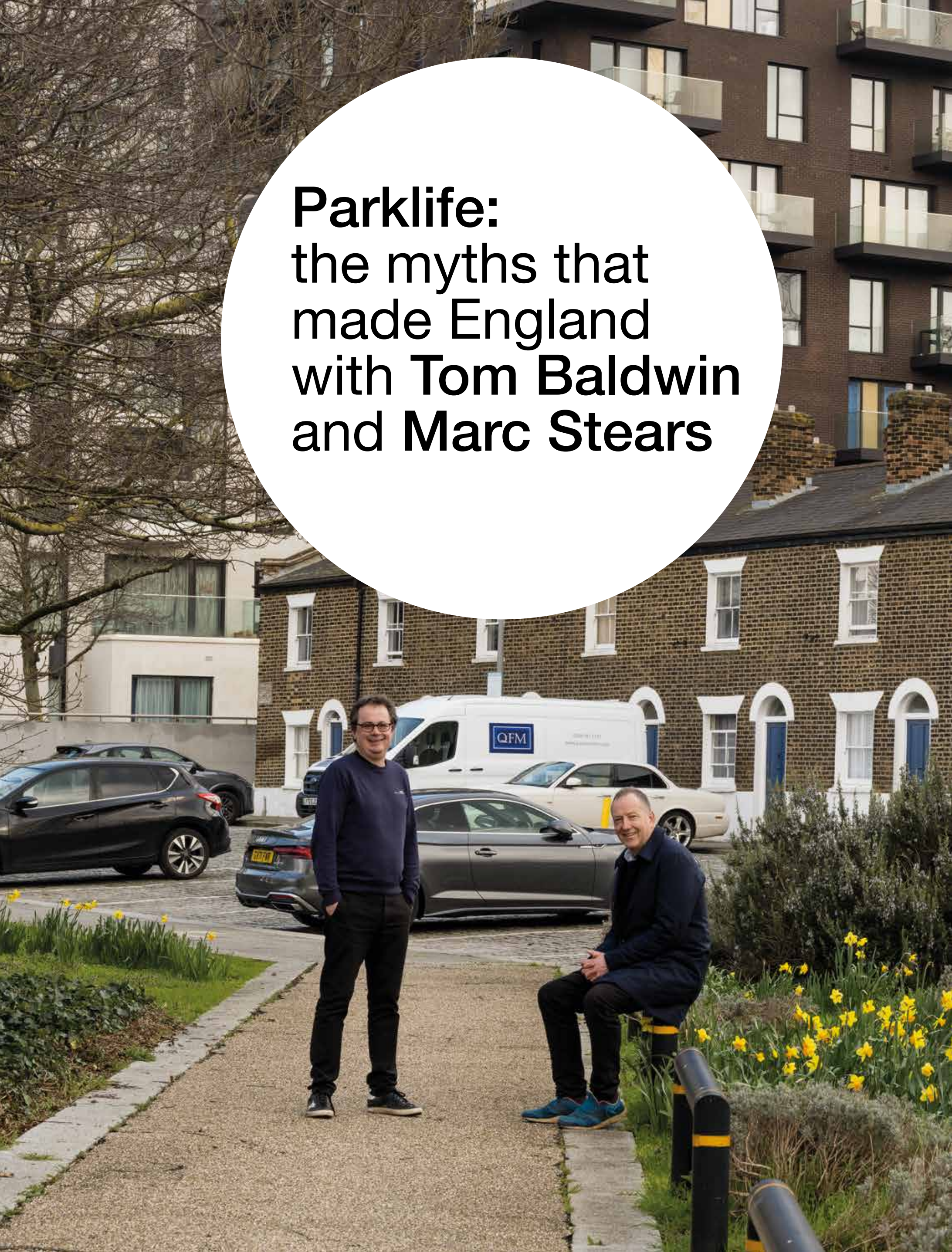
In York, we are met with a city of soaring beauty and reforming ideals. It is a small city with big thinkers and doers—from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to Danielle Walker Palmer and the Friends Provident Foundation. York has an old tradition of rebellious thinking when it comes to social change. At the same time, in Bettys Tea Room, amongst the cream teas and tourists, there is a welcoming Yorkshire hum, a place of gossip and friendship inviting you in.

