

Manifesto Club

'History is still young'



INTRODUCTION

The hopes and desires we share as human beings, and the differences between us, can rarely be expressed today in terms of the old politics of left and right, still less in the empty slogans of the Third Way.

Those who want to change and improve things are searching for new ways to express their aspirations. This manifesto is an attempt to do some fresh thinking about how to proceed.

Our manifesto is not a political programme. It is an attempt to challenge today's cautious and suspicious culture, which continually assumes the worst about people and seeks to regulate and rein them in. Against this, we pose the possibility of a new politics that builds on the achievements of the past and looks to the future.

Each of the manifesto's six points criticises today's limiting consensus in a different way, developing the argument that humans can and should be the authors of our own destiny.

We want to form alliances with others who share a similar worldview, with the aim of encouraging a more aspirational and free-spirited approach in all areas of life, from science to art, from education to political life.

Some say that history has ended. We believe that history is still young.

SUMMARY

- 1. We are committed to freedom, free speech and genuine tolerance.** We oppose all restrictions on debate, from speech codes to hate-speech laws. We believe that it is only through open, heated discussion that society can decide what is true.
- 2. We support experimentation in all its forms - scientific, social and personal.** We oppose the 'safety-first' culture, which holds back everything from space missions to children's play. We believe that human beings develop by making leaps into the unknown, and learning from their mistakes.
- 3. We support individual self-determination.** We oppose the growing official intrusion into personal life, with government guidelines on what we should eat or how we should raise our children. We believe that people can make their own life choices.
- 4. We uphold a human-centred perspective.** We do not believe that society is powerless in the grip of natural forces, from extreme weather to bird flu. We believe that there is nothing more human than remaking and developing our environment.
- 5. We believe in a universal humanity that transcends difference.** We oppose the division of humanity into fixed cultural or ethnic groups. We believe that people from different backgrounds can forge alliances, and transcend their personal perspective.
- 6. We continue to be inspired by the legacy of the Enlightenment.** Humanity is capable of rising to the challenges it faces. Through the use of reason we can begin to influence the course of history - a task that we enthusiastically embrace.

1. WE ARE COMMITTED TO FREEDOM, FREE SPEECH AND GENUINE TOLERANCE

Freedom is not 'just another word', a slogan to be invoked cynically in support of dubious causes. It actually means something. When governments attack civil liberties in the name of defending freedom, or reactionary bigots claim to be champions of free speech, we should not doubt the value of freedom, but criticise those people for their inconsistency and their feeble understanding of what freedom means.

It is the freedoms hard-won by earlier generations that enhance our lives today. Historically, the cause of freedom has advanced in short bursts, with many setbacks, but an undeniable impulse: from the slave revolt led by Spartacus to the French revolutionaries who fought for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and the black civil rights activists who demanded the right to vote in America in the 1960s. All were driven by a desire to break free from choking conditions and realise their potential. Recent uprisings in Nepal and Hungary show that people around the world still aspire to the freedoms we take for granted.

However, there is more to freedom than the absence of tyranny. A culture of conformism can be just as stifling. The problem in the West today is not so much that certain of our liberties are being undermined by the authorities (although this is happening) but that we are reluctant to exercise even the freedom we have.

The biggest threat to liberty today is neither terrorism nor the 'war on terror', but ambivalence about freedom itself. We hear that there are 'too many freedoms', and that these are 'abused', as if liberty means only the right to behave correctly. Freedom of speech is seen negatively, as a licence for the hateful to offend the vulnerable. We are told that we have a 'tyranny of choice' in our careers and lifestyles, making life too stressful. We worry that we won't be able to cope without official guidelines and supervision. Hence, we surround ourselves with CCTV and other forms of surveillance, and follow guidelines for 'acceptable language' in the workplace or on campus.

