

Just Working?

Why the Dignity of Work is at the Heart of Civic and Spiritual Renewal

Jon Cruddas

*Lecture #6 in the series "Social Theology and the Common Good",
part of the Lincoln Cathedral Common Good Project.
Held on 14 September 2023 before an invited audience at CCLA, London,
and streamed live for a public audience. To hear a recording, click [here](#)*

Good evening everyone.

It is very good to be with you all.

Firstly, I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak as part of this prestigious Lincoln Lecture Series.

Although I should apologise for being unable to deliver this talk earlier this summer. That evening we were voting on numerous amendments to the government's immigration bill – and I could not leave Westminster – so please accept my apologies.

I would also like to thank Maurice Glasman for standing in for me on that occasion. And to thank the organisers for rearranging tonight's event.

I would like to put on record my appreciation to the partners that have made tonight's event possible: Together for the Common Good, Lincoln Cathedral and CCLA.

This series asks us to reflect on "*How can common good theology help us play our part in civic and spiritual renewal?*"

That is such a significant question.

It is asking us to think deeply about the challenges we face as a nation – we can all agree these challenges are immense. You can simply name a few of them quite easily:

- *Climate change* - literally the future of the planet;
- *Populism* - the hallmark of which is the friend/enemy distinction that breeds grievance, division and conflict;
- How we live together – specifically issues of *race and migration* - our relations with outsiders - strangers - and the terms of modern citizenship. The insider/outsider distinctions that challenge how we rebuild the social contract and ideas of the commons – or any notion of the common good;
- We are consumed by *fake news* and the *denial of truth*;
- The rise of *authoritarianism* and political strong men across the globe, that challenge the fundamentals of liberal democracy – the rule of law, independent elections, the civil exchange of ideas, how we reconcile differences and the like;
- *Social media* echo chambers;
- The rise of a *hyper individualised performative liberalism and identity politics*;
- Epochal *technological change and automation* which challenge the future of work;
- The lack of inclusive growth, escalating material deprivation and *inequality*;
- How we age and the future provision of *health and social care*;
- Intergenerational challenges around *housing, debt and work*.

These are all big ticket items – that cover the future of our public conversation and of democracy, the future of the species and the planet, the meaning and status of truth, how we care for one another and live together and so much more.

Yet as an MP my sense is there is almost an inverse relationship between the scale of the challenges we face and the capacity of politicians to offer remedies – let alone discuss some of this.

And this tension is getting worse.

It is a disturbing state of affairs.

It begs the question how might we navigate the modern world and what resources are available to help us make sense of it all – to render intelligible these challenges and offer responses.

That is why this series of talks is so important - because of the questions it asks - questions that politicians dodge.

We literally hide from them, we stay in the weeds, focus on trivia and political point scoring - pretend we are busy, get through the day - stay away from the deep water. We splash around in the shallow end of a lot of this stuff and there is a lot of noise but not much that penetrates through and tries to diagnose what is going on.

In part because of the fear of social media and the press, in part because of the limited time horizons of politics, in part because this stuff is really difficult.

So I want to congratulate the organisers of these discussions who force us to confront difficult, unfashionable terrain.

Focusing on human labour points to hope

The overall theme of these lectures is social theology - how God calls us to engage with the world, in terms of the economy, work, nature, freedom, social peace, politics and civic life.

My talk is entitled *JUST WORKING? Why the dignity of work is at the heart of civic and spiritual renewal.*

I want to try to focus on questions of human labour to address some of the wider issues I have just mentioned. If you like, to use the question of human labour as a portal into some of these challenging issues around the future of democracy and how we live together.

The obvious question is why should we bother?

Well if we accept - in a general sense – that political instability threatens the foundations of liberal democracy - which I do - then we cannot assume democracy will survive.

And if we acknowledge this - then for it to survive requires us to return to some fundamental philosophical questions such as:

- How do we wish to live?
- What provides meaning in our lives?
- Where and to what do we belong?

Historically, these questions have helped shape competing visions of justice - alternative public philosophies, theories, traditions of thought - regarding how society should be organised.