As spring arrives, these two communities once again feel renewed, the possibility that comes with green shoots. Speaking to people in Peckham and York, we're reminded that there are ordinary communities behind radical ideas and institutions like The Peckham Experiment and Friends Provident Foundation – they are shaped by the places where people meet and connect. From Bettys Tea Rooms in York to Khan's, these are the spaces where connection is fostered, and people flourish.









**Parklife:  
the myths that  
made England  
with Tom Baldwin  
and Marc Stears**

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**‘We’re just saying that there are some good things here, slightly weird good things which can provide the foundations for some sense of belonging, security, identity through which they can then rebuild a better life and a brighter future.’**

Ahead of the publication of their new book *England: Seven Myths That Changed a Country – and How to Set Them Straight*, published by Bloomsbury this St George’s Day, **James Baggaley** speaks to **Tom Baldwin** and **Marc Stears** about how ordinariness can overcome grandiosity and create a new shared hope.

Nothing remains new. In the end, newness fades and bends to the folds of a place. At the North Greenwich Peninsula, on one of the Thames’s great meanders, you are reminded that history is shaped as much by the immovable elements as it is by grand human impositions.

The river, its past and its vista manage to dwarf any building or venue. Its great flow, in fact, provides the skyscrapers and music venues a reason for being. It is the context in which life exists. And today, sitting staring at the Millenium Dome or the O2 Arena, depending on your age, you are struck by how this once very modern idea of design and politics has become a very ordinary corner of London. Conceived by Tony Blair and his allies as a beacon of abstract newness, it has become another line in a continuous story of the city and the communities that have come to call these riverbanks home.

For a time, the Dome had become a great political albatross. It was a space without a purpose. And yet slowly, with the emergence of cracked pavements and the fading of its cream tarpaulin, life has emerged—one that isn’t as showy or abstract as the art performed to a seemingly unmoved Queen Elizabeth II back on that rainy night in 1999. But one that speaks to a bigger English tradition of the ordinary.

Today, it is an ordinariness that provides light relief to families at a weekend or venue for the concert of a lifetime in the 20,000-seater music venue. Where once there was performative dance, now there are The Killers pumping out the soundtrack of a night out in provincial England or Michael MacIntyre and his special brand of suburban humour.

Here, where once there were myths, now there is a place and even an emerging community.

The story of how ordinariness overcome grandiosity and how the power of personal connection trumps unmoored abstraction is the very essence of Tom Baldwin and Marc Stears’ new book *England: Seven Myths That Changed a Country – and How to Set Them Straight*, published by Bloomsbury this St George’s Day.

The fifth chapter of the book focuses on the Millennium Dome and the community that now surrounds it.

I start there when I sit down to talk to the two of them in the pub, The Pilot, the last remaining relic of the pre-90s era, and the scene of the video for Blur’s “Parklife” thirty years ago.

‘What struck us here in the North Greenwich peninsula is how community, and people can help to turn what is bright and shiny and grandiose into something humbler and more ordinary and more liveable.’ Baldwin says.

Before I manage to ask my next question, the food arrives.

The Pilot is a stocky pub arranged over a couple of buildings, lined up next to a neat row of bricked terrace housing. The food menu now lists tofu burgers alongside its steak and ale pie and fish and chips —further proof of Baldwin and Stears’s argument that change in England, even culinary, happens all the time, mixing the new amongst the old.

‘Take this old pub,’ Baldwin continues. It’s a quintessentially English experience. But scratch the surface, and it’s a messier story. Firstly, it’s a Fuller’s pub, Fullers which is owned by a huge Japanese multinational corporate firm, one of the biggest in the world. And yes, there are plenty of regulars, I can hear a few now.’ Baldwin says, pointing around to the folks lined up at the bar.

