

We need a new social contract

As a starting point, let's take the idea that public policies should be based on the facts of the human lifecycle, writes **Albert Weale**, adding that ideas of precaution and the provision of public goods would be central to this

First of all, what is meant by a 'social contract'? It is a way of talking about the network of rights and responsibilities that bind us as citizens to one another and which form the basis for government action. We can think about it as the charter of rights and responsibilities by which our society is governed. Every so often that charter needs to be refreshed. Now is one of those moments.

When the Berlin Wall was demolished in 1989 and communism fell, many assumed that democratic government, with its benign effects, would spread around the world steadily. People even spoke about the 'end of history'. This did not mean the end of politics, but it did imply that fundamental political revolutions would become a thing of the past. Latin American dictatorships had been replaced by constitutional democracies. Apartheid tumbled in South Africa. Economic policymakers – governments, central banks and international institutions – all shared a set of assumptions about how to achieve prosperity involving lean supply chains, competitive tendering for public services and just-in-time delivery. Governments, it was said, had learnt how to avoid boom and bust. The 'great complacency' had set in.

That complacency was broken by the financial crisis of 2008. However, there had been plenty of signs of other dangers before this time. Strong evidence of global climate change began to accumulate in the 1980s, so much so that even in 1992, the *Rio Declaration on*

the environment was urging precautionary action to deal with the problem. Though there was less public attention given to the issue, global water resources were already being depleted beyond sustainable levels. In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in the USA, we witnessed the most powerful government on earth unable to guarantee physical security to its citizens against an event that was high on that government's own list of foreseeable risks. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 in East Asia was a harbinger for Covid-19, 17 years later. Then came the 2008 recession. More recently, the war in Ukraine, of which there had already been a foretaste in 2014, reminds us of the need for military security and just how internationally interdependent energy and vital food supplies have become. We took for granted the benefits of a just-in-time world. We had forgotten the need for a world of 'just-in-case'.

Born vulnerable

But what would a social contract based on the principle of just-in-case look like? What does it mean when we say that a new social contract is going to require us to put precaution and public goods at the centre of our thinking?

As a starting point, my suggestion is that we take the idea that public policies should be based on the facts of the human lifecycle more seriously. Nothing is more obvious than the fact that we are born vulnerable and



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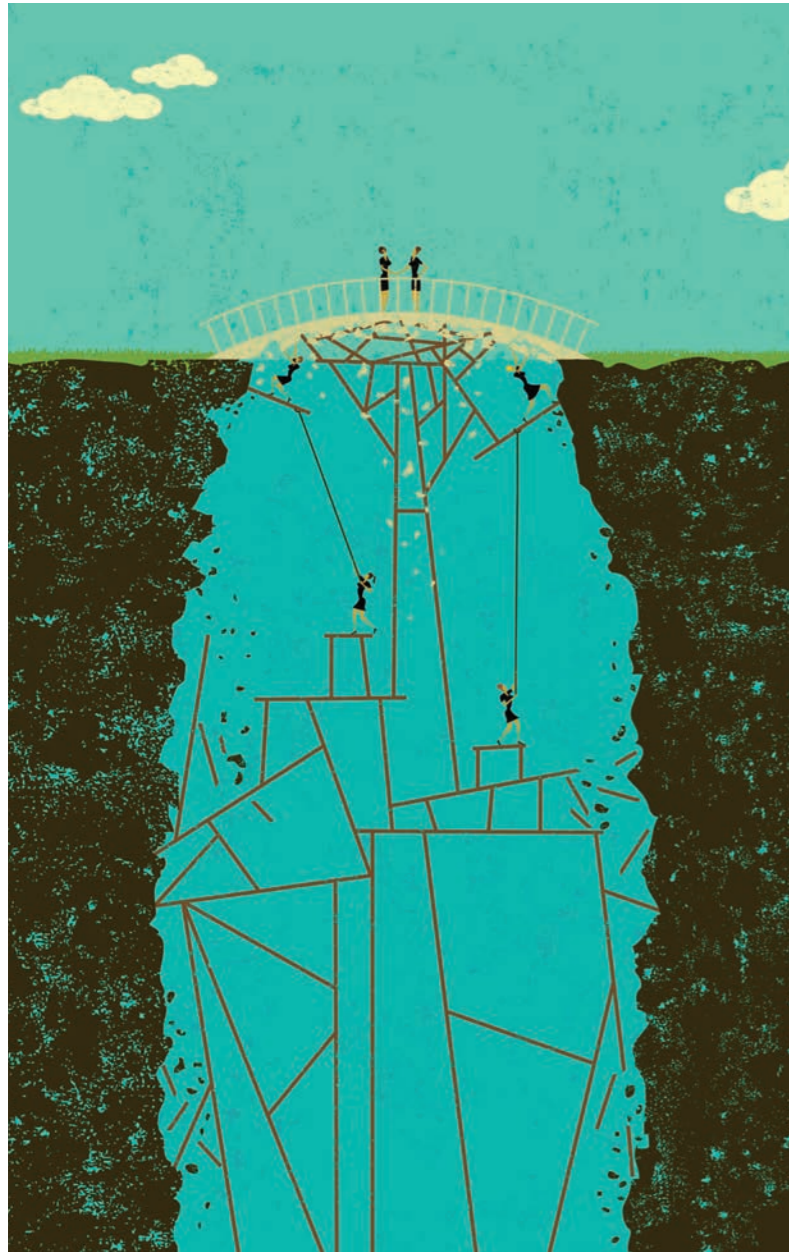
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utterly dependent; if we are lucky, we then grow into independence, usually acquiring responsibilities to those younger than us before – unless we are very fortunate in avoiding the scourges of old age – facing another period of dependence. What we need from public policies is support towards resilience over this lifecycle. In this enterprise, each one of us must be both giver and receiver.