And as has happened before in periods of dramatic change, philosophers, politicians, those who contribute to the public square, have sought to offer solutions - and I think these questions of purpose have to be revisited.

Because, I would suggest, behind the backs of the rise of authoritarianism, populism, political rage, disquiet and anger - the forces that are driving modern political turbulence - lies a fundamental point that is often obscured. It seems to me there is this growing escalating tension between the lives we live or we wish to live, and the lives we are forced to live.

This division finds expression in the rage and anger that we can detect in constituencies like mine. The anomie, political alienation and an accompanying lack of hope in the remedies offered by politicians.

Not least because it is the same class of politicians that promised us very different lives, lives that are increasingly unavailable to many of our fellow citizens.

Questions of purpose and meaning fuel a populist reaction - this angry backlash against modern politicians and liberal democracy, which is failing to deliver the goods, that is driven by frustration about a lack of purpose and meaning in our lives.

A French moralist once said: *“Hope is the last thing that dies in man; and though it be exceedingly deceitful, yet it is of this good use to us, that while we are traveling through life it conducts us in an easier and more pleasant way to our journey's end.”*

The disappearance of hope bends toward despair.

Just a few days ago a Shadow Cabinet colleague of mine in the Labour party said publicly that ‘False hope is worse than no hope’. An extraordinary thing to say.

If we accept that hope is indeed the last thing that dies, his was an inadvertently revealing indictment of the present political state of affairs. This is a really interesting statement about where we are politically in terms of the ability of the present political class to offer remedies.

I am interested in questions of human labour because historically work and the struggle over human labour has offered meaning and purpose in our lives, a source of human dignity and hope. And these questions have been central to the development of public philosophies to navigate the complexities of previous worlds and previous eras of epic industrial change and political struggle.

So work is a good issue to begin to address some of these larger questions.

Despair is not inevitable. History does not just unfold – we have agency and political choices – irrespective of what politicians tell us.

Tonight I want to cover a fair bit of ground.

First to discuss why work – and what used to be described in the nineteenth century as the ‘labour question’ - is back at the centre of our public conversation.

Second I want to look at what Catholic Social Teaching might offer in this area.

Third I want to then try to use Catholic Social Teaching to discuss human dignity.

Fourth I want to explore some issues regarding technological change and automation.

Finally I want to discuss some policy ideas.

So here goes.

Why the human labour question is back

Let's start with the 'labour question' – why is it back on the agenda? It seems to me these are the basic reasons:

The first reason – *the Pandemic*

Worked literally stopped.

The Furlough programme – covering 11 million - an extraordinary political intervention.

Our labour was politicised in ways that it hadn't been for decades.

The tiny virus redefined the role of the state – a Conservative government was forced to regulate who works, where and under what conditions.

That is a big deal – not least because for decades we have been taught that the state should keep out of such matters – work relations were private transactions between rational consenting employees and employers.

The TUC emerged at the centre of economic life – for the first time in 40 years.

The status and significance of human labour moved centre stage.

The value attached to the work of others - especially the vocations – the callings – of public service workers increased significantly. They had renewed value because they helped keep us alive.

Overnight we re-evaluated jobs linked to the care of others – historically the worst remunerated jobs in the economy.

Before the pandemic much of this work was carried out by people - constituents of mine - who are often deemed part of the working class, part of the so-called 'left behind' - maybe a better description would be the 'overlooked' or 'ignored.'

During the pandemic, we clapped for our front-line workers. These jobs became more visible and acquired a renewed standing. We recognised the dignity of their labour.

The Pandemic was an important moment – we confronted our own mortality and what we value in our own lives and the contribution of others. It could have been a major turning point in terms of redefining what work is, how it is commodified and the standing of different contributions within society – but I think we should be honest that the waters covered over and the moment passed.

The second reason - an extraordinary, unprecedented *productivity crisis*

Productivity continues to underperform compared to other countries.

Today British output per hour and real wages are no higher than they were prior to the global financial crisis of 2008-09.

Between 2008 and 2020 average productivity growth was just 0.4%.