‘But just out there, we spoke to a bloke playing football with his son. And it turns out he’s from Bilbao and works in a bank. There is a community association here, but it is chaired by someone from Sweden. And so, there’s a sense that in England, what is reassuring and what is new are all wrapped up together. And that’s what we ultimately want to explore with our book’.

‘The book is a recognition that England is necessarily a muddle, a mixture of the old and the new, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful.’

That argument in the book also provides us with a window through which to explore politics today.

As Baldwin points out, politics has too often shrunk away from complexity—instead seeking out simple stories of national heroism or imperial evil—when, in fact, these sinners and saints have come to be interwoven.

Politics today, that is, has its loud, simplistic, one-sized myths. And according to Baldwin and Stears they have warped our sense of our own country.

Their book does not seek to disprove or discard these myths but more see them in all their messiness. To recognise their ambiguity, in doing so they offer us the tools to overcome our challenges today.

It’s a theme that resonated with Stears following a conversation with the celebrated playwright and UCL Policy Lab Honorary Professor, James Graham.

‘James put it so well when we interviewed him,’ Stears tells me. ‘He says that the problem with politics in the last 20 or so years has been that actions have no consequences. But he doesn’t mean that in the usual, sort of ethical sense, that politicians get away with doing bad things. He means that politics has become detached from the tangible reality of people’s lives. Politics too often operates on a different plain, with grandiose abstractions, with phrases that end up coming from a political







glossary, but that doesn't resonate with the experience of millions of people in the country.' Stears summarises.

And that is why from the modernism of the Dome to the ancient rights of Runnymede, Baldwin and Stears have toured England unpacking their seven myths.

'One thing we were trying to do with the book is deflate some of these myths, take the air out of them, and bring them back down to the ground. In the hope that political life can be back in touch—real touch with people's tangible experience'.

As a former political speechwriter Stears has thought more than most about the power of words and actions in political life. And he has always been driven to explore how our relationship with memory and place creates the foundations for a political story and strategy which can create lasting change.

'That's one of the reasons why the Dome is such a, a sort of great place to come, because it captures a moment in British politics when politicians, for good reasons and bad, were trying to imagine a perfect future unmoored from the shackles of the past. One not let down by the failures of Britain in the 20th century, both free of prejudice and discrimination, but also free of texture and tangibility and place of belonging. And now we're hopefully entering a period where, you don't have to pose all those things as dichotomies, that you're either new or old, you're either ambitious or cautious,' Stears says.

This belief in ordinariness and nuance is not a rejection of the new or a disagreement with diversity and difference. In their telling of England's myths, you have a story that leans into the personal work of myth-making. England is a country where new communities add and adapt the old, sometimes odd traditions.

'This is not anti-modernity, you know, because if you're anti-modernity, you're basically just reactionary,' Baldwin argues. 'A lot of the original reaction against the Millennium Dome and New Labour was a sort of ersatz tradition. You saw it with the Countryside Alliance and a belief in an England that had never really existed. And that's as much mythological, than the myth of modernity. What we're asking for is almost just to relax these engorged mythologies so that everybody can find the space to live more easily, not perfectly because they won't, but more easily with each other.'

These messy ambiguities are what have so come to define the UCL Policy Lab's work and how Stears has gone about creating a space for a genuine exploration of perspective, experience, and ideas.

Sitting with Baldwin and Stears now and hearing their stories, both personal and political, one realises theirs is a politics forged in a belief in people's ability for genuine joy and compassion. That somehow, whatever the political challenge, the untrampled brilliance of ordinary spirit is where politics can find ordinary hope.

Theirs is a story of relationships, relationships which are politically powerful because they are real and tangible. The people described in the book – which James Graham calls a 'cast of characters to die for' – they are foundational building blocks to a better politics not because they espouse grand visions but because they tell stories which are bound to the people and places around them.

