



S3E3: Transcript

Building Common Purpose

with Sir Paul Collier

Tavia Gilbert

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert, and in every episode of this podcast, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversation about the newest scientific research on human flourishing, and how those discoveries can be translated into practical tools.

This season of the Stories of Impact podcast explores the vital question of citizenship in a networked age: the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the individual and community strengths inherent in healthy citizenship, including digital citizenship, and the threats to our future without it.

Today Richard speaks with Sir Paul Collier, a professor of economics and public policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. Professor Collier is a world-renowned economist and a best-selling author, including *The Future of Capitalism: Facing the New Anxieties*, and his latest release, with John Kay, *Greed is Dead: Politics After Individualism*.

Just a quick note: We recorded Professor Collier's interview during a fierce, afternoon English rainstorm, so please forgive any tapping in the background. What you're hearing is raindrops hitting the roof of his office.

We'll begin with Richard.

Richard Sergay: So Paul, let's start with a broad definition of citizenship in the networked age. What does citizenship mean in the 21st century to you?

Paul Collier: I think citizenship is a set of obligations matched with a set of rights. If you like, all the obligations add up to the ability to implement all the set of rights. So the rights and the obligations need to be a perfect match. If they're not a perfect match, it's the equivalent of printing more money than you've got goods to supply with, but it's this willing entering into these mutual obligations, which add up to the pleasure of, of mutual rights. Obviously, the, the load bearing bit is the obligations, and the enjoyable bit is the rights, but I think it's very important to see the two things together. And it's not just about individual rights, it's about managing to build common purpose.

In a healthy society, the citizens manage to have a dialogue where they gradually forge through that dialogue, backwards and forwards, converging on some common purpose that they would like to see achieved. And that common purpose then becomes a further obligation that everybody has to try and further that common purpose. Jean Jacques Rousseau came up with the idea that if we don't cooperate with each other, we can only catch rabbits when we go hunting, but if we work together for common purpose, we can catch stags, and we get a lot more food out of catching a stag than out of a rabbit. So that was the first social science that recognized the importance of working together to forge a common purpose and then coordinating around it.

Richard Sergay: So, Paul, help me understand when you use the term obligation—what does that mean?

Paul Collier: Well at its very simplest level, it's the obligation to obey the law and pay taxes. That's the tip of an iceberg of obligations in a sort of healthy society. A healthy society works on a sort of presumption that people will behave decently to each other in a thousand little ways. And some societies have this, and some societies don't.

If we give the example of the most successful society in Europe at the moment, is Denmark, where people have habitually built

mutuality, and that played out when Covid struck, because we often present the discussion of Covid as, do you protect the economy, or do you protect people? But Denmark has the lowest hit to its economy and the lowest mortality rates around Europe. So it's not chosen at which end of a trade-off, it's achieved both. And the reason it's been able to achieve both is that the Danish population is so used to cooperating together around a common purpose, that, here's a new common purpose. We want to get rid of Covid without destroying the economy.

And so that becomes an obligation on everybody to behave sensibly. Older guys like me in Denmark would take precautions not to go to places where there are lots of young people playing about, right? We'd protect ourselves. And younger people would be careful not to kill granny, right? And so the Danes haven't even had to close their schools at all because parents behave sensibly with their children. And so it's got this very very low rate of mortality, but it's also got very little disruption to its economy.

And so that's a population which is habituated to mutuality. Here's a new common purpose, you agree very rapidly to it, because it's so blindingly obvious you don't want Covid to destroy either the economy or kill your elder people. And so they are very easily able to create new sets of obligations around, be kind to your neighbor, be careful not to give this disease to your neighbor. That's basically it.

Richard Sergay: Paul, what do you attribute that sense of commonality or common purpose to? Could it be that the Danes are a more homogeneous society to a much more multicultural society like the UK or the US?

Paul Collier: I don't think that's it, really, I think first of all, Denmark, didn't used to be like Denmark now. And if we go back to the mid-19th century, Denmark was bitterly divided between an arrogant aristocracy, a very unequal society of the mid 19th century. So modern Denmark is a recent creation. I think it's had some pretty good leadership.

It's got some very good leadership at the moment, Mette Frederikson. She is a, not particularly well-educated. She's a single mother, brought up kids on her own. And so when she says "we" to other Danes, they hear that, and say, yes, you're just like us. Actually

you've had a harder life than many of ours. And so she can say, "we all need to protect our population from this disease." And everybody says, "yeah, yeah, that's right, we do need to, we need to take responsibility." And so that good form of modest leadership has been really very, very central to Denmark's style. It's not had a lot of command and control, "we know best," that sort of leadership. It's had a sense of modesty about its leaders, I think.