The UK ranks 31st out of 35 OECD countries in growth of output per hour from 2008 to 2017. Before Covid-19, our productivity growth was at its slowest since 2008.

This wretched situation has led to 15 years of wage stagnation since the crash, a situation almost historically unprecedented.

Yet despite this flatlining productivity – we have a political and policy stasis.

We literally don't know what to do about it.

Why is there this stasis? Maybe it has something to do with the unfinished business of the last 40 years, in terms of our understanding of contemporary capitalism.

The Bank of England describes our productivity problem as a 'puzzle' – a benign, humorous word – to describe what is in reality a crisis in work quality and our productive capacity as a nation.

Why can we not diagnose this crisis? I would argue because the whole of the political establishment, under Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s, assumed that through labour deregulation we witnessed a productivity 'miracle'.

If we you've had a miracle you then lose the language to diagnose the crisis in work and output that followed – whose significance is reduced to little more than a puzzle.

The third reason - the recent waves of *strikes and militancy* that we've been living through.

After 15 years of flatlining productivity and stagnant wages, we have recently experienced an extraordinary inflationary surge triggered by global events - which has further dramatically contracted living standards - and people quite rightly in my view have sought to challenge this as being unjust.

Who can blame them? Well actually all the political parties blame them, when they fail to offer support to them.

The fourth reason why Labour is a focus of such attention - is *the question of automation*.

Before the pandemic, the future world of work was attracting widespread attention. It was regularly discussed in popular culture, modern literature, journalism, and social, economic and political commentary.

And two poles have emerged in this debate:

- One signposts a *post-work* nightmare of escalating inequality amongst a threatened humanity, subservient to technology.
- But the other, more popular view, suggests a future *utopia of abundance*, numerous routes to self-actualisation, and even enhanced transhuman possibilities.

This renewed interest in work futures reflects a widespread view that 'the robots are coming', often described as the 'fourth industrial revolution'; one which will redraw how we live, in ways that we can't even imagine today.

Over the last month this debate around AI has picked up again and we are now revisiting these terms of debate around imminent technological upheaval, rupture, and the 'benign' possibilities that this creates. We have had numerous tabloid headlines of displaced jobs through automation, technological upheaval and the inevitable end of work.

Yet I would argue that we have been here before. And it is instructive to learn from what has happened before. The depiction of alternative worlds through epochal technological change is a site where fiction and politics have regularly met.

Throughout the early twentieth century, science fiction allowed politics to re-assert the need for human solidarity and political agency to contest the malign consequences of our intellectual development.

Sci Fi retained an ethical, humanist tendency. Left unchallenged technological change could usher in tyranny; the human imperative was to ensure this was not left unchallenged.

Some view the texts as dystopian. But I view Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* as political interventions - warning shots to choke off dystopian trends in modern society. Huxley's target was a sort of dominant left utilitarianism, Orwell's a sort of totalitarian, scientific left.

In contrast to these humanist and democratic warnings regarding technological change, the tendency today is to see technology as destiny; to leave unchallenged these forces of production.

For instance the political embrace of automation and interest in the idea of Universal Basic Income. A brilliant idea, but some of the drivers for the renewed and fashionable interest in it are about deterministic views about technological futures.

Today few ethical questions are asked about technological change – we tend to shrink the conversation down to utilitarian concerns about what is best for Britain plc, rather than some of the deeper questions.

So overall, for these basic reasons, the 'labour question' is back in the news.

And so too is the working class.

Political reconfigurations in a time of upheaval

In a period of profound change we have seen the reconfiguration of political coalitions.

On the right the success of the Conservative Party and the so-called 'red wall' and the growth and support for the Tories amongst working class voters post Brexit, they are looking at ways to cement that coalition – not necessarily successfully at the moment, but they are.