If this is a theme of all of Baldwin and Stears' recent work – it's a theme they think is shared across politics and can be a process for renewing politics and public service.

'I think the reason that so many of the different people that we spoke to for the book about England, or who have read the book ended up agreeing with us – it was because both on the Labour side and on the conservative side or the left, or the right, there are people who recognise the sort of problems with grandiosity, abstraction, distance that we tried to identify in the book and who strive for a more humane story about the country and a political approach to changing it'.

As we come to finish our meal of pie, fish finger sandwiches, and, yes, the tofu burger, Stears goes back to where the book began, in a conversation he has with Baldwin when thinking up ideas for a speech back in 2011. He tells me that they both tried to think back to their own memories of growing up in Britain, Stears in the suburbs on the edge of Cardiff and Baldwin in the John Bull countryside of the Cotswolds.

They landed on the memories of attempting picnics on rainy days – sat in some National Trust car park, attempting to see the view through the fogged-up windscreen and listening to the football scores on the radio. This is not some celebration of misery or blitz spirit but that in its difference and strangeness England and Britain can find joy.

'We're just saying that there are some good things here, slightly weird good things which can provide the foundations for some sense of belonging, security, identity through which they can then rebuild a better life and a brighter future.'

In doing so, they offer us a glimpse of what is beautiful through the similarly foggy windscreen of British politics.

'Finding that middle ground, which is neither a grandiose myth which rejects everything, nor a sort of grandiose myth which celebrates everything, but which says, actual life is complicated and muddled and sometimes joyful and sometimes melancholic, and sometimes your next door neighbour is from the other side of the world, and sometimes they're an old person who's lived in the same town for 70 years, and all of that mish-mash together is what England is. And if you accept that and recognise it and build on it, you've got an opportunity to create betterness.' Stears says.

As we wander back through the newly sewn lawns and sprouting developments, we see all that life and joy so perfectly expressed by Baldwin and Stears. And I remember coming to the Dome on a school trip aged 9 – one of the thousands of other schoolchildren given a coach trip to witness our future.

Most of it had fallen from my mind, but I remember the excitement, the possibility that came from a day trip out and time with schoolmates. From a sense that we were part of something new, that perhaps this future might include us. In truth, the exhibits all seemed bonkers to that nine-year-old and his mates.

Standing here today, by the now not-so-new Dome with its growing sense of place and community, is something not so bonkers. It is a place where ordinary people get to experience each other, to see and witness joy and happiness. To be here today, is to glimpse the realities of the ordinary, a new myth perhaps, but one which deserves its place amongst the best of them.



*England: Seven Myths That Changed a Country* by Tom Baldwin and Marc Stears is published by Bloomsbury and out on St Georges Day, April 24th, 2024

# A radical invitation to collaborate

How can we transform public service design and delivery by focusing on the power of human relationships? That is a question that the UCL Policy Lab has been increasingly investigating. James Baggaley sat down with **Nick Kimber**, Director of Strategy and Design at London Borough of Camden and **Osian Jones**, Head of Corporate Strategy for the Borough, about how they are changing public services for the better.



Nothing less than a “radical invitation” is needed, a real opportunity for citizens and the state to relate to one another in a way not seen since the birth of the welfare state. Or so, Nick Kimber and Osian Jones, from Camden Council, believe.

When I met them, we sat in the small reception space at Camden Council – where those seeking support and help often arrive in moments of greatest need—each citizen with their own set of complex requirements and relationships. The collection of tables is separated by neat bookshelves and bright open windows. This is not the kind of cold, bureaucratic space one imagines when we think of local government public services. It is far more welcoming, warm.

Camden, along with other councils across the UK, are attempting to break the status quo. And this isn't about heroic exceptionalism, Camden has partnership with councils such as Leeds and Manchester to name but a few. This is about a real national network of reformers. They are shifting to a model of public service design and delivery in which the human connections between individuals, the community and those who work for the state are the primary drivers of innovation and support. In some sense, it is an attempt to overcome the challenges facing modern developed societies, those of poverty, alienation and social disconnection, by drawing on the oldest of human strengths: belonging, knowledge and even love.