Richard Sergay: We know the United States, for example, has 4% of the world's population and close to 20% of the world's fatalities and those who have been infected with Covid. So how important is leadership to that sense of common purpose and citizenship in a society,? Can you draw a straight line between Denmark's leadership and their low mortality rate and the US's in terms of leadership?

Paul Collier: What we certainly can draw a straight line between is this ability to see ourselves as a "we," not as a one group looking at others and saying, you're "they." And so the ability to see everybody is a common "we," and then, yes, an ability repeatedly to forge new common purposes and then work towards achieving them. And as you do that, you start to become confident that yes, we can do this sort of thing. Stuff will happen that we didn't expect new needs will arise. And we'll struggle collectively to try and implement this new common purpose. And we'll get there step by step. We'll learn what works well, and we'll do that.

Leadership is, I think, really important in being able to build a common purpose, because a common purpose is a coordination phenomenon. People all have to agree on, this is what we're trying to do, and these are some good ways to do it. In the case of Covid, that needed to happen really fast. We learned about Covid in January, and so very quickly we needed to behave responsibly towards it—widespread model load-bearing across society, families, firms, communities, all needed to behave in a responsible fashion: Wear masks. Don't congregate in big groups, the higher-risk group trying to shield themselves from a lot of interaction with the young, the young trying to get on with their lives without endangering others. So good leadership speeds that process of coordination. I mean, if we compare: Clearly in Denmark, they all rapidly coordinated around this principle, you better take

care of your neighbor. And in America, as I remember, what happened in the onset and Covid was queues outside gun shops. So it was less, "take care of your neighbor" than, "shoot your neighbor." And that was emblematic of a failure in the society to coordinate around a pretty straightforward common purpose. As you say, leadership must have had a role in that, but it's, it's sort of not just the leadership over the last couple of years, it seems to me somehow it's gone back in society over the last 40 years.

Richard Sergay: Connect the "we" and decision-making. I'm assuming that "we" makes for a better decision and a better societal decision-making process. Is that correct?

Paul Collier: It does. But it also is that we have to have a "we" in order to get some common purpose. And by having a "we," by participating in building that common purpose, feeling our voice has been heard, if everybody's voice is heard, then we own this common purpose. It's *our* purpose, as well as everybody's purpose. And that's the key step in taking responsibility, to feel that this purpose is co-owned by me. I'm part of reaching that.

And so a healthy democracy is a continuous process of dialogue in which people hear each other, rather than just shout at each other. And America used to be like that, to a large extent, if we go back to the 1950s and 60s—it wasn't a perfect society by any means, there were whole excluded groups of American citizens, shamefully, but it was a much more listening- and "we"-based society than it is now. America, like Britain over the last 40 years, has sort of polarized between rival groups.

And to be honest, I blame most of all, not the poorest people, I blame the richest. I think that successful people, both in Britain and America, have shifted away from a concept of "we" to a concept of "me." I've succeeded because I'm brilliant, I'm smart, I'm working, I've achieved. I fulfilled myself. And that peeling off of the successful from recognizing their obligations to others, that was, I think the tragic move in both Britain and America.

We're very much aligned here with Michael Sandel and his new book, *The Tyranny of Merit*. We both see this as a case where the hyper-successful peeled off from mutual identity and started to

celebrate their own individuality. And they did that just as the big gaps were opening up between themselves and the less successful. So just as the less successful needed to be able to claim obligations from the successful, the successful walk off.

I'm a communitarian; *Greed is Dead* is very much a communitarian book.

Tavia Gilbert:

I want to jump in here because what Professor Collier just said is so dense with meaning and moves so quickly, I don't want it to pass any of us by. First, Professor Collier calls himself communitarian, and I had to stop to look that up.

The Encyclopædia Britannica defines communitarianism as a social and political philosophy that emphasizes the importance of community in the functioning of political life, in the analysis and evaluation of political institutions, and in understanding human identity and well-being.

But I still wasn't clear what he was communicating when he said "*Greed is Dead* is very much a communitarian book." I emailed him to ask him to clarify his meaning, and he responded this way:

"We mean by 'greed is dead' that the arguments that sought to justify greed are *intellectually* now indefensible and will gradually be abandoned. And so we are currently at 'peak greed' because the new understanding of human nature will lead societies to become more communitarian."

