Staying Human

#02 Statecraft for the Common Good

From Tragedy to Restoration - Shaping the New Era

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Thank you, Jenny for providing the space for us to talk to each other about things that matter in this volatile moment. I really honour you very much. Gratitude and honour always from me to the Catholic Church for the gift of Catholic Social Thought to guide us through these times. It is a gift beyond value.

Over the last five years we have already lost one great political party and the way things are going we are going to lose two. This is no time, as Lady Bracknell suggested, to be careless. It requires a seriousness of thought and action that is the very definition of politics in the ancient sense of how we live together in peace and justice, and to go even deeper, how to preserve what is human from the enormous forces that wish to reduce the person to a consumer, an administrative unit, a provider of services, or even a proletarian - that class in Rome who were born to die for the State.

Thank God the Church has been here before, when Rome fell, when the Reformation and the Nation State emerged, when the Enlightenment made its claim on absolute political power, when Nazis and Bolsheviks made their absolute claims against human life and liberty and when Europe had to be rebuilt from the rubble. Ever Ancient, Ever New, this is where we are now.

And so as not to leave you in suspense about my conclusion, I am sure that the English Church, which includes the Church of England, has a vital role to play in leading and brokering a new national settlement for the new era that is taking shape before our eyes, because the new era is not a secular era. Islam will be a powerful force; Protestant nationalism is present and powerful and will also claim the keys to the Kingdom. There is a reason that Nigel Farage's Party is called Reform, it seeks the Reformation. The defection of Danny Kruger today is a significant step towards the consolidation of that trend which will lead to the levelling of the institutions and the individual standing naked before God, the market and the State. The only significant faith tradition which as yet plays no significant role in the new era is the Church of England which has become so embedded in the old era that it can barely speak to what is happening. I really sincerely pray for its resurrection. As it stands, I think that the Catholic Church understands the meaning of original sin (not eating the apple, but blaming your wife), it understands the meaning of institutions, of relationality and above all of restoration. Ever ancient ever new, this is an era of restoration.

This is not an original thought. When God stood face to face with Moses on Mount Sinai, he described himself as a God of mercy and grace, slow to anger and abounding with kindness and truth. Kindness and truth, not kindness or truth. Pope Francis said that we are not living through an era of change but through a change of era. His words were prophetic and we are living through a volatile moment in that transformation. The balance that we strike between kindness and truth will define our engagement with it.

Before I begin to describe the era that is now forming, it is necessary to describe what it is replacing. It is a familiar period to all of us. It was a period of historical time that was mercilessly initiated by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and immaculately consummated by Tony Blair in 1997 and I call it the Era of Progressive Globalisation. It has been the Common Sense for forty years and its assumptions still dominate our economy and government. The problem is that no-one, except perhaps the Parliamentary Labour Party believes in it anymore. The tragedy for progressives is that the future is not what they thought it was going to be. Do you remember 'Things Can Only Get Better'? That's not true. The more the future slips away the more they double down on their greatest weaknesses and follies. This is what we witness now. The more liberal, the more authoritarian; the more diverse, the more homogenous of thought. The future is dissolving before their eyes and so they fight to preserve their power by forcing through legislation based on their values and beliefs. And the more they do that, the more unpopular they become. This is where we are.

The truth is not kind for them. And this age of restoration is paradoxical; it's dark and light, loving and hateful, violent and holy, fearful and hopeful.

Let me try to explain by way of contrast the scale of the transformation we are living through. The old era was contractual, the new is covenantal; the old era was characterised by the domination of financial services in which money became the ultimate measure of value whereas the new requires industry and a priority for national security. Free movement will be replaced by borders, corporate social responsibility by a national economic strategy, innovation by invention, reform by restoration, process by courage, diversity by solidarity, students by soldiers, TV production by weapons production. Most importantly the old era was progressive, and the emerging era is tragic; the previous era was procedural, legal and administrative, the new era will be political, democratic and volatile. There is also a shift from Protestant to Catholic, from individualism to institutions, from self-definition to the authority of tradition.