Kimber is clear about the importance of leadership and core values in driving this change.

‘How we design services is so important for Camden, partly because we see ourselves as a values-led organisation – in everything we do. And one of those values is around empathy. From our chief executive down, our work is about being empathetic human beings. It's so key to this way of working.’

When Kimber and Jones speak about design-led approaches, I hear the passion of individuals who believe in the place they serve and the people who shape it – the people of Camden themselves. This strong sense of values, mission, and place permeate their whole approach.

Informed by the inspiring work of others in this edition of the Policy Lab magazine, including Hilary Cottam, reformers like Kimber and Jones form the basis of a growing community and network of policymakers, civil society leaders, public servants and business leaders who place human relationships at the heart of service design and delivery.

‘Trust, empathy, and humility: these are all central to how our approach operates,’ Jones says, reflecting on her role working with Camden's political leaders and communities.

‘When we step into a space it is about recognising what we don't know and stepping into spaces with an intention to build trust before we act. Stepping into spaces with an intention to learn and understand is super important.’

Trust, empathy, and humility are not often words citizens associate with large state entities these days. Yet Kimber and Jones are clear that their approach is not wholly new. These values, after all, permeate so many of the relationships between specific individuals working within public services at the moment. The GP and their patient, the social worker and the family they are working to support, the teacher and the student looking for help; in each of these individual cases deep connections can prevail. And it is the fact that our attention has too often been drawn away from these specific relationships and focused instead on abstract structures and targets, that some believe has led to deepening distrust and major failings in outcomes.

Listening to these stories and sitting with Kimber and Jones in their welcoming space in Camden, it is easy to forget the intense wave of challenges facing British local government at present. With enormous financial pressures and ever deepening social crises, the burden being placed on local government has never been more acute nor the complexity of demand more nuanced. Yet Kimber and Jones are clear about the lessons and leadership we can take from the innovations in service provision we are witnessing all across the country.

**‘Be it Camden or any public service body, we need to be thinking about how an organisation moves from top-down and bureaucratic to relational while remaining high-performing.’**



'I think the real advantage of local government is that we have real relational practice existing at a strategic level and a frontline level. You see, childrens, social workers, adult social care services are fundamentally relational services. And we draw a lot of our specialist expertise from those frontline practitioners into organisational strategy. We really benefit from that dialogue between different aspect of leadership and delivery – that's about creating a space for conversations.'

How political leadership interacts and supports this new, more relational approach will likely be critical to public service delivery in the coming years. As UCL experts, including the Lab's theme lead, Dan Honig, have explained, the need for this new approach is driven by both the demands of our age and by the severe financial constraints that so many public services face.

For both Kimber and Jones, leadership at a political level is key to making real progress. And at heart, the kind of leadership required rests most of all in a willingness to make a genuine invitation to everyone to collaborate for the common good, across private and public sectors, and, critically, the community at large.

Kimber believes bold leadership of this sort can create a space and a belief in a new way of working.

'Be it Camden or any public service body, we need to be thinking about how an organisation moves from top-down and bureaucratic to relational while remaining simultaneously high performing and still doing the basics well. A relational organisation is one where relationships are embedded into the core code of the organisation. Into its policy, procedures, practice.'

To some – this more contingent, people-based, relational approach can feel risky. It means moving on from many of the targets and centralised control at the heart of the so-called "new public management" that has dominated British public service design and delivery for so long. Letting go can feel like a radical act. But as both Kimber and Jones make clear, attempting to manage the complexity of people's lives in a top-down bureaucracy has proved to be a mirage, even if one grounded in an understandable desire for accountability. When the lives of those who depend on and provide public services are constantly monitored and measured using abstract systems, we can strip the humanity out of them and end up doing little to transform the lives of those we claim to care about. We can measure all but deliver little.

