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UCL Policy Lab

The Respect Agenda: How Britain Can Get Its Future Back

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We live in profoundly unhopeful times. Most people in Britain have spent the last few years worrying what will come next: spiralling energy bills; falling real wages; searing heat and shivering cold; war in Ukraine; painful fallings-out over Brexit; chaos in Westminster. And there is little optimism that change is around the corner either. Most people believe that the problems that confront us are baked-in. They are unlikely to be put right by any simple turnaround in the economic or political cycle.

Striking though they are on their own, these denials of hope also stand atop an even more fundamental crisis.

As millions of people struggle with the fundamentals of life, they also feel that those who are elected to help sort those problems out cannot, or even worse, will not, do so, because they do not treat them with the respect that they deserve.

Nurses and doctors, teachers and tech workers, carers and those who run small businesses, feel as if they are not taken seriously by those who get to make the decisions that shape their lives.

They – or we – feel as if our voices are simply not heard, our experiences ignored, or suffering overlooked. Even when our issues are considered, those in authority too often determine policy for us, not with us; and then seem surprised when they miss the mark.

We feel too as if the everyday things which matter most to our lives are looked down on, dismissed as parochial or mundane, by those in positions of authority who think that they have “bigger” issues to worry about.

The facts speak for themselves.

In recent polling conducted by More in Common, for the UCL Policy Lab, only 11% said that the current Prime Minister respects people like them.

Although crisis is often an overused word, this is a crisis. And this one matters – not just for this news cycle, or even this election cycle. This crisis speaks to the threats which hold us together as a country – or do not. Those threads are frayed. If something does not change for the better soon, they may well come apart entirely.

For decades, lawyers and other academics have told us that a strong spirit of mutual respect is the absolute precondition for a properly functioning democratic society.

The British public agrees. In that same polling, a feeling of respect ranks at the very top of the set of characteristics that the British public look for in their political leaders. People think it is more important

than they think it is that a leader has good ideas, or can manage effectively, or has a track record of getting things done. But they do not feel this respect is forthcoming.

So, how could we tackle this crisis? What would it take for people to believe that they are being respected by those in power once again?

Answering these questions begins by understanding what respect entails.

Most straightforwardly, being respected involves being seen, heard and acknowledged, by those around us and especially by those in positions of power.

As the philosopher Robin Dillon pointed out, the very word respect originates from the Latin *"respicere - to look back at, or to look again."* As Dillon says, this reminds us that to respect someone or something "is to pay particular attention to it, to give it careful consideration, to take it seriously and try to perceive it clearly." And, conversely, "to ignore, disregard, or be oblivious to something, to dismiss lightly or carelessly, or to negligently misinterpret it is to not respect it."

There have been dramatic failures of the kind of respect in Britain in recent years.

Think of the victims of the Windrush scandal desperately trying to get officials to understand what they were going through as paperwork excuses deported elderly people to countries that they had not lived in since they were a child. Or the residents of Grenfell Tower trying to get the authorities to take their concerns seriously for years before the building was engulfed in flames.

But there have been far less dramatic versions too, from overly cold, dehumanising engagements with public services that are designed to help but end up with "computer says no" decisions to politicians who seem to believe that there is one rule for them and another for everyone else.

Is it a surprise that this has led to millions drifting away from the polls, not bothering to vote because they think nobody cares about them? That so many are turning away from the big institutions of our country – including the NHS, universities, broadcasters and charities – because they no longer listen to people like them? If it surprises any of us, perhaps that's a sign we haven't been paying attention.

Turning our crisis of respect around starts, most simply, with people feeling that they are being acknowledged and taken seriously. Seen. Heard. Valued. Considered as partners in finding solutions, not just beneficiaries awaiting the support of those with their hands on the wheel.

This is not just about politics. In fact, some of the clearest ways of exhibiting respect have been seen in culture and the arts. One example is Steve McQueen's *Year Three* project. The Oscar-winning Black filmmaker and artist displayed simple school class photographs of Year Three children from all backgrounds on billboards and other public sites, as a reminder to us that all children (and by implication all families and communities) need to be seen, listened to and taken seriously.

This is the inspiration behind the UCL Policy Lab's Citizen Portraits project too.

Crucial though such cultural recognition is, respect in a democratic society means more than just having a chance to be seen or to share your problems with those who are in charge.