The vocabulary of ‘levelling up’ – often used in the UK – obscures these basic truths. It portrays a world in which one group of people – the left behind – are helped by another group – the affluent – to the likely advantage of the former and the detriment of the latter. But it is not so simple. The well-off pensioner forced to wait for hours for emergency treatment after a fall, the young professional couple finding that one of them is working solely to pay for childcare or the business that cannot find trained technical staff, all suffer from the lack of public support that a well-functioning social contract would provide. This lack of support includes adequate provision for health and social care, affordable child care and high quality education and training. The lustre of private affluence loses its shine amid public penury.

Social order

A crucial feature of services such as good healthcare or affordable child care is that they are both elements in the public goods – those commodities or services that benefit all members of society, often provided for free through public taxation – that all individuals need in order to flourish. The wealthy can, of course, buy private healthcare or private education, but they cannot buy reliable emergency services, a well-educated workforce or a well-maintained road system, let alone a functioning public transport system, product safety regulation, clean rivers and seas or protection against the depletion of resources such as water or clean air. Even if we believe

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(as I do) that individuals and their lives should be at the heart of any civilised social philosophy, we also need to recognise that the conditions for achieving such individual fulfilment lies in a social order that serves the public good. Outside of such a social order, in a state of nature, life is, as the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes pointed out, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

This then is the road to a social contract, an agreement to contribute to the supply of public goods in return for the right to receive public goods. But the experience of the just-in-time world highlights a vital principle of what is needed for a new social contract: the capacity to set aside resources in case of future hazards.

As I write, there are reports that NATO powers are facing shortages in restocking the weapons that they are supplying to Ukraine. Lean production lines and lack of capacity to produce the required computer chips mean that it will take many months to replace military equipment. If such shortages can happen in an area of policy as vital as defence, they can happen anywhere. Look at recent experience with shortages of gas storage capacity or the small number of fertiliser manufacturers. In many countries around the world there is a shortage of medical staff, ambulance crew, bus services, agricultural workers, science and modern language teachers and many others. These shortages are said to be particularly acute in the UK as an effect of leaving the European Union.


The challenges facing the creation of a precautionary state – a state whose policies address the need to plan for the hazards that may come our collective way – are many. There is, of course, no easy remedy to solve them. However, in rising to those challenges it will be necessary to address the short-termism that is too often a feature of democratic politics; in other words, the populist promise that we can have our cake and eat it. The costs of precaution, like all investment, come early and the benefits materialise later. When people are hard pressed financially, it is tough to persuade them to give up something now on the promise of something in the future.

Even more difficult in the pursuit of the precautionary state is that the benefits are often those of security rather than something that is experienced directly. Like any form of insurance, the hope is that you do not have

to call upon the policy. If this is a sober lesson for us as individuals, it is an even harder lesson for us all as a collective body. Populist politics that wish away the need for planning and rely upon facile slogans to attain office undercut the sober, measured outlook that is needed for government in the interest of the people.

Those whose business is to think about risk and crisis planning must, at times, be tempted to despair of short-term politics and policy. But this would be too pessimistic.

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There are signs of a capacity for long-term thinking even in the UK, which has long been the home of the improvised fix. Parliamentary committees often do good work in looking towards the long-term policy horizon; bodies like the National Audit Office do not shirk their task of identifying failures in government performance and many non-governmental organisations campaign incessantly for responsible policies. The promise is there. Our new social contract need not be that far away. 

Author



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