'Take the example of children's early-years help and child protection. In Camden, you have a social work system with a focus on what we call a resilient family model – these are relational practice models that exist within our children's services.' Sometimes, of course, crises are unavoidable, and the state still ends up taking children away from their parent, but even then Kimber and Jones argues the approach taken matters. 'We have the responsibility to do that sometimes – but acting in a genuinely relational approach is key to good outcomes.'

'What's felt like a shift in Camden has been thinking about individuals in context', Jones continues. 'And so, thinking about things like family group conferencing or early intervention, we always seek to ask how can we properly see the individual within their context, their community, their family? Then, we also support frontline staff within their context and their deep knowledge. That relational practice exists between staff and service users, but also between staff as well,' Jones says.

And it is not just political, social and economic challenges which are driving this new innovative relational approach to public services. Technology can help too. Sometimes seen as a tool for removing human interaction, Kimber thinks instead that used in the right ways new digital technologies can make these relational approaches even more effective and viable.

'Take our earlier example of child protection; Artificial Intelligence is a tool which potentially takes a day of labour out from every social worker in the UK. It can work like a co-pilot. It can record your case notes verbatim; it can translate those into a set of actions that you're accountable for; leaving the social worker to focus on the human dimension.'

In this sense Kimber and Jones show how we develop new ways for public services to use technology to enhance human interaction, supporting a move to a focus on relationships. Their idea is that those who shape public services should stop running away from what makes the essence of our human lives -- our relations with those around us -- but instead run towards it. We should be seeking to support and enhance people's lives through deep personal connection, understanding and compassion.

What is being fostered in Camden, is also seen in plentiful other local authorities across Britain. From North Lincolnshire to Wigan, people with deep knowledge and relationships with citizens are not only helping fix broken public services but also transforming how individuals interact with the state and politics. As Britain faces its future, the question now is whether central government can follow suit?

### **Explainer: Design-led Public Services**

In Camden, we use a design-led approach to changing and improving public services because we believe that effective, relational public services need to put people at their centre. With local government being uniquely positioned to focus on communities and individuals, and a design-led approach's emphasis on drawing on a wide range of skills and expertise to make tangible change and take action, it allows us to work even more closely with citizens to solve problems and provide the most relevant support.

Empathy is a core value for us, which we seek to embed throughout the development and delivery of our services by prioritising understanding the needs and experiences of everybody involved - working closely with front-line staff, the teams that support them, and the residents they serve. Throughout the design-led process, we continue to hear the importance of reflecting on the opportunities and barriers to delivering relational and empathetic services (which is how staff instinctively want to work) and how designing services with staff and residents helps build trust and long-lasting relationships with our communities.

Local government services need to be able to cope with uncertainty, with making long-term decisions which can flex and respond to change, and with recognising the limits of our understanding and capacity. A design-led approach reduces risk by testing assumptions and allowing us to unpick complexity, and it also encourages humility and transparency about what can be known, and achieved, at a particular point. Design gives us a framework for asking the right questions, including the right people, testing and learning the best solutions for our current context and place - and reducing waste and increasing public value.



# Disagreeing well with

**Michael Spence, the President and Provost of UCL, has made the idea of “disagreeing well” central to the university’s vision in recent years. He argues that we all benefit as a society when we can listen to the perspectives of others, explain our own point of view and continue respectfully to engage in debate even if no consensus has reached. The idea has animated two researchers in political science with leading expertise in the politics of the United States, Julie Norman and Thomas Gift. Together, they are developing a new module on disagreeing well that will launch in 2025.**

Gift and Norman sat down with the UCL Policy Lab to discuss what disagreeing well is all about, and why it is so important for the USA in the 2024 election year.