Attacks on civil liberties institutionalise this contempt for freedom. The government's incursions on freedoms often seem to be motivated by a fear of passion and conflict, and a desire for an orderly and manageable society. Infringements on the right to silence and the right to trial by jury were justified in the name of a 'speedier, simpler and quality justice system'. Legislation against offensive speech further dulls our passions, as if giving a sedative to society. Politics becomes about keeping things ticking over without too much risk or controversy.

There is no future for this insipid brand of politics. Deep down we all know that our freedom matters. Many of us object to the patronising attitude of politicians

who presume to tell us how to live without offering any inspiring vision of society, and many of us worry about the erosion of civil liberties. What is needed is a whole-hearted celebration of freedom that brings all these concerns together.

We defend free speech and liberty for all, even those with whom we profoundly disagree. If free speech meant the right to joke about religion but not to sing offensive songs about gays, for example, then there would be no free speech. If the UK government has the right to detain terror suspects for 28 days, then our right to liberty unless charged with a crime ceases to be a right, and becomes a privilege granted by the authorities.

Better that eccentric or offensive ideas and practices are confronted with argument than banned for the sake of a quiet life. If we are all to pursue our own aspirations, and build alliances to change the world for the better, we need more freedom, not less. We need to be able to challenge conventions, break taboos, question orthodoxies, and we need a culture that celebrates these things as the essence of creative politics. This means we have to oppose restrictions on freedom whenever they occur and however they are justified. And it means we must have the courage to use our own freedom, make our own judgements, and act on our own beliefs rather than hiding behind codes of conduct or regulations. Freedom is not just a word; it is an activity.

2. WE SUPPORT EXPERIMENTATION IN ALL ITS FORMS - SCIENTIFIC, SOCIAL AND PERSONAL

Imagine a world without the benefits of science, technology and medicine – from aspirin and blood transfusions to electricity and farming, from space exploration and the telephone to wheels and X-rays. Imagine a world where the founders of the American Constitution had stuck to what they knew rather than debated the possibility of a future fit for free citizens. Imagine a world without art or architecture, literature or music.

All of these things are the products of experimentation. It is by making calculated leaps into the unknown that we can learn more about how the world works, and develop our capabilities.

Today's culture is hostile to the human drive to explore and experiment. Scientists who work on stem-cell research or genetically modified crops are accused of 'playing God'; the organisers of space missions are criticised for wasting money or taking needless risks. The hostility towards taking risks affects our everyday lives, too. Schoolteachers who want to take pupils on a field trip find they have to fill in piles of risk assessment forms. Young people out enjoying

themselves are warned about the dangers of one-night stands and binge drinking.

There is a powerful safety-first ethic, a fear that we will not be able to cope with the unintended consequences of our actions. This is expressed in the 'precautionary principle', which states that we shouldn't do anything unless it can be shown in advance to be absolutely safe.

This has encouraged a general restraint and anxiety. People start to think always of what might go wrong, rather than of what they are trying to do, which means that they start to tread a little more warily and fearfully. Individuals start to follow rote rules and procedures as a guide for action. We start to live our lives by risk-assessment forms, which require that every possible eventuality is accounted for before undertaking an activity, and that there are pre-defined responses in place.

This ignores our ability to use commonsense judgement to respond to new situations. It also ignores the fact that it is impossible to remove all uncertainty from life. We can never be completely safe, and will always have to use our creativity to respond to unforeseen circumstances. Societies and the natural world are constantly evolving, and like it or not, we have to adapt and change.

Far from making the world a less risky place, the reluctance to inquire and innovate actually leaves us more exposed. It was 'risky' leaps such as heart surgery and vaccination that allowed us to live better and more secure lives. If adults restrict children's play, or prevent them from going outside on their own, those children will never learn to handle life's challenges. A few scraped knees are a price worth paying for growing up into a confident and capable young person.

Experiments often fail, and can sometimes involve considerable personal and societal costs. But it is often the case that a 'failed' experiment gives important indications about how better to approach a problem. In other instances, tests can yield unintended benefits: a drug developed for one medical condition may turn out to be useful in treating another.