The election of Donald Trump was the final confirmation of the end of the old, which had been brewing for two decades, but it is only the beginning. The fundamental question for the English Church, and there is an equal stress on both those words, is how it acts to shape this era of restoration. The fate of the Kingdom is in your hands. Kindness and truth, wisdom and courage, ever ancient, ever new.

We are only just beginning to emerge from the fog of progress in which up is down, bad is good, weird is normal. Human Rights mean you can't tell the truth, justice is the defence of corporations, democracy is liberalism, sovereignty is obedience to multi-national treaties, freedom means compliance, creativity is marketing and diversity is homogeneity. Two generations have been sacrificed to this idiocy masquerading as reason, and universities have been the main incubators.

And by the way, men are women. And if you don't agree with all of that, we'll take away your lanyard and you won't have a job. Honestly.

The fantasy is over and the truth is kind, only our delusions make us tremble. It enables me to say to you, without fear of being called nostalgic or outdated that the first point, ever ancient, ever new, is that the free market did not create the world.

'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' is the first sentence of Holy Scripture. Without following Aquinas too closely, we can define Creation as 'human beings' and 'nature'. The definition of capitalism is the commodification of both. The exploitation of human beings and nature in order to turn them into commodities of fluctuating price in competitive markets in order to generate quick and maximum profit. This is the definition of capitalism. Pope Leo XIII called this a system of 'modern slavery' and Saint John Paul II wrote of a 'structure of sin'. It desecrates the human status of the person and most particularly the worker. That's the *Rerum Novarum,* the 'new thing'. The highest return at the greatest speed is its objective and the status of a worker as more than a commodity blocks that return. Capitalism is like diarrhoea, it liquidates solidarity.

The second truth is that the State did not create the world either. The preservation of the sacred status of human beings and nature is the primary role of politics. Subsidiarity is the best way to temper the Pharaonic tendency of centralised State power. Sovereignty is necessary to resist the domination of capital, subsidiarity is required to resist the tyranny of the State and all of this is predicated on democratic Solidarity as the fundamental ethic of society. Cain, as we know, made a very big mistake. He was his brother's keeper, we all are. This is the political position of *Blue Labour* in British politics, and it is based almost entirely on *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus*. I will always be grateful to the Church for this gift.

The fundamental teaching of Catholic Social Thought, and particularly in relation to statecraft, is that tyranny is a real threat in the economy and the state, and that only a Democracy founded upon solidarity – the strengthening of society – and the sharing of the burdens of this hard and merciless life, can generate a virtuous politics through domesticating the demonic energy of the market and of the State. Solidarity, Status and Subsidiarity are the three pillars.

This new era we are entering is an era of industrial production. It is an era of war and of weapons production. It is an era that demands the restoration of an effective State. It is also an era of artificial intelligence. One of the primary virtues stressed in the Encyclicals is Vocation, which I define as good doing rather than do gooding. The move to industry will require a new institutional settlement, for example closing half the universities and turning them into vocational colleges. The relationship between Government, local government, the unions and the church will be transformed by this. Skilful action is a necessary attribute at this time and working within the frame of subsidiarity, this will require strong vocational institutions. Respect for labour, and the dignity of labour is central to this. Jon has written a book on this. I honour him.

In this new era the reality of war is inescapable. It is a tragic era. Without the capacity to defend ourselves, our borders and our allies, we will become a colony of the United States, and that is not a good place to be. Ernest Bevin is a key thinker here. And modern industrial production requires a developed system of Artificial Intelligence. What I wish to concentrate on is that part of the story,

the restoration of effective state capacity and the political nature of Artificial Intelligence. This is what Pope Leo XIII referred to as *Rerum Novarum*, this new thing. And in the same way as Catholic Teaching responded to the machine and industrial production by resisting capitalism through the resurrection of ancient virtues and institutions, through a defence of the human person as longing for love and relationship, through a defence of private property and freedom of association, through a deep defence of the dignity of labour, so it is imperative to bring all that to bear now in relation to AI.