It also means being one of the sources of new ideas for change.

People feel respected not only when they are recognized for who they are, or can express their complaints, but when they are able also to share ideas about how things might get better – and see that some of those ideas are put into practice.

Recent research has demonstrated people's enthusiasm to share their insights in this way

time and again, and it reveals their frustration when they are prevented from doing so: from patient groups shaping the practices of their local GP surgery to frontline care workers helping to reshape the provision of social care for the elderly.

And the concrete benefits of showing people respect in this way should be apparent too.

As UCL Policy Lab theme lead, Dan Honig says, "the community, those closest to a given problem, often understand best how to tackle it. Public servants often also want a different, better relationship with communities – in no small part because people who work for government are often are drawn to the work precisely because they want to help citizens lead better lives."

Activities like this are already to be found in pockets all over the country. In previous UCL Policy Lab magazines we have profiled the efforts of the We're Right Here campaign that works in this way, and of Our Future, a social renewal programme led out of Grimsby Town football club.

These inspiring examples both show us the advantages of this way of working and remind us that the idea of respect goes far further than just listening. Anyone who visits the Our Future project in Grimsby and sees a community taking charge of its own destiny again, can see that to be properly, fully respected is not just to be acknowledged or even to share your ideas for change. It is to be invited to be a full partner in delivering that change as well.

The American academic and community campaigner, Danielle Allen, has explained this idea powerfully in her recent *tour de force* of a book, *Justice by way of Democracy.*

When we think of a truly respectful society, Allen tells us, the goal is not "merely to secure spaces free from domination but also to engage all members of a community equally in the work of creating, and constantly re-creating, that community and to state clearly that the resulting institutions and shared practices are an asset that belongs to all."

This notion begins by ensuring that those who operate public services are themselves treated with the respect due to knowledgeable and well-motivated professionals, rather than trying to direct every decision from central authority.

A few years ago, UCL economist, Imran Rasul, and his then UCL colleague, Daniel Rogger, identified the transformative potential of this kind of respect in their hugely influential study of public service delivery in Nigeria. Nigerian public services improved, Rasul and Rogger discovered, when those responsible on the frontline were granted the ability to respond to local situations as they saw them. And those self-same services declined when they were micro-managed from the centre, whether through targets or direct control.

There is no reason to believe that will be any different in the UK.

But this new culture of respect does not stop at the professionals' door. It is also about deepening collaboration with everybody else as well. As Dan Honig puts it, the goal "is creating opportunities for empowered communities and supportive public servants to collaborate to achieve their shared goals."

Collaboration of that sort is vital at a moment like our own.

Changing the country in the sort of way that our circumstances demand neither *could* nor *should* be a project for just one group. Even the strongest of governments or the richest of big businesses will fail if they seek to operate alone. We need a shared project.

Another celebrated UCL economist Wendy Carlin and her colleague Sam Bowles, laid the reasons for this out at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"No combination of government fiat and market incentives, however cleverly designed, will produce solutions to problems like the pandemic", Carlin and Bowles told us. "What we call civil society -- or the community -- provides essential elements of a strategy to kill COVID-19 without killing the economy." We really were all in it together. We still are – and what we need to be focusing on in recovery is not just our economy, but strengthening the ties that bind us together.

For Carlin and Bowles, this means that one of the most important contributions we can all make now is to develop and practice what they call the "civic virtues". That means each and every one of us have to learn to work far more effectively with each other than we have got used to of late.

We need to learn genuinely how to collaborate. That means government playing a new role as the facilitator of collective impact, enabling public sector bodies, private businesses, community groups, academics, campaigners and the public at large to share their ideas, identify overlapping interests and agendas and push forward for change together.

This is a more respectful way of working. But it is also a far more effective one. Without collaboration of this sort, no new infrastructure can be built, no Green technologies effectively spread, no public service reform succeed.

And this is where the search for hope in our ordinary lives and the quest to ensure that we all feel properly respected come together again.

For drawing all of this together, we can see the challenge that faces us. We need to build a political system where people feel acknowledged; where their ideas for change are taken seriously; and where they are invited to be partners in change. It is only if we do that we might begin to become more hopeful once again. In other words, our country will move forward if and only if we move together.

This essay draws from material developed by the Ordinary Hope project, which is a partnership of the UCL Policy Lab and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.