Different periods have had very different attitudes to experimentation. The experimental spirit flourished at times when people began to recognise that they didn't have to bow to religious dogma or monarchical diktat. This robust attitude derived from a positive sense of, and aspiration for, humanity. Today's hostility towards experimentation, by contrast, is founded on a diminished view of humanity.

Of course, there is often a rhetorical celebration of experimentation today. Buzzwords such as innovation and creativity are everywhere; we are told to 'think outside the box' or engage in 'blue-sky thinking'. Yet much of this is merely brainstorming, crazy thinking that never leaves the seminar rooms. Another trend

is to hype up minor innovations as historic developments. Experimentation abounds in the race to develop new kinds of mobile phone ringtones, but it is less evident in areas that could make a serious difference to the way we live.

Even in the most progressive periods, innovators came up against barriers. In response to the motor car, some argued that the human body couldn't handle high speeds; others later said there was no way that planes would fly. Democracy and social reform alike were cast as foolhardy experiments, violations of timeless laws of God and king. Different forms of intimate and sexual relationships were cast as anathema to the sanctity of traditional marriage. As a result, experimentation has always depended on bravery as well as curiosity.

The restraints we face are different now – health and safety commissions rather than priests – but the challenge is not so different. Thankfully there is still an appetite for experimentation and many people are prepared to take risks in order to improve lives. What we want is to create a climate that encourages and affirms these individuals' experiments. For this, we need to move beyond a merely rhetorical celebration of the new, and champion experimentation in workplaces and playgrounds, as well as at the frontiers of art, science and industry.

3. WE SUPPORT INDIVIDUAL SELF-DETERMINATION

Under feudalism, the authorities regulated individuals' jobs, places of residence, even the kinds of clothes they could wear. With the dawn of modernity, people eagerly seized the opportunity to make choices about how they lived their lives.

In some respects, we now have more choice than ever before – technologies allow us to email on the move, and we no longer answer to lords, priests or kings. Yet in other respects, there is an almost feudal impulse creeping back in, with the government and new experts seeking to regulate the most intimate aspects of everyday life.

There is government advice on how to discipline your child, how to think about your marriage, how many pieces of fruit and veg to eat a day, how much to drink and smoke. Regulations prevent TV stations from advertising chocolate when children might be watching; laws ban both foxhunting in the countryside and smoking in pubs and bars.

A swathe of new experts tells us how to live: therapists claim we need their help to cope with difficult experiences; life coaches advise us on how to shop or set personal goals; makeover shows tell their subjects how to do up their hair or house, or even how to have sex.

Many have been disturbed by this new regulatory impulse. A group of mothers in the north of England handed bacon sandwiches through the bars of their children's school, in protest against the 'food fascism' regime that had been imposed within. Foxhunters across the UK are bending or openly flouting laws. One does not have to be a foxhunter or to like bacon sandwiches to empathise with the temper of these rebellions.

Our capacity for self-determination is also being undermined by a new cultural script, which emphasises individuals' weaknesses and inability to make choices. Apparently our lives are predetermined by everything from our biologies to past experiences. These modern notions of predetermination echo older ideas of fate.

Some Westerners now look for their identity in their biological origins, tracing their genes back to Africa or Asia for a sense of who they are. Defendants have used their biology as a defence in court, claiming it was their DNA that made them murder. Others see their lives as determined by events that occurred before they were born, from the Holocaust to slavery. Everyday character weaknesses are seen as intractable conditions. We are apparently all addicts now – shopaholics, sexaholics, chocaholics – or sufferers from acute shyness syndrome or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Individuals taking control over their lives, by showing resilience or ambition, are often deemed destructive. People are put on a pedestal if they parade their scars and confess their weaknesses: the bestsellers lists are full of accounts of childhoods of abuse, drug addiction and broken relationships. Society will find room for asylum seekers who flee persecution, but holds economic migrants in contempt for aspiring to a better life. These victim identities can prove a damaging trap, preventing people from engaging constructively with the problems they encounter.