The dangers are clear and palpable. Corporate power intensified, the elimination of the human, the end of reading and writing, the enclosure of technology and wealth. Relentless surveillance at home and on the street. I had lunch with Peter Thiel a few weeks ago and this was the topic of discussion. All the tensions between transhumanism and Catholicism were alive at the table. Other than that, the food was quite nice.

There is also another tradition to draw upon, associated with John Ruskin, with William Morris and Frank Lloyd Wright, which was, like Catholic Thought, responding to the machine age and how to preserve the human being in extreme circumstances of dehumanisation. This led to the Arts and Crafts Movement, the establishment of Ruskin College, and the restoration of skilful human action as the means of resisting dehumanisation.

AI poses the question 'what can only human beings do?' My research indicates that, for example, 60% of public sector employment could be replaced by AI because 60% of public sector employment concerns emails, responding to questions and guidance concerning compliance. This means that 60% of the public sector is procedural and mundane. This is not a status quo that deserves defending. The adoption of AI can lead to a shift towards relationship, vocational training and contribution. We should establish a Royal College of Artificial Intelligence. We should restore Ruskin College as a centre of training and education for the Arts and Crafts for working class people. We must attend to the emancipatory as well as the tyrannical consequences of AI and draw upon our tradition to strengthen the sacred, the uniquely human, which is ultimately a political question of how to embed this in a national institutional structure and not exclusively allow it to be owned by the private sector. It must become embodied and incarnated in human relationships and institutions.

We also need to revisit the parish as the fundamental unit of political organisation, as it was, ever ancient, ever new. We should have assemblies in the parish, where people vote for who is the head of police, who is the headmistress or headmaster of the school. Real physical presence, another Christian concept I really like. The local public institutions on which people depend are absolutely fundamental. Part of the rupture that Jenny was talking about is this division between the political class and the people who are ruled, the breakdown of trust. Through these local institutions there can be an education on the complications of self-government. There are many areas of statecraft to attend to. You can close half the universities and turn them into vocational colleges; you can establish the parish as the immediate unit of accountability. We have learned our lesson from the financial crash that accountability is much too important to be left to accountants. All of those things remain true.

That is why I believe, as a Jew, and an Orthodox one, that in politics, Christ is King, that in honouring God we honour his Creation, incarnated. That the attributes God gave to himself when he spoke face to face with Moses on Mount Sinai are the very condition of Citizenship. Mercy, Grace, Kindness and Truth. This is why secular republics fail, it is not only that they yearn for a King, which I witnessed when I went to Trump's inauguration, but they reject the very idea of nobility that is essential for virtue. Ever Ancient, Ever New. Count your blessings, at least we are not French.

And this for me is the paradox of God; He demands kindness and truth but the truth is not kind. It hurts people's feelings. In order to be kind, however, we must honour the truth and in order to honour God we must honour his Creation and recognise the truth that the last thirty five years have been a desecration of all that is sacred. Saint John Paul II understood this better than anyone. Even better than Marx who wrote that capitalism commodifies creation itself by creating the conditions in which:

'All that is holy is profaned

And everything solid, melts into air.'

The gift of Catholic Social Teaching speaks to us now, as clearly as God spoke at Mount Sinai, ever ancient, ever new. My political life is based on this. We are not commodities, we are not administrative units but social beings yearning for love, for connection and meaning. Solidarity, subsidiarity and the dignity of labour are the foundations of the Encyclicals.

And now to conclude, and I am sorry to deliver this, but there has never been a greater need for the English Church as the leading moral force in the restoration of our nation. That is all of the English church. In order to do that you will have to honour your own tradition and truly be yourself. Maybe this is what Chesterton meant when he wrote of the 'democracy of the dead.'

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The second in the Staying Human series of public talks, this lecture was one of a pair given on 15 September 2025. A companion lecture was given by Jon Cruddas. A recording of both lectures and the Q & A can be found at t4cg.substack.com.