Reviving community

What policy-makers can do to build social capital in Britain and America

Andrew K. Leigh and Robert D. Putnam

In a little over a decade, the topic of social capital has moved from the pages of obscure journals to the forefront of policy debate. Suddenly academics and business leaders, politicians and journalists are discovering what many at the grassroots have long known – community matters. In places where people know their neighbours' names, crime is lower. Regions with more local groups tend to have better schools. People with more friends are healthier. Where civic activism is high, government works better. Even the market operates more smoothly when people trust one another.

Yet in many advanced democracies, the past few decades have witnessed a steady decline in many indicators of social capital – a trend that seems to have been, temporarily at least, halted in the wake of the tragic events of 11 September. The question of why social capital collapsed will be the focus of the first part of this article. The second part will look at new social capital challenges, and the third will consider how government might help to build social capital.

The social capital crisis: 1960-2001

In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam wrote about a variety of indicators that US society is in the midst of a social capital crisis. We focus on just four here – political participation, organisational membership, churchgoing, and interpersonal trust.

- **Political participation:**

US: In the 1960 election, 62.8 per cent of the eligible population turned out to choose between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Forty years later, the race between George W. Bush and Al Gore attracted only 51.0 per cent to the polls. At the same time, the proportion of Americans who say they follow current affairs is one-fifth lower than twenty-five years ago. As political parties have become more professionalised, the proportion of the population who work on campaigns, attend political rallies or write to their political representatives has dropped markedly. The explosive growth of direct mail campaigns and television advertising has been matched by a decline in participatory politics.

For many voters, election campaigns are now shows that happen around them, rather than civic events of which they are an integral part.

Britain: During the past forty years, UK voter turnout has fluctuated between 70 and 80 per cent. When it fell to 71.4 per cent in 1997, people became concerned. When it crashed to 59.4 per cent in 2001, many concluded that the 'vanishing voter' has also become a real problem in the UK.

· Organisational membership

US: Through the twentieth century, participatory civic groups, from the Rotary Club to the Parent-Teacher Association, tended to see their membership peak around 1960, before steadily falling over the next four decades. And while some new associations have sprung up, they have not managed to reverse the negative trend in organisational involvement. According to evidence from time diaries, the average amount of time each American invests in organisational life fell from 3.7 hours per month in 1965, to 2.9 in 1975, and 2.3 in 1985 and 1995. As a result, thousands of local associations across the country are having difficulty finding people to serve as officers and committee members. Just as they are dropping out of political life, Americans are withdrawing from their community organisations.

Britain: Here, the evidence is more mixed. According to political scientist Professor Peter Hall, the number of voluntary associations in Britain since World War II has generally kept pace with population, and there has not been any general drop in the number of adults who are members of formal organisations. The exceptions are women's organisations and trade unions, both of which saw their membership drop in the 1980s and 1990s.

· Church-going

US: Attendance at churches and other places of worship has fallen steadily since the 1960s. Depending on whether one looks at church records, surveys or time diaries, involvement in religious activities has fallen by between 25 and 50 per cent over the past three to four decades. This is particularly significant for African-American communities, since black churches have acted as crucibles for civic activism, both during and after the civil rights struggle.

Britain: Church membership in the UK dropped from 28 per cent in 1980 to 22 per cent in 1990, with the largest falls taking place among traditional denominations such as Anglicans, Presbyterians and Catholics.

· Interpersonal trust

US: The proportion of people who agree that 'Most people can be trusted' shows a familiar trend, peaking at around 55 per cent in 1960, before steadily declining to around 35 per cent today. This matters because 'generalised trust' – between people who are not already close friends – acts as a form of social glue. Communities in which individuals give one another the benefit of the doubt have stronger civic institutions, more participation in politics, and higher rates of volunteering. Trust is also self-reinforcing, in that those who trust others are also themselves less likely to lie, cheat or steal.

Britain: Interpersonal trust is perhaps the area in which Britain most closely mirrors the US. In 1959, 56 per cent of British respondents said they generally trusted others. In 1990, only 44 per cent said they did. According to Peter Hall, the decline in trust has been greater among the working class than the middle class.