Self-determination isn't just about selfishness. On the contrary, autonomous individuals are better able to collaborate fruitfully with each other and to form meaningful relationships. They marry for love rather than tradition; they come together to pursue common interests, or to have interesting arguments.

In reality, the possibility of self-determination is confirmed by our practical experience. In spite of today's limiting culture, we do make decisions, day after day, and are accountable for our actions. We go to work on time and meet deadlines; we raise our children; we plan our careers and strive to make our plans come true; we seek out lovers and build bonds of trust; we travel to other countries in search of a better life. If this were not the case, society would grind to a halt.

It is not that our capacity for self-determination is dead, perhaps, but rather that it is in denial. Because our attempt to control our lives lacks cultural affirmation, it is

often experienced as lonely and difficult. Little meaning or value is attached to individuals' struggles.

Self-determination is an essential part of the good life. Politicians now put forward 'happiness policies', claiming that these will make us safer, healthier and happier. They often judge the value of policies in purely utilitarian terms. But human beings are not cattle, seeking only to have enough food and to be protected from harm. An essential part of the good life is making your own choices, even if that means doing things that others consider foolhardy.

We need a climate that affirms people's desire and capacity to determine their own lives, rather than one that stifles and disavows this.

4. WE UPHOLD A HUMAN-CENTRED WORLDVIEW

Since the emergence of human beings, we have cut a dramatically different path from that of our animal forebears. Animals are subject to the caprices of natural forces, and develop only through the slow action of Darwinian evolution. Unlike animals, we are conscious beings and have worked to transform our environment to such an extent that it is almost unrecognisable from what went before. We increasingly became subject, not to the laws of natural survival, but to our own laws and ethics.

We have gone from learning to make fire to subatomic physics; from fashioning stone tools to large-scale industrial manufacture; from developing agriculture to genetic engineering; from traversing the globe to sending craft into the outer solar system and beyond. We have developed spoken and written language, sophisticated art, music and scientific theories.

Over the course of our history, we increasingly adopted a human-centred perspective. While we once endowed animals with human characteristics, and imagined our fates to be intertwined, we gradually came to see ourselves as different. The Greek philosopher Protagoras stated in the fifth century BCE that 'man is the measure of all things'. We are the source of all value. The worth of nature is only something that we can judge and understand according to human need.

This human-centred perspective is under serious threat. Human beings continue to develop and to change their environment, but this process is increasingly seen in a negative light.

A new fatalism holds that we are powerless before hurricanes, viruses and changes such as global warming. Some say we are little better than parasites on

Earth, interlopers upsetting the delicate balance of ecosystems. Fatalism limits our ability to take sensible steps to deal with the challenges we face. Critics say that it is not sustainable to maintain cities such as New Orleans or Venice, ignoring the fact that human societies have been reclaiming land from the sea for thousands of years. A constant stream of doomsday scenarios makes it all but impossible to plan for the future.

Environmentalism has developed from a fringe political movement to a mainstream worldview that informs policy at the highest levels. This worldview characterises humanity as an arrogant, destructive force, wantonly despoiling the planet and incapable of managing its long-term affairs. It assumes that any interference in the 'natural order' of things will bring the whole fragile edifice crashing down.

Human creativity and value is projected on to nature: increasingly, nature is seen as the measure of man. We now commit much of our effort and resources to the reduction of our impact on the environment, as though the environment had its own needs and interests that it is our duty to serve. Many call for us to preserve species and habitats, not for our reasons – because a species is of scientific value, or a habitat of aesthetic or recreational value – but as an end in itself.

We are told that the key to the good life is living in harmony with nature. 'Ethical living' guides warn against everything from wine to flowers, from certain types of fish to foreign holidays. The good life in these terms means counting carbon credits and making as little impact on the world as possible. These mean-spirited prescriptions take the joy out of life.

