The state and uk political ideologies politics essay

The role of the State is one of the central issues in British politics. Where should the boundaries of the State be drawn? Its role at any time must be to protect its citizens' liberty and ensure their security. But how far beyond this should the state intervene in the lives of individual citizens; at what point does intervention for the greater good become interference? What should the State provide in employment and social services? But the answers have changed over time. In discussing the future of the British State in the current context, therefore, it is useful to begin with a brief look at how its role has evolved.

For much of the nineteenth century, many argued to have a small State. Yet all the while intervention in social and economic affairs was becoming increasingly apparent with the growth of a civic structure. As Sidney Webb famously said in 1896, the committed supporter of laissez faire would " walk along the municipal pavement, lit by municipal gas, swept by municipal brooms with municipal water, and seeing by the municipal clock in the municipal marketplace that he is too early to meet his children from the municipal school, hard by the county lunatic asylum and municipal hospital, will … tell them not to walk through the municipal park but come by municipal tram … to the municipal library, gallery and museum."

By the end of the First World War, state intervention was being proposed at the national level. Substantial state intervention in the economy became an accepted option in the eyes of all parties, not least Labour, which in 1918 adopted common ownership of the means of production as one of its core objectives.

Following the Second World War, a Labour Government put these objectives into practice as it set about rebuilding a war-torn economy. The public realm extended wider and deeper then than it does now. Furthermore, political action was largely embodied in – and regulated by – collective public bodies. Political parties had more members than now and represented the principal route through which political opinions and interests were fed into the policy-making process.

But by the mid 1960s, this consensus started to unravel, above all as the approach at the heart of this consensus.

Other developments, from mass immigration to a cultural revolution that struck deep at the heart of traditional attitudes also led to fundamental changes in society. The Wilson Government intervened to create a legislative framework to prevent discrimination on grounds of race or gender and to legalise homosexuality and abortion.

In the economic sphere, Britain found itself confronted by ever-greater global pressures. The UK joined the European Economic Community, a decision which was supposed to herald a new era of prosperity. But rising oil prices throughout the 1970s produced an economic recession that led to growing industrial unrest and eventually an appeal to the IMF for emergency funds.

Out of this mix came Thatcherism and a period of intense and often painful social, economic and political upheaval. Many services and functions were removed from state hands and placed in the control of bodies driven by different concerns. Large numbers of people were encouraged to buy, and subsequently bought, their council houses. A major programme of

privatisation put industries nationalised after 1945 back into private hands, and downgraded the power and position of the trade unions.

The make-up of British society altered significantly. The proportion of manual workers fell from around a half in 1981 to a third by 1991. At the same time, far greater numbers of women entered the workplace – comprising 46% of the total occupied population by 1998. The number of trade union members fell from just over 13 million in 1979 to 7. 3 million in 2002, leading to a marked decline in labour clubs that had once acted as social centres in working class areas.

Church attendance also witnessed a major decline, though one that had a longer antecedence, with regular worshippers falling from 9. 3 million in 1970 to 6. 6 million in 1990. Meanwhile the proportion of households containing the traditional family unit – couple families with dependent children – decreased from around one third to just over a fifth. In the same period, the proportion of lone-parent households with dependent children almost doubled.

Against this backdrop of socio-economic and cultural change, previously entrenched views began to shift, with many people displaying a more individualist, consumerist, less class and state orientated outlook. It is not altogether surprising. For those who bought their council house and gained employment in the private sector, it has become entirely possible to own, manage, light, heat and run a home without ever coming into direct contact with formal state institutions. The private realm of individual choice and

freedom – autonomous from the various organs of the state – greatly expanded. Society became more atomised.

In sum, socio-economic and political changes over several decades have given rise to a new kind of citizen, less deferential and more demanding than in the past.

Traditional social and political identities and affiliations have declined; the concept of voting as a civic duty has weakened; at the same time the public wants more control over decisions. Instead of joining political parties, growing numbers subscribe to single issue pressure groups and feed their views into the political system by direct means such as e-petitions and postcard campaigns.

Given all this, one view is that there is a need for a fundamental change in the relationship between citizens and the state: a shift away from the paternalistic, welfare state model to a new ' enabling state' which empowers citizens to affect change through the power of their own actions.

The question of power lies at the heart of this. The powerful comprise those people in society with easy access to resources, those who can exercise power without considering their actions. The powerless, on the other hand, are those for whom power is – in a real and perceived sense – out of reach. This can breed a culture of fatalism in which individuals doubt the efficacy of getting involved in political action.

This cultural element is important. It helps to explain why social, economic and political inequality is so entrenched and difficult to tackle. So

rebalancing power is critical. But how can it be done? The answer to some degree is decentralisation, devolution and the introduction of new forms of democratic decision making.

Yet merely creating new avenues for people actively to make their voice heard, while worthwhile, will not guarantee wider and deeper public participation in decision making. Indeed, it may serve to increase inequalities in power by creating tools that are only picked up by the already engaged whose voices do not need amplification. In short, it might simply benefit those who shout the loudest.

Furthermore, the truth is that many people do not want to be actively involved in decision making on a regular basis. According to Sir Michael Lyons, research conducted as part of his inquiry into local government has found that, when it comes to the decision making process:

People want to know that those in power are properly accountable; that those in power have the capacity to deliver promises; and that if an individual should want to make their voice heard on a given issue, they will be listened to.

In summary, people want to know that the opportunity to engage in decision making in a meaningful way, but accept and welcome the role of politicians taking responsibility for decisions in most cases.

That people think political parties are desirable is important, because parties have never been more necessary. As society becomes more diverse, and competing claims increase, the parties' key role of aggregating those

competing claims and making coherent choices between them is absolutely vital. The alternative is the rise of single issue politics and groups which, though an important part of any healthy democracy, also run the risk of distorting democratic debate by advancing tunnel vision arguments and pretending that there are easy choices without any price. So in terms of the relationship between citizens and the state, it is essential that parties remain the central vehicle connecting the two together.

Our representative democracy is of course central to political dialogue. The answer to the questions I posed at the beginning of this speech about the role of the state in the 21st century is not to replace representative democracy with direct democracy, or to abandon the traditional welfare state for an enabling state, but to create an amalgam of both.

This is a vast canvas, too much to cover in one speech. However, I want to mention two elements in particular which must play a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between citizens and the state in the 21st century: the Westminster Parliament and political parties. The reputation of both has suffered unfairly. Parliament is not a toothless, tired body and political parties are not corrupt institutions. Yet both need to be refreshed in their different ways.

The future of the Lords is a useful place to start because the arguments expressed around its reform are symbolic of broader discussions about how representative institutions should adapt to a more pluralist society. My preference is for a reformed Lords that contains elected Members alongside appointed Members with special expertise and experience. By such means, I

believe we could create a more representative and legitimate second chamber, which nonetheless retains its essential attributes as a reflective, thoughtful and independent body in which no single faction holds an absolute majority. Its creation would be an important step towards a more pluralist constitutional structure.

But the renewal of Parliament requires more than reform of the Lords. We need to strengthen the ability of MPs to develop their public engagement role without diminishing the parliamentary aspect of their work. I believe there are ways of making the two things mutually reinforcing. A combined emphasis on scrutiny and engagement is required. Mechanisms such as the new Public Bill Committees point the way forward in this regard, providing opportunities for both MPs and the public to become involved in parliamentary work.

Further Reading

Heywood A (2007) Political Ideologies. An Introduction. MacMillan: Hampshire. pp366.

Webb S (1896). The Moral Aspects of Socialism. International Journal of Ethics 7 (1): 80-84.