

For an Oxford Union debate on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015

Speech by John Nickson against the motion:

This House believes that there is nothing wrong in spending more on looking good than doing good.

Some years ago, archeologists discovered a pre hominid jawbone in France that was estimated to be 700,000 years old. It belonged to a 45 year old man. Because our ancestors had a very different diet, dental decay was not as common as it is now so it is odd that all the teeth were missing. Research showed that the teeth had been lost at varying intervals before death and that the man suffered from multiple abscesses making eating painful and difficult.

Unlike modern Provencal cuisine, most of the food then would have been tough and hard. Our man would almost certainly have found it impossible to masticate and so that the only way he could have survived to the age of 45 was if others chewed his meat for him.

Think about that at breakfast tomorrow.

If correct, this must be one of the first examples of charity in our history. All the evidence suggests that altruism is a deep -seated instinct. We are supposed to be charitable. We developed a biological need to help others because this was the best way to sustain and prolong life.

I define doing good as being charitable.

Rather than criticise maxillofacial surgery or making one self as attractive as possible, I will focus on making the case for why giving more to others is important and why we need to spend more on doing good than looking good.

I believe giving is good for us individually and good for society. I leave my friends on the other side to make the case for focusing on one-self rather than others; not that those who give necessarily occupy the moral high ground. People who do good and who give are as flawed as anyone.

Whilst thinking about being flawed, I thought I had better check to find out if I spend more on looking good than doing good. I am as vain as anyone and I was relieved to work out that last year I gave more than 12 times the amount I spent on trying to look good. I don't think this makes me a better person but giving has made me happier.

The beauty industry is estimated to be worth £17 billion a year whilst turnover in the voluntary sector is c. £40 billion. However, personal giving is estimated to be just over £10bn so I regret to say that we ARE spending less on doing good than looking good.

Why does that matter? History tells us why.

We know that the most successful and stable societies were those where the rich and powerful demonstrated commitment to their fellow citizens by being philanthropic. Their motives may have been suspect but the outcome was generally good.

The concept of charitable status began in 6<sup>th</sup> century Greece when tax exemption was available on gifts to establish hospitals, orphanages and schools. Philanthropy became a badge of pride, an emblem of civic loyalty and the mark of a good citizen.

In the second century AD, Rome decreed that gifts of legacies could be made in perpetuity, providing the legal framework for the trusts and foundations we have today.

Since then, philanthropy has shaped contemporary Britain. Hospitals, hospices, museums and galleries, theatres, libraries, public parks and gardens and of course, great universities such as Oxford, were all originally funded by philanthropy and are all manifestations of a civilised society.

That was then. Now, many people have no idea about the foundations of contemporary society. Most people think that philanthropy is nothing to do with them.

We need to think again about giving and volunteering because the state is in retreat. The state will provide less over the next five or ten years. It is not my job tonight to say whether this is a good or bad thing but I must point out that a smaller state has implications

for the future of our civil society and liberal democracy. A smaller state requires a response from all of us if we are to maintain the fabric of society.

We like to describe ourselves as a generous nation but here are the facts. Despite a colossal increase in personal wealth in Britain charitable giving has not grown in real terms for 30 years. A parliamentary report in 2014 showed there has been a long-term decline in giving by households from 32% in 1978 to 27% in 2010. Only 9% of us are responsible for two thirds of all charitable giving.

Moreover Coutts bank reports that only 10% of those selling a business are engaged in significant philanthropy and a recent survey shows that almost half of top rate tax-payers feel no obligation to give to charity.

In 1987, there were 9 billionaires based in the UK and now there are estimated to be 117.

I must confess to being shocked that giving has not grown. Why should that matter? Try to answer the following questions:

What happens to civil society when the state is in retreat? How is it possible for the voluntary or social sector to compensate if charitable giving has not grown in real terms for 30 years and only a minority of the wealthy is philanthropic?

Is civil society and our liberal democracy sustainable in a more unequal world, whilst automation threatens jobs and youth unemployment remains high, where there is fragmentary support for mainstream political parties and a lack of trust in authority and institutions?

Are we sure that we will bequeath the civil society we enjoy to future generations who will live in an increasingly unequal world where liberal democracy might not prevail?

The top 1% owns half the world's wealth. Will future generations inherit a plutocracy rather than liberal democracy?

According to the governor of the Bank of England, we live in an Age of Irresponsibility. The cult of the individual and consumerism has brought us to the point where I believe humanity is losing the plot. When we lose our humanity, ignore the needs of others and start to stigmatise them as something other so that they become less than human, we are in trouble for that way leads to violence, carnage and genocide.

If you think I am being alarmist then consider this. Three years before I was born, there was no civil society in most of Europe and only 4 functioning democracies. Look at the world today and the seeds of discord are not far away. There was genocide in the Balkans only 20 years ago. How will Europe's flash

point react to mass migration by people of different religion and ethnicity?

It is time to rebalance our priorities. The answer is to revive an old fashioned concept: the Common Good. This concept ought to unite right and left. I define the Common Good as the sum of all the values, activities and services that sustain our liberal democracy. We need to renew our commitment to the Common Good if our civil society is to survive and that requires that we give money and time to others in addition to paying our taxes.

In Victorian times, all classes engaged in philanthropy as testified by Frank Prochaska, the historian, who is with us this evening. We should try to revive the Victorian spirit of enterprise and philanthropy whilst avoiding the hypocrisy, repression, poverty and squalor that blighted the nineteenth century. Perhaps the rash of beards and a mania for baking is a sign that we are recreating our Victorian heritage.

I am not making a plea to return to a rosy past that didn't exist. I am looking forward to a future shaped by the experience of those who have gone before us.

And I must emphasise that philanthropy cannot and should not replace an enabling state. If we are to sustain our civil society and bequeath it to future generations, we must have new partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors that are based upon mutual interest and mutual respect.

However, as none of the political parties has a policy to strengthen the voluntary sector, leadership and initiative must come from below. All of us, not just the rich, will have to take more responsibility by giving time and money.

In conclusion, let us think about the most powerful impulses that have enabled the human species to flourish.

We have to eat. If we eat well, we feel good. We have to make love and if we do that well, we feel even better. Those who give will tell you that giving inspires a feeling of wellbeing that is like no other. I know from personal experience that is true. I must also tell you that 30 years of professional fundraising have taught me that the great majority of those who give are, however plain or ugly, more attractive and loveable and have more fun than those who do not. So those of you who are missing out, get in touch with the Oxford Community Foundation, start giving now and enjoy doing good.

Ends.