Environmentalism fosters a hostile attitude towards other human beings. The aspirations of the Chinese people are cast as a threat to the delicate balance of the ecosystem; discussion of the 'population problem' presents humans as a plague that should be limited. Some environmentalists casually consider the prospect of the extinction of the human species. In turn, they present the present generation as the curse of future generations.

We want to champion the belief that human existence is positive and valuable. The more children born, the more brains there are to work out solutions to problems, the more hands to build new cities, machines, and beautiful natural parks. We do no justice to future generations by limiting ourselves: they will be aided by the application of our creativity, just as we ourselves benefit from past generations' efforts.

There is no pristine state of eco-harmony to which we can return: the history of the Earth has been defined by change and extinction. Furthermore, we are not and never can be just another 'part of nature'. It is in our nature as human beings to inhabit a world increasingly of our own making.

We want to build a future in which human powers are developed to the greatest extent possible, and in which billions of people are able to live full and productive lives.

5. WE BELIEVE IN A UNIVERSAL HUMANITY THAT TRANSCENDS DIFFERENCE

Each of us lives a unique life, situated in a particular time, culture and place; and yet as humans we have the capacity to see beyond our narrow orbit. Our ability to reason and communicate with others means we can interpret the world more objectively. However diverse our experiences, we can relate to one another. 'Nothing human is alien to me', wrote Terence, the Roman dramatist, over 2,000 years ago. We can translate the beauty of medieval Arabic poetry, and marvel at the art of the European Renaissance; we can use knowledge acquired by others, including the scientific discoveries and inventions of people around the world.

Our culture today underplays this capacity for universality. Humans are portrayed as products of their culture, personal identity and time, unable to relate fully to others. Students are expected to find Shakespeare boring because he is not 'relevant' to their lives. Museums and galleries try to engage ethnic minorities through 'their culture'. Campaigners focus on parochial community issues because they believe the electorate cannot identify with anything beyond. Underlying such trends is a patronising assumption that people lack the imagination to assimilate wider human experiences, that they are intimidated by the unfamiliar.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many of us enjoy the benefits of living in a cosmopolitan environment, and are exposed to a variety of viewpoints through the media. We are learning from each other more than at any other time in history. Yet policymakers pigeonhole us into local or ethnic communities, or tell us to focus on building our self-esteem.

Even talk of universal human rights reveals little faith in our common humanity. On the one hand, human rights activists try to impose ethical standards on other countries, not by engaging with their citizens as equals, but by appealing to supranational authorities to coerce local governments. Alternatively, Western activists try to preserve traditional ways of life against the march of 'cultural imperialism', oblivious to the developing world's appetite for cars, television, science and consumer goods. Instead of believing that people should be free to embrace or reject ideas from all of human culture, some want to keep the developing world in a premodern museum.

Human experience and ability is rich in variety, but the dogma of diversity reduces three-dimensional individuals to labels. The ideal of the democratic citizen enables a person to engage in public life regardless of their private lifestyle and background. When people are defined instead as disabled, gay, Muslim or female, this ideal is undermined. While old-fashioned discrimination is increasingly rare, many workplaces now have quotas and targets that emphasise skin colour or gender. This is a step backwards.

Unless we can identify beyond our own particular experience, we cannot develop solidarity. Our fellow human beings appear to us not as potential allies who might help improve the world, but as creatures with quite separate needs and problems. We risk breeding mutual suspicion, and making everyone a victim or oppressor. Fears are unnecessarily stoked about racial tension in our cities. In the workplace, men and women are given diversity training, telling them how to behave in order to avoid harassment claims. People feel wary of strangers, or under siege from anti-social youth and 'neighbours from hell'. Thinking it impossible to empathise with each other and work together, we regulate our relationships in ways that alienate us even further.

A genuine universalism wouldn't mean bland similarity, with everybody talking and looking the same. Instead, it would provide fertile ground for rich differences of character and opinion. People would be free to develop their own viewpoints and capabilities in arguments and association with others. We would take sides on the issues that mattered, rather than on the basis of empty and formalised categories of identity.