Now, that's clear to me. What remains unclear is whether we might move toward more communitarian societies through creative vision, problem-solving, and civic participation, or out of necessity because society is no longer functional. Richard alludes to the same question.

Richard Sergay:

Are we living through one of those moments where democracy has been, or is being, derailed?

Paul Collier:

It's threatened, it's threatened. It's not yet derailed, but it's threatened. There really is no alternative to democracy. The region

where I work on a lot of the time, Africa, had about 30 years of autocracy. Uh, it had so many dictators that I couldn't count them anymore. It was a disastrous phase. If we believe that autocracy, dictatorship produce solutions, just look at that experience. They don't, right? What works is a society that's able to build common purpose, and that we're all hard-wired by evolution to be capable of forging common purpose in a community. That common purpose has to be well-informed, and the community has to be a big, inclusive community that is coincident with the nation, because the nation has so much power, political power, that it's vital that that political power is used for the common good, and not just the one group against another.

Richard Sergay: Hm. For both democracy and society to be successful, you've written about communicating the same narrative, in terms of helping understand facts and truth. When there are oppositional narratives, fake news being an example, it can damage democracy, correct?

Paul Collier: Oh, massively so. I mean, democracy depends upon building an informed citizenry, and an informed citizenry needs to basically have common narratives. We understand our role, or misunderstand it, through narratives. And there are really some very extraordinary polarized narratives going around in both Britain and America. The notion on both the extreme left and the extreme right, that the state is some sort of conspiracy and that Covid is a sort of invention of a power-obsessed state, I mean, it's such an extraordinarily false portrayal of the facts that it's astounding that in a well-educated society, like America or Britain, anybody could hold these views, but they're actually there, in both societies. Britain had a demonstration in London, I think a week ago, of people saying Covid's all made up. It's made up by the state in order to suppress us. All right, it's hard to place those people on the political spectrum. It's not hard to place them on the mental spectrum.

Richard Sergay: Hm. So if I understand you correctly, then, a healthy society manages to communicate the same narrative or similar narratives across the spectrum. Is that correct?

Paul Collier: And that those narratives are well-informed. People understand their world, or misunderstand it, through the narratives they hear

and accept. Narratives circulate around a community, a healthy society is sufficiently one big community that the same narratives flow around everybody. So for something like the germ theory of disease, most people in a modern society accept that disease is caused by germs, not by magic. And so that's an example of a scientific theory, which gradually spread and produced a well informed society, which then behaved more sensibly towards illness. And that, that happened during the 20th century. In the 19th century, very few people understood the germ theory of disease.

So that's a common narrative spreading around a population, circulating because it is sufficiently one society that the same narrative is communicated everywhere. And then people are able, being informed, they're able to behave sensibly. Another more recent example on health would be the dangers of smoking, which gradually spread around society, in the second half of the 20th century, informed by the very senior medical authorities, which said, here is new health knowledge, new scientific knowledge, and that spread. For awhile, we had people pushing back, but they don't now. So that's a healthy society. Somehow we've stumbled into such polarized societies that different, crazy narratives circulate in different parts of the population and persist, because people just hear the narratives within their community. And so this is tragic, but the real culprit is the polarized society.

Richard Sergay: And what do you attribute that polarization to? Is it in the networked age that people are stuck in their social media bubbles? Because essentially what you're talking about is that societies build a collective wisdom around a base of knowledge that all can agree on. But what we're seeing, if I understand you correctly, and focusing on the UK and the US in particular, that we are becoming not only polarized, but tribalized in our views of what knowledge and narratives are about.

Paul Collier: That's absolutely right. Most of our decisions are guided not by our individual smarts, but by the collective brain of our community, which is built up over many, many years and is actually much wiser and more knowledgeable than any individual brain. So it's very sensible to be guided by the narratives circulating in the community.

But what's happened is that we've split, we no longer have a common collective brain, common collective, common narratives that encapsulate it. We've got this vicious polarization, brought about partly by the peeling off of the successful into this individualism, meretricious, "I deserve it" culture, and partly by a sort of grievance culture at the other end of society, which comes up with the rival accounts of everything. And that is, if you like, an understandable reaction to the denial of obligations to others by the successful, but of course it has catastrophic consequences, not just for the poor, but for the successful as well, huh? America's got such a high mortality rate from Covid, even amongst the successful, because it's not been able to do what Denmark's done and build a quick acceptance of a new common purpose, and everybody behave with the same narrative of, "this is what we need to do." America's deeply split, even more so than Britain, as to what we need to do to contain this illness.