On the Left we have witnessed a still unresolved crisis in the future of social democracy – what it's for, who represents, what is its organising philosophy:

- We have also seen the emergence of new socialist imaginations – often described as 'post-workerist', a world of 'post capitalism', 'luxury communism' and the imminent end of work.
- This assumes the working class is on the wrong side of history, given the march of the machines – a view shared by elements of both the Blair and Corbyn projects around labour over the last 20 years.
- We are seeing the rebirth of *technological determinism*.
- Any cursory reading of history, especially on the left, will be worried about the growth of technological determinism - in terms of the denial of agency and democracy that goes along with it.
- A new political coalition is suggested by many progressives – Thomas Piketty described it as the 'Brahmin left' – that the future left coalition is around the urban, educated and networked – little room for traditional approaches to work and labour.
- I would argue that many working class people know this and they feel it; and they acknowledge the disdain that they have felt; many of them historically have been associated with the representation of the working class in this country.

It seems to me that this is all symptomatic of how the political parties that encased variants of twentieth century liberalism, socialism and conservatism are scrambling to make sense of the modern world where traditional political allegiances are crumbling – as the political philosophies themselves are hollowing out.

Recognising the challenge this poses to liberal democracy, some of our greatest philosophers such as Michael Sandel, have argued that this necessitates a new politics of work. One that requires:

- a new approach to inclusive growth – including confronting the just rewards afforded to work in our society.
- a rethink around our hubristic approach to meritocracy and knowledge work, and the need to re-evaluate the work of others – and actually decommodify the terms of our debate around work to include other forms of activity and voluntary work, and how it is gendered as well.
- we need to debate the future of work and the implications of it; and challenge whether these are inevitable certainties or political choices.
- and we need to rebuild the politics of work within national bordered communities; to allow us to reconcile and move beyond the binaries that currently dominate politics - around age, education, geography, class and Brexit that disfigure our national conversations.

So we might conclude that the politics of work is now centre stage, following decades where questions of human labour were decoupled from politics.

It is therefore a timely moment to rehabilitate traditions of thinking about labour.

One of these is Catholic Social Teaching.

Catholic Social Teaching and the question of human labour

On 15 May 1891, Pope Leo XIII published [*Rerum Novarum*](#) – in Latin, “of revolutionary change” – on the “Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour”.

It was written nearly a decade before the creation of the Labour Party in 1900.

In it the Pope sought to preserve the essential dignity of workers at a time of rapid social change and the unbridled growth of the power of capital – sounds familiar.

Rerum Novarum remains an extraordinary condemnation of unfettered industrialisation and the immiseration of the working classes.

It has a contemporary feel in a modern world that envisions 21st century technologies often coupled with 19th century employment conditions - in sectors stretching way beyond the so-called "gig economy."

The 1891 encyclical asserts the moral imperative to regulate capitalism and it planted “a preferential option for the poor” into the evolution of Catholic social thought.

This creed advocated unions, collective bargaining, a living wage - to maintain and preserve the dignity of the person in the workplace.

It urged the capitalist - and I quote - “*not to look upon their work-people as their bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled of Christian character*”.

Its focus was morality and not just questions of utility – again something modern politicians might wish to dwell on.

This intervention by Pope Leo took place nearly a decade *before* the creation of the Labour Party.

It is useful to consider the religious character of socialist thought in the period of the encyclical, beyond just Catholic Social Teaching.

The notion of the ‘*religion of socialism*’ captures a distinct approach to socialist justice that informed much of the pre-history of the Labour party.

Influences include not just Catholic but dissident, ‘non-conformist’ protestant voices – including Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers and Unitarians.

Assorted churches included the ‘Brotherhood Church’, the ‘Labour Church’ later renamed the ‘Socialist Church’, the ‘Ethical Church’, as well as the Salvation Army and Temperance Church, groups such as the ‘Fellowship of the New Life’, alongside visions of ‘socialist fellowship’ and the moral economy associated with writers such as John Ruskin and William Morris.

Such thinking was revealed in journals such as the Socialist League’s *Commonweal* and the *Clarion* newspaper which started in December 1891 – six months after the Pope’s encyclical.

It was expressed in the poetry of Edward Carpenter and William Morris, including the latter’s ‘*The Pilgrims of Hope*’ from 1886.

In books, religions and pamphlets with titles such as Blatchford's *'The New Religion'* or Bruce Glasier's *'The Religion of Socialism'*, in J.L. Joynes *Socialist Catechism* published weekly in 1884.