Why did social capital decline? One factor in the US is the passing of the 'long civic generation'. Those born between 1910 and 1940, and shaped by the New Deal and World War II, have always tended to be over-represented in civic and political life. Yet in recent decades, this generation has begun to pass away, to be replaced by Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers, who are less likely to join or vote than their forebears. A large part of the story of social capital over the past three to four decades is not one of individuals becoming less trusting, but the replacement of an older civically active generation with a younger generation whose stock of social capital is much smaller. There seems to be some of this happening in Britain too. In 1959, those under the age of 40 were more trusting than those over 40. By 1990, this pattern had been reversed.

Another cause of the American social capital crisis is increased commuting time. Since the late-1960s, driving to work alone has become the dominant form of commuting for most Americans. Higher rates of car ownership, suburban sprawl, and traffic congestion have combined to push up commuting time to an average of 24 minutes per day. Not only does the average person take longer to get to work, but the number of shopping and personal trips has also increased. At the same time, we are more likely than ever to be alone in the car. All this travel time has a negative effect on civic participation. Each additional ten minutes per day in traffic cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 per cent. We attend fewer public meetings, go to church less frequently, and do a smaller amount of volunteer work the longer we spend in the car. Britain, with substantially higher levels of public transport use, has so far been spared some of these problems.

The large-scale entry of women into the full-time workforce also had a substantial effect on social capital – particularly among those who now work because of financial pressures, rather than by choice. Clearly, the entry of women into the workforce has been a net benefit to both Britain and America – but combined with an increase in financial pressures, it has also had the effect of reducing civic engagement. Many of those women who were homemakers in the 1950s and 1960s were our best social capitalists – keeping school organisations, reading clubs and neighbourhood associations afloat. As the composition of the workforce has changed, new efforts are needed to maintain our civic cohesion.

Finally, there is the effect of television. The average American watches over 4 hours of television per day, while the average Briton watches over 2½ hours. In the US, we know that more television viewing is highly correlated

with lower rates of civic activities such as volunteering and attending club meetings, as well as social activities such as writing letters to friends and attending church. Although the evidence is not as strong in Britain, it seems likely that television also hampers social capital.

New social capital challenges

In the last two years, we have begun to develop a much more sophisticated idea of social capital in America, thanks to a regular survey known as the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey. One of the most troubling findings of that survey has been that places with a high level of ethnic diversity tend to have less social capital. In diverse communities, people trust their neighbours less, and have fewer close confidants. This effect operates within races as well as between them. That is, in places with a high degree of diversity, not only do blacks trust whites less, but blacks trust other blacks less as well.

What are we to make of this finding? We cannot turn back the clock on diversity – indeed, greater diversity itself brings many social and economic benefits, as the history of America demonstrates – so the real challenge for policy-makers is to develop new strategies to promote social-capital-building in diverse settings. We also need to learn more about why racial mixing seems to hamper civic engagement. Is this a temporary phenomenon, driven by high mobility rates? Is there an underlying problem with America's largest cities? How important is it that new migrants are integrated into local political structures? We suspect that some of these factors may be at play in Britain too, though without more detailed data, it is difficult to do more than speculate.

The second challenge for Americans is building social capital in the wake of the tragic events of 11 September. In October and November 2001, the Benchmark Survey went back to respondents to find out how their civic engagement had changed. Some of the findings were dramatic:

- The proportion of Americans who trust their federal government has risen by 44 per cent
- Americans are 19 per cent more likely to trust their local government
- The fraction of Americans who trust their neighbours has risen by 10 per cent
- 10 per cent of Americans did more volunteer work in 2001 than in 2000.

Moreover, in most spheres, Americans appear to have also become more tolerant. On average, they say they trust people of other races 10 per cent more than they did a year ago. The only exception to this is trust in Arab-Americans, which is somewhat below the level of trust in other minorities.

Can these changed attitudes be translated into action? So far, the proportion of Americans who are members of organisations, or have contributed to charities, has changed little. But just as the tragedy of Pearl Harbour brought an outpouring of civic activity, so the terrorist crisis could potentially do the same. During World War II, the US government harnessed civic energy through a range of initiatives from scrap drives to war bonds – helping bring Americans together in pursuit of national goals.

It remains to be seen whether governments will use this opportunity to turn around the long-term decline in social capital, or whether these past few months will simply be a short rally amidst a continuing downward spiral. But if the public sector does opt to play a role in building social capital, there is no shortage of ways in which it can do so.

What role can government play in building social capital?