**What do you understand by the phrase “disagreeing well”?**

**Julie Norman:** Disagreeing well isn’t necessarily about reaching consensus or compromise -- though that can be an outcome. Rather, it means learning to have better conversations on difficult issues. While we’re focusing on disagreeing well in an academic setting, the concept can help all of us better engage with diverse viewpoints to have more productive and inclusive conversations in both our personal and public lives. Disagreeing well -- or at least better -- enables us to learn from others with rigor, compassion, truth, and respect without sacrificing our ideals or convictions. Gandhi said that “honest disagreement is often a sign of progress.” While conflict can be difficult, disagreement is often what facilitates the necessary discussions around political and social issues that are so crucial for moving our communities forward.

**Why is American political life so apparently far from that ideal?**

**Julie Norman:** It’s no secret that Americans aren’t disagreeing particularly well these days. In particular, our ability to participate in civil discourse and disagreement around political issues has declined sharply. There are many reasons for this, but it’s largely because many of us experience politics through filter bubbles and echo chambers -- in real life and online -- that mean that we rarely engage with people or viewpoints that differ from our own. When we do cross, our impulse is often to demonise the other side rather than try to understand or even persuade them, and we tend to double-down on absolutes instead of allowing space for nuance.

**What are the causes of the polarisation we see in American politics?**

**Thomas Gift:** Elite polarisation among politicians often stems from structural factors, such as the practice of manipulating district boundaries for electoral advantage (commonly known as “gerrymandering”),

# Thomas Gift & Julie Norman



campaigns laws that allow for the influx of contributions from ideologically extreme out-of-state donors, and the influence of low-turnout primaries that compel candidates to pander to the more radical segments of the electorate. Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, phenomena like the proliferation of social media echo chambers, the ideological segmentation of news sources, and the geographic segregation of “red” and “blue” America are often cited as primary culprits of polarisation.

**Do you worry about the future of American democracy itself?**

**Thomas Gift:** I tend to be more sanguine about the state of U.S. democracy than many of my peers. Despite the extreme excesses we saw on January 6th, the contestation of a legitimately held election, and a former president who took an axe to executive constraints, it’s important to keep in mind the result: American institutions bent, but didn’t break. To my mind, those who say that American democracy is teetering on the brink of collapse are too pessimistic about the resilience of a regime that has lasted well over 200 years. If the Constitution is really so

fragile that it can collapse under the weight of one leader, then you have to ask whether the system of government that it constructed was that remarkable in the first place. The Constitution, while imperfect, was designed precisely as a bulwark against the kind of authoritarian impulses we’ve seen in recent years.

**What, if any, sources of hope do you see? Are there any ways in which American politics might become more inclusive and more stable in the near future?**

**Julie Norman:** Despite the breakdown in political discourse, I don’t think all or even most Americans are as divided as it sometimes appears, and polarization can sometimes become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Polarisation is always worse in the abstract. Recent research has shown that Democrats hold higher animus towards Republicans (and Republicans towards Democrats) in generalized terms than they do when confronted with individuals in real life. That’s not to say that there aren’t ample conflicts in school board meetings, or tensions around the Thanksgiving table when people disagree. But most Americans are living their lives with all kinds of identities of which

politics are just one of many. Finding ways to tap into those other identities is usually a first step for helping us overcome the “othering” impulse that overtakes so many partisans. It’s harder to make headway at the elite level, especially during an election year. But citizens have agency in making their communities more constructive and inclusive places, even when the national discourse is so polarized.

**Thomas Gift:** There’s been a lot of focus, understandably, on what’s gone wrong with American politics in recent years. But it’s also important to focus on what’s gone right. Institutions – at the federal, state, and local levels – have held. That’s a testament to the strength, not weakness, of the U.S. system. America’s government was built on “checks and balances” and the “separation of powers” that have proven remarkably durable. That doesn’t mean vigilance isn’t required. It doesn’t mean past success guarantees future success. But it should offer a degree of optimism. American democracy isn’t, and never was, flawless. Yet the hope of building a “more perfect union” is still an aspiration that nearly all U.S. citizens deeply believe in, even if they disagree profoundly about how best to achieve it.

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