It was a language of religiosity that infused the socialism of the period.

Political conversions were often quasi religious experiences. Socialism for many was an evangelical-like force, one demanding both sacrifice and missionary activity in pursuit of 'making socialists'.

At this stage labourism had not found a particular voice or institutional home, socialism had yet to discover the utilitarian language of the later social engineers or be captured by the machinery of state welfarism. The politics of labour had yet to be assigned a political bureaucracy.

The First Principle of the Labour Church stated *'That the Labour Movement is a religious movement'*. Such sentiment was shared by many across a variety of traditions in the 1880s and 1890s.

Its leading advocates sought to challenge the scientific status of economics, and the separation of economic value and utility from questions of human life, and deterministic assumptions regarding modernity and the evolution of socialist society found within much socialist economic thought; the technological determinism which is such a regular drumbeat within the history of the left.

In the critical last decades of the nineteenth century the 'religion of socialism' was for many a way of life and often their work took the form of a 'crusade'.

The historian Stephen Yeo has explained the way such advocacy often involved forms of conversion, with socialism akin to religious vocations, callings, with activists often termed 'apostles' or 'evangelists' for the cause.

It's no coincidence that Keir Hardie, George Lansbury and Ramsay MacDonald were often described as the apostles of the old religion in their roles in the early formation of the Labour Party.

Such feelings were intimately related to the brutality of late nineteenth century capitalism, with socialist resistance considered essential to human salvation - and were themselves embedded within ancient traditions of thought regarding the promotion of the common good and human virtue.

Yet such ethical sentiments were later diluted when consolidated into the formal party structures and the calculus of electoral politics.

This process helps account for the 'exile' of ethical traditions within the Labour movement.

The 'religion of socialism' sought to promote a life of virtue, to act with wisdom, compassion and cultivate an essential humanity in combatting industrial capitalism. Primarily around the dignity of human labour.

It represents a politics of resistance to the commodification of life; our families, our relationships; a continuous struggle, not just against the alienating effects of capitalism but also left-wing utilitarianism and Fabianism in the contest to shape a just society.

In the cauldron of 1880s and 1890s, it was a politics in search of authentic human life to ask the questions of purpose that I mentioned earlier. Socialism then was understood as a calling to contest human degradation and retain dignity.

But time passed, and the religion of socialism was overtaken by electoral realism and institutional consolidation.

My simple question is why not retrieve a bit of the old religion regarding questions of human labour?

This is not just a history lesson.

Ninety years after *Rerum Novarum*, in his encyclical [*Laborum Exercens*](#), “On Human Work”, Pope John Paul II offered his restatement of this tradition.

It begins by elaborating why work is not simply a commodity or random action but is essential to human nature, “a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth”.

Being made in the “image of God”, the person is a subject capable of acting in a planned and rational way, and so “man is therefore the subject of work” and by acting on nature through work he finds fulfilment and becomes “more of a human being”.

Laborum Exercens reasserts, and I quote, “a principle that has always been taught by the Church: the principle of the priority of labour over capital”.

It follows that protections must be in place to halt violations of dignity, including unemployment, wage inequalities, job insecurities – and technological change.

This last element can “supplant” the person, and I quote, “taking away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous employment, or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of its slave”.

Work is a spiritual activity, following literally in the footsteps of a carpenter, through which the worker collaborates with the Creator “for the redemption of humanity”.

Today Pope Francis follows, and is a radical advocate of, this intellectual inheritance.

“We do not get dignity from power or money or culture. We get dignity from work,” he said in 2013.

“Work is fundamental to the dignity of the person. Work, to use an image, ‘anoints’ with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God who has worked and still works, who always acts.”

A recurring drumbeat in Catholic thought is that the recognition of dignity in others as a means of recognising it in ourselves, and is a way of understanding the capitalist-employment relationship and the rights and duties of the employer and the worker.

A belief in the dignity of the person is moulded into an understanding of how under certain social relations our common humanity can be violated and how work can affirm or degrade this abstract sentiment.