We focus here on four ways in which the government can help rebuild social capital – by subsidising community organisations, through civics education, by instituting a scheme of voluntary national service, and through structural reforms.

One way in which Britain is pioneering social capital formation at a local level is through the Home Office's Active Citizenship Unit, providing grants to community groups located in disadvantaged areas. This addresses one of the key problems of social capital formation – that those places which most need to build social capital are also those with the least human and financial capital. While both Britain and the US provide tax deductibility for individual donations to approved charities, direct grants can help augment the work of the non-government sector. For the policy-maker, the challenge is to provide seed funding without making groups economically dependent on government, and without putting in place a new layer of bureaucracy. In the long run, the best community organisations are self-sustaining.

Another area in which Britain is developing innovative solutions is civics education. Following a 1998 report produced by the Citizenship Advisory Group, the subject of citizenship will be officially added to Britain's national curriculum from August 2002. Students will have the opportunity to learn skills of social and moral responsibility; community involvement; and political literacy. This is a direct way of tackling the challenge of alienation and cynicism by young people about public life and participation. We hope that students can be encouraged to regard citizenship not just as an academic discipline, but also as an area where young people can make an impact on their communities. Many Americans will be watching what is in one sense a bold experiment to find out how much society can affect attitudes towards volunteering and community involvement.

Government can also provide direct resources to encourage community service. In Britain, the Millennium Volunteers initiative has so far seen 8000 young people gain a certificate recognising that they have contributed 100 hours of community service. On a much larger scale, the AmeriCorps programme, founded in 1993, now funds 50,000 volunteers across the US to serve full-time for a year, often in a different state from their own. Participants work on programmes as diverse as building low-income housing, providing

computer skills training, and teaching literacy skills to new immigrants. In exchange, they receive a college tuition credit. Evidence suggests that the civic effects of the experience on the volunteers themselves are even more valuable than the service they provide to others. Once derided as a boutique initiative of Clinton's 'New Democrats', the programme has won solid support in both parties, with Senators John McCain (Republican) and Evan Bayh (Democrat) calling for the number of participants to be boosted fivefold, and President Bush recently proposing an expansion of AmeriCorps and other service programmes.

One final way in which government can help boost social capital is by tackling the factors that often impede civic engagement. For example, last year, the UK Work and Parents Taskforce proposed a new system for employers considering requests for flexible working from parents with young children. If implemented, this will provide parents with a better chance to become involved in their schools and communities. In addition, programmes that target early childhood, at-risk students, and school-to-work transitions all have the potential to boost the national stock of social capital. In the US, we may also come to decide that the special challenges of diversity and social capital warrant particular policy measures, if ethnically diverse communities are to increase their level of civic engagement.

What next?

In America, most indicators of social capital declined over the four decades following 1960. In the UK, it appears that civic engagement may have held up during the 1960s and 1970s. But from the 1980s onwards, declines in voter turnout, churchgoing and trust suggest all is not well for Britain's social fabric today.

For governments, the good news is that they can play a role in boosting civic engagement. Funding community organisations, teaching citizenship skills, promoting volunteering, and creating an atmosphere that is conducive to grassroots involvement are all ways in which we can help create social capital. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic have much to learn from one another.

Andrew K. Leigh is a Frank Knox Scholar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. He is the co-editor of *The Prince's New Clothes: Why do Australians Dislike their Politicians?* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2002).

Robert D. Putnam is the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. He is the author of seven books, including most recently *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000).

Published by **Renewal Limited**
www.renewal.org.uk
in association with
Lawrence & Wishart
99a Wallis Rd
London E9 5LN
lw@l-w-bks.demon.co.uk

Getting in touch
To submit or discuss articles contact:
Paul Thompson
Editor *Renewal*
c/o Department of Human Resources Management
University of Strathclyde
Graham Hills Building
50 Richmond Street
Glasgow G1 1XT
Tel: 0141 548 3284
email: paul@renewal.org.uk

Or

Neal Lawson
Managing Editor *Renewal*
58 Heathlee Road
London SE3 9HP
Tel: 07976 292502
email: neal@renewal.org.uk

ISSN Number 0968-252X
ISBN 0 85315 963 7

Designed by The letter g, London
Typeset by Derek Doyle & Associates, Liverpool
Printed and bound in the UK by Cromwell Press, Trowbridge

Vol.10 No.2 2002

RENEWAL