We believe that humans are not isolated individuals, living in separate worlds, but social beings able to communicate our ideas and emotions across time, geography and culture. This transcendent quality makes learning and development possible. History shows that we are not content to leave good ideas to the few: when the radical philosophes of the Enlightenment inspired the French peasantry to rise up against the old regime, the black colonial slaves on the other side of the globe saw the possibilities for their own struggle. In knowing others, and transcending our own particular standpoint, we can know more of ourselves. We need to discuss our aims and goals openly and honestly, engaging with each other as genuine equals.

6. WE CONTINUE TO BE INSPIRED BY THE LEGACY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment was a pivotal moment. Its significance stretches far beyond eighteenth-century Europe and America, where a spirit of free enquiry took hold. Its greatest insight was that human beings make their own history. For the first

time, humans caught a glimpse of their potential to decide their own fate. That potential remains today.

However, while the Enlightenment was crucial to the making of the modern world, its legacy is disavowed in contemporary culture. The greatest threat to that progressive legacy comes not from religious revivals or New Age mysticism, still less from the pathetic fanaticism of anti-Western theocrats, but from mainstream Western culture itself. In universities, the idea of open enquiry and knowledge for its own sake is too often disdained. Knowledge is judged by its instrumental value, or it is suggested that one idea is as good as another. The Enlightenment notion of progress is lacking from contemporary politics. Governments manage without vision, while a fatalistic consensus holds that large-scale change is off the agenda.

We don't defend the Enlightenment as a collection of dusty old books and phrases, or look back on it with nostalgia or reverence. Nor do we believe in static 'Enlightenment principles' that apply for all time. Instead, we want to rediscover the critical and forward-looking spirit of the Enlightenment for our own time.

The Enlightenment threw out a challenge that was not met: its demands were perhaps too great to be fully realised at the time. Just as the heroes of the French Revolution championed 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité', only to find their aspirations frustrated by circumstances, the Enlightenment as a whole spawned ideas that seemed ahead of their time. Oppression and tyranny, even slavery, persisted. Even now that the worst of these things are behind us, we find ourselves some way short of liberty, equality and fraternity.

But we should criticise today's pessimistic consensus that such things will always be out of reach. Enough was achieved during the Enlightenment to show future generations that the first step in changing the world is recognising that the conventional wisdom of our own time is that of an *ancien regime*, ready to be toppled. The historic failure of the Enlightenment should not be taken as a sobering lesson but as a provocative challenge for us to take up today.

The worst thing that ever happened to the Enlightenment was that it became a distant 'ideal' rather than a lived inspiration. The Enlightenment has been caricatured as a set of prescriptions dreamt up by a particular group of thinkers in a particular time and place, and thus inevitably coloured by the racial and patriarchal prejudices of eighteenth-century Europe and America. In fact, there is no single Enlightenment doctrine – it is a diverse and often contradictory body of work. The legacy of the Enlightenment has always been contested and argued over by those who have been inspired by it.

The 'values' of the Enlightenment are not simply those favoured by a bunch of 'dead, white, European males' who lived in the olden days, and those who

happen to think like them today. Ideas like truth, knowledge and freedom should not be seen as take-it-or-leave-it 'values'. These things matter to all of us. So let's not revere them as dead doctrines, but talk about how we can realise them in the here and now with several billion living and breathing human beings all over the world.

The Enlightenment made the link between human reason and our capacity to act, to show how we might shape the world according to our own needs and desires. Since the Enlightenment, this idea has inspired generations of thinkers, reformers and revolutionaries.

Making history is a constant struggle, however, and time and again the Enlightenment view of history has faded in the face of setbacks. While there can be no return to pre-Enlightenment thinking about a God-given natural order, the intervening centuries have produced all manner of irrational ideas about the intractability of human nature, the 'revenge' of nature, or the arbitrariness of the universe.

Whatever the difficulties of making history, it remains in our hands. The Enlightenment serves as an enduring inspiration and challenge for those of us who want to understand and change the world for the better.