Human Dignity

I just want to drill in then, to this question of human dignity a bit more.

Until recently the “dignity of labour” appeared as a somewhat old-fashioned, dated term. Until recently, if we discussed human “dignity” we were likely to be contemplating how we are to die rather than how we are to live.

The pandemic changed this. In confronting death – as individuals, and as families and communities and as a society – we once again recognised the worth of others and realised the dignity of their contributions.

We applauded care-home workers, nurses, porters, orderlies and doctors. We were moved by the sacrifices of tube, bus and lorry drivers, the selflessness of cleaners, teachers, police officers and men and women in the emergency services, front-line council workers – welfare and housing officers, maintenance and refuse operatives – as well as delivery drivers, supermarket employees and many others.

This work was briefly more visible and acquired renewed standing.

Questions of human dignity – and specifically the dignity of labour - could become the organising principle for a new politics built around a revived sense of justice.

Over recent years my own party, the Labour Party, has noticeably lacked a conception of the good life – a *telos*, or purpose.

Ethical concerns have lost out to technocratic and purely economic ones – in truth a recurring theme throughout labour history. The exile of the ethical tradition.

More worrying still has been the emergence and popularity on the left of tech-utopianism, and even transhumanism, powered by AI and automation.

Such ideas just leave us stranded in the 21st century with modern technology and 19th century employment conditions.

But what do we mean by dignity? The word retains a moral purchase but it remains controversial.

In a widely cited editorial in *The BMJ (British Medical Journal)* in 2003, the American bioethicist Ruth Macklin declared that “dignity is a useless concept in medical ethics and can be eliminated without any loss of content”.

In 2008, the psychologist Steven Pinker published an article in the *New Republic* entitled “The Stupidity of Dignity.”

Now, it seems to be that we can identify a “thin” version of dignity - which originates from Latin notions of worthiness - to describe a concrete achievement in terms of respect or status.

But dignity is not just about status or standing; the worth of a worker cannot simply be measured by his or her salary or position in an office hierarchy.

The word also suggests something more significant, something that can be ambiguous and elusive but which can readily be recognised when it is lost.

It suggests ethical duties in how we order society. For instance, in tolerating slavery, abuse and exploitation, or allowing some forms of imprisonment, we compromise both our personal and our collective dignity.

The idea of the negation of human dignity implies a process of reduction, degradation, dehumanisation. It captures some intrinsic human worth, with minimal acceptable moral standards, that we can recognise, whether we come from a religious or a secular humanist standpoint.

I think the loss of personal dignity actually underscores the rage and anger that drives populism and underscores modern politics. The distinction between the lives we want to live and the lives we are increasingly forced to live - and that growing gap, that canyon between those two, creates a sense of anomie that drives the rage that we witness all around us.

Understood in these terms, “dignity” has real political significance and purchase that can be detected across a variety of spiritual, ethical and human rights traditions.

In secular traditions, human dignity relates to notions of agency or autonomy, and the ability of humans to choose their own actions.

In both traditions, dignity can embrace a shared state of being that involves obligations - not just in religious traditions but also secularised traditions.

This implies the ethical duty to remedy things or processes that violate that dignity – genocide, torture, tyranny or exploitation.

Our dignity – both in a personal as well as a collective sense – is shaped by what we tolerate and what we do not. And it is an organising method for how we build a conception of justice, a view of how society should be organised. That seems to me to have real power.

This was famously captured in Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, created in the aftermath of a generation facing up to tyranny and authoritarianism, genocide, and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 – 75 years ago this month:

Article 1 states:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

The point being that Article 2 *follows* Article 1, not through a natural rights vision of human rights but borne through the need to ethically confront the drivers of genocide, tyranny and authoritarianism.

That was the organising principle to re-imagine a post-war world 75 years ago.

Which vision of justice are we following?

What does this mean in terms of technological change, automation and AI?

My argument is quite simple - we need to take a step back and focus on the fundamental ethical questions that this period of epochal technological change throws up - rather than jumping straight into the technical policy issues and solutions.

Yet, the problem is that utilitarian thinking dominates politics.

