

The Soul of Great Britain at the beginning of the 21st Century

This is a pivotal time in our history. On the global scale it is a time of great uncertainty and change. Science and modern developments point to extraordinary and wonderful opportunities, but there are flip side risks to some of these developments. Anyone who questions this point should read Al Gore's latest book 'The Future'. Whilst not everyone's favourite, even as one Gore critic admirably put it, it is a compelling read, and if only 20% turns out to be true.....

Zoom in on Great Britain and we find further layers of uncertainty and challenges. Will we remain a United Kingdom? Will we be a major player in Europe - in or out of what sort of European Union? Will our economic recovery turn into an enduring sustainable period of growth? Will we be at ease with our new 21st century identity both at home and abroad? How will changes in climate affect our villages and cities?

Over recent years NHJ has examined a number of uncomfortable issues. We have also been unstinting in our view that our nation has enormous strengths and the potential to remain a significant role model and exemplar in the world. Together, our history, culture, openness, and diversity can give us an edge in this age of uncertainty.

However, this will only happen if we are clear about what we stand for and where we want to be in twenty and fifty years time. We need to find our soul at the beginning of this becoming-more-difficult and dangerous century. We should re-establish our binding core values and set them out in a national covenant. This will bring strength to the plurality and diversity of the sum of our parts which at present are weakening the whole because no one can see a framework or direction of travel in a sea of relativism, competing values, spin and half truths. We are not pulling together around a shared vision and narrative.

If we do not bind together around this shared vision and narrative we risk less democracy and freedom because extremism and sectional interests will flourish. As it is, our democracy and capitalism are both flawed and in need of urgent repair. Unprecedented loss of confidence in our political system and politicians is a critical challenge. 'Me' and 'my party first' party politics is only part of a wider problem, as power is leaking fast from most traditional centres and instruments of authority. We must recognise this and work with the grain of more diffuse and diverse centres of power, and the significant empowerment of individual citizens and the communities into which they self-organise and identify - courtesy of better education and almost universal digital communications.

So what sort of British society do we wish to be? What are our core binding values? What ethical principles should underpin our forward journey? How do we achieve this vision and improve the delivery of big ideas and policies? The following points outline the NHJ vision and set the stage for detailed follow-on articles.

It is important to note that these values are not defined by birth or lineage, but are inclusive of all people who are part of our country and who choose to live and contribute to our society.

Vision narrative

Transformation and continuity: we must personify a dynamic and diverse society purposefully transforming and adapting to new opportunities whilst confidently upholding (refreshed) enduring core British values and integrity. This is not about harking back to old traditional values, but about being able to talk about values and nationalism in an inclusive way, reflecting the best of the past with the diversity, youth and dynamism currently in the UK.

People first: the state and its officials serve the British people - not vice-versa. British society must be about much more than just a prosperous society. There is more to life than politics and economics.

Freedom and discipline: enshrined freedoms are the bedrock of individual rights. Universal buy-in to a collective culture that is above party politics is required to safeguard individual freedoms and societal cohesion.

Core values and ethical principles

Freedom, democracy, and rule of law: freedoms within and under the law - including freedom from tyranny, abuse, discrimination, and invasion of privacy; freedom of speech and faith, and freedom to (lawfully) protest must be spelt out. Our democracy must be transformed by more active participation and engagement. We must find new ways to connect citizens and modernise political processes. The rule of British law, administered independently of government, officials and sectional interest must remain the cornerstone of 21st century Britain. We need an acceptance of unviolable rights that will endure through austerity and all but the most extreme crises.

Community first: we need to change from a 'me-first' to a 'community-first' society - strengthening families, neighbourhoods, and other local communities at the 'working levels' of society.

Ethical principles: we should up-date and refresh "traditional" British Christian ethical principles to underpin 21st century multi-cultural and multi-faith British society. The majority of non-Christian faith communities and secular citizens recognise that society must form a view of good, bad and evil, and continuously up-date ethical standards and laws. They also support enduring core British moral principles such as respect and toleration of others, the sanctity of life, and care for the weak and vulnerable. As society becomes more diverse and the scale and pace of change accelerates, we can no longer rely on unwritten constitutions and codes.

Delivering visionary reform

National Covenant (Rights and Responsibilities): we need a national covenant outlining the national vision and road map, and a contract laying down the duties, rights and responsibilities of government (at all levels) and every citizen, man, woman and child.

Improving British Democratic Governance: we must deepen and widen our democratic governance system - repeated flaws especially in Whitehall indicate an over-mighty executive, a weak legislature, and a despondent and disengaged electorate. Taking one example of how to ensure the political system is more connected to its citizens, we should appoint high level - independent of government - commissioners with requisite authority and status to hold anyone and especially senior government ministers to account in order to reveal gross abuse of power and incompetence in 'real time' (cumbersome and prolonged public enquiries sap public confidence and engagement and Mid Staffs NHS enquiry obfuscation, for example, represents a scandal upon a scandal). New 'super' commissioners might include elder statesmen responsible for eg Truth and Major Abuse of Power, Social Cohesion & Civil Society, Next Generations.

Citizen Responsibilities: citizens have to participate if we are to transform our society for the better. We should at least consider whether voting should become compulsory. Citizens of all ages should be incentivised and enabled to undertake voluntary service. A bottom-up and community-led growing commitment to voluntary service could soon become contagious, address social problems and deliver healthier and more cohesive neighbourhoods.

Culture change: getting from 'me-first' to 'community-first'. We need to be a society that recognises that compassion comes not from a state-provided giro payment but from giving others some of our time and genuine care. We should start at primary school level to inculcate the new culture of 'community first' and citizenship. We should introduce a 3 month youth national service which every young person undertakes after leaving school. It could be an all-communities and backgrounds variation of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and with specific focus on community service. Various public and private sectors could co-sponsor. Long-term benefit will accrue from time spent in teams with fellow young citizens from every background and part of society. It will help address various issues caused by the segregation of some communities from mainstream society, and also better equip students "to live and work in a multicultural, multi-faith and democratic Britain" - to quote from a recent Ofsted report.

Heart and Soul

If we are to rise to our 21st century challenges we need heart and soul transformation. Continuing on present trajectories will not do it. It all comes down to values and character. Above all, we must find our soul. It requires real leadership, including self-leadership. And as Winston Churchill said, the single most important quality of leadership is 'courage' – "the first of human qualities...because it guarantees all the others".

Bon courage!