Political philosophy can be divided into three traditions regarding competing visions of justice:

- one that seeks to maximise human *welfare*
- a second that seeks to maximise *human freedom*
- and a third to maximise *human virtue*.

The first tends to focus on questions of utility, mostly economic utility.

The second on liberty and rights – on the political right we see libertarian arguments and on the left economic and social rights to remedy disadvantage.

The third is more ethical, and indeed judgmental, concerned with the questions of human flourishing and nurturing the common good.

But this third tradition, the area where faith and politics mix, remains increasingly unfashionable - and *exiled from much of our political conversation*.

Politics is prone to utilitarian thought – to maximise the welfare of the maximum amount of people – the terrain of welfare economics. It's got a natural fit with a lot of reasons why people go into politics - totally understandable.

But the danger of the utilitarian position, for example around technological change, is that it tends to focus on the aggregate benefits to Britain Plc, rather than the constraints on questions of human flourishing - especially when these new technologies have the power to challenge the integrity of the human condition itself.

For me this should be the political entry point – the defence of the human condition.

Why is it not?

Because politics long ago lost its ethical grip and has been residualised into variations in technocratic administration, driven by prioritising questions of utility.

Populist uprisings can therefore be seen as an angry verdict, a backlash against that methodology which dominates politics - especially when the lives we wish to live, compared to those we have to live, are increasingly at odds with each other. There are no remedies in terms of a sense of justice animated by the political conversation in that world.

This suggests the need for a very different public conversation.

One that addresses moral and cultural questions regarding the lives people wish to live and why they cannot.

It is imperative that we embed our discussion of technological change, robotics and AI within this deeper conversation.

Technology is not destiny

Artificial intelligence obviously has the potential to affect all policy fields.

Yet current political thinking around AI is reactive and simply geared towards ensuring Britain is at the forefront of this technological progress.

We need to take a step back, and begin by discussing what role technology should and should not play in our societies, our workplaces and our personal lives and the society we might wish to live in - with echoes of the late 19th century in terms of the religion of politics in that period.

But there is a further challenge today for politicians and policy-makers with regards to AI, owing to their lack of technological and scientific expertise in these areas. I put my hand up as one of them, so we rely on technologists to give an account of what their software can do, or might lead to, which is especially problematic.

Many politicians have bought into *techno-solutionism*, the idea that all ‘problems’ which humanity faces can be ‘solved’ using technology - including those problems that technology itself creates.

For many in Silicon Valley, we see this *libertarianism*: as the role of technology (and hence their profit margin) expands, so should the role of the state, they believe, contract.

Then there are those who approach these issues from a transhuman background.

Modern *transhumanism* asserts that technological change creates opportunities to transcend the human condition, of becoming transhuman, and that this has to be celebrated.

Resistance is deemed parochial or nostalgic.

This is applicable both to libertarian politicians on the right but also on the radical left.

Consequently philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, who argue we should defend a ‘species ethic’ in the public conversation when we navigate this terrain, are dismissed as ‘parochial’ contributors.

These are deep waters and should be dominating political discussion - but are virtually non-existent.

You never hear any of this in Westminster.

But technology is not destiny – there are political choices.

Yet *technological determinism* has dominated politics since the start of industrial revolution - on both left and right.

The dangers are numerous.

You can recall a variety of them:

- from data analytics being used in targeted political campaigns at the expense of our democratic process
- to facial recognition software now being trialled for the purposes of marketing by judging facial expressions
- malign filter bubble effects on civic and social life - building echo chambers, segmenting communities at the expense of a transcendent public conversation and any idea of the commons or the common good.

The ramifications for social cohesion could be catastrophic.

- Public debate will suffer from the ease with which fake news can be produced on an epic scale.
- Our very knowledge of the world around us and notions of truth will be further compromised.
- Posing the greatest threat could come from the feelings of powerlessness and exclusion felt by many as they realise decisions about them - from hiring to policing to insurance - are made by machines.

I am stretching the boundaries of my lecture here – as these issues cover the wider range of this Lincoln Lecture Series.

My basic argument is the need to return to first principles - asking questions about the value we place on work, freedom, privacy, community and justice.

In short, the type of society we want to live in.

From there, we can discern the role we wish to allocate to technology, rather than being seduced by the hype of novelty and processing power of technology.

If we do not build policy upon a well-defined vision of human flourishing, policy-makers will put technological and economic progress above people.

Or, we may endorse a 'soft' technological determinism in using policy only to manage what we euphemistically call 'risk', when what is really at stake are huge social issues: rising inequality, the accumulation of power in the hands of private companies, and human dignity.

Policy needs to become more than a technocratic exercise in risk-management.

Our political conversation needs to change and return to the deeper questions about what constitutes a good life and a good society.

I simply say we can begin that *reformation* by re-establishing the dignity of labour.

The dignity of labour in policy terms

Policy ideas are numerous.

You could begin with the promotion of good work as an act of public policy:

- A new *Good Work Charter*, that the state could embrace, which might include the right of everyone to have access to good work
 - o with fair reward, decent conditions, work that is a source of equality, dignity and autonomy, that promotes human wellbeing
 - o and that includes a right to representation and participation
 - o and access to life long learning.
- And maybe like other institutions that have been creative in other areas of public policy, we could have a *What Works Centre* for good work, where you nurture that role of best practice.
- *A renewal of vocation* – we could go back to the Tomlinson Review of equality between academic and vocational learning, and have new national colleges of skilled work and the professions.
- In terms of *Voice* at work
 - o you could reform the Companies act – confront the question of directors’ duties, industrial democracy, rights to voice and codetermination - that has been test driven across other Western market economies
 - o economic democracy and worker ownership
 - o new sectoral union organisation
 - o we could revive the old fair wages resolution – to spread collectively determined conditions into unorganised sectors
- We could have a new *bill of rights* around preserving personal dignity at work – to push back against some of the 'amazonisation' of work – defend the integrity of the person against excesses of surveillance in the workplace and over homeworking.
- Regulation of the *role of technologies*.
- Review the *categories* of worker in law, in terms of who is a worker, who is an employee and who is a contractor – specifically regarding the gig economy.
- New rights for public service workers, for example *priority access* to transport and housing.
- New rights at work - *family friendly* policies, rights to time off, sick pay and holiday and a genuine living wage - jobs you can raise your family on - the origins of which were our early discussions in East London decades ago about what constitutes a living wage rather than a minimum wage.

- *New infrastructure investment* – in care, education and environmentally sustainable work, upholding voluntary work, trying to contest the commodification of work.

Biden's Rescue Plan, Jobs Plan and Family Plan are instructive in some of this.

You could go back to FDR's 1944 Second Bill of Rights – which never was enacted in law, about rights to work alongside new rights to housing and access to socialised medicine.

You could *put work at the centre of government policy*, for example through:

- a new Department for Work, with new employment standards in all forms of public procurement and supply chain compliance
- new integrated enforcement procedures to uphold minimal standards and put a floor underneath the economy
- you could have a new national council on work futures – linked to environmental challenges – but also on the ethical challenges of new technology, as part of a renewed public conversation around the purpose of human labour in our economy, and the constraints on technological change.

Political will, public conversation

This is all possible.

A focus on work could be the jumping off point for a wider discussion of meaning and purpose – of renewed citizenship and democratic renewal.

But it requires political will - and the realisation of the need for a public conversation that is qualitatively different to that which presides around Westminster now. One informed by ethics and not just utility.

To conclude - the present resembles the past.

In 1894 the great artist and illustrator Walter Crane, in a magazine called '*Justice: The Organ of Social Democracy*', depicted 'The Workers Maypole' with the words 'The Cause of Labour is the Hope of the World'.

It seems to me it was as true then as it is today.

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak with you all this evening.

© Jon Cruddas

Jon Cruddas is the author of [The Dignity of Labour](#). Jon is an Honorary Professor at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham. He is also a visiting fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford and a visiting professor at the University of Leicester. At the time of writing Jon was the Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham and intends to stand down at the next election.