Richard Sergay: So let me ask you, since our conversation is based on this new Oxford report called Citizenship in a Networked Age, can technologies like machine learning and AI and similar sorts of things help us out of this potential morass of polarization, or is it in fact increasing polarization?

Paul Collier: Certainly the social media to date has actually by and large, amplified divergence, because it's enabled people to join into echo chambers where everybody agrees with each other. It doesn't have to be like that. It doesn't have to be like that at all. And AI could and can really enhance high-quality decision-making. So all of the evidence is that AI allied to good human purpose makes it easier to achieve those human purposes. So it's, it's a piece of technology which extends our capabilities to achieve complex things, which is great.

But to date, AI has been used for some pretty awful things. I mean, let me give you one example, which is Facebook, Google—in the end, what's their business model? They're selling screen time. Because they sell adverts. And so to sell adverts, they need people to stay on that screen. And so they've hired some of the finest mathematical brains in the world and applied very fancy AI to the

problem of how do we keep people on that screen for as long as possible?

AI has come up with solutions which come up with, for example, for teenagers, highly addictive games. I've got three teenagers and my goodness, the battle to try to get them to do something other than just watch that screen, huh? Because the finest minds in the world have the finest AI to work out the answer of how to keep them on that screen. And I'm one person struggling with three teenagers, trying to counter that, right? I shouldn't have to. It's ethically deplorable that we've used AI for such a purpose.

Another solution that AI has come up with to keep people on the screen is not highly addictive games, it's moving people to watch more and more extreme things. So—this has been tested in the political sphere. So if you start by being inclined to be a democratic voter, you'll be steadily lured into conspiracy theories of how the Right is dominating something, is abusing something. If you're mildly inclined to be a Republican, you'll gradually be steered to these fantasies and conspiracies to destroy all liberty. This is what AI has come up with.

It works! It works. People like to stay and watch something that's a bit sensational. And so as an AI solution to the problem, how do we keep people on that screen?, they've come up with brilliant solutions. It's just that the solutions to their problem maximize revenue for Google and Facebook, but at the price of enormous social damage.

So we need a responsible AI, a responsible AI that's harnessed to good social purpose. And that is what this commission report is really about.

Richard Sergay: And is that a real possibility in your mind, are you an optimist or pessimist about that?

Paul Collier: I have worked on Africa for the best part of half a century. And I've learned never to be either optimistic or pessimistic, but always to say “where realistically can we put our energies now to make things a bit better?” And so, that's always the right response. Never mind,

optimism, pessimism. They're always foolish. We need to say, what can we do practically to move things in a better direction now?

And that's what that report actually does, right? It's a practical report. These are the things we need to do. And the first thing is we all need to become aware of both the dangers and the hopeful possibilities of AI. We can't just leave it to the market, to direct AI to solve our problems, because the market will turn us all into addicts when we're teenagers and extremists when we're adults.

Richard Sergay: As you look at the arc of history, is this sense of polarization fundamentally different because of technology than in past pre-internet decades?

Paul Collier: That's a good, it's an interesting question. I don't think so. I think there's always been dangers in societies of stumbling into polarization, usually arising from some unaddressed catastrophe.

So if we look at the most famous recent case of that polarization, Germany during the '30s, there'd been a hyperinflation, which had wiped out a lot of the lower middle class. These are sort of unaddressed, major failures of the democratic process. And so we need to guard against that. And that's why my little book, *The Future of Capitalism*, the subtitle, *Facing the New Anxieties*—always a democracy has to be alert to the new anxieties that crop up.

The nature of capitalism is that it doesn't work on autopilot, it will keep coming up with problems. It's a brilliant system, it's the only system that works, but periodically it derails, and we need to be fleet of foot and putting it back on the rails. And this time, we've been really slow. These two acute divergences, the spatial and the educational, which have been unaddressed for 40 years and so have blown up in our faces. And that's our fault for being so slow.

Richard Sergay: Last question, are we too diverse as a society, whether it be the UK or the US, or even Africa to seek common purpose?

Paul Collier: Not at all. Let's have a look at Singapore. Singapore started in 1961, it was bitterly divided. There were three racial groups: Malays, Indians, Chinese. They hated each other as much as any racial groups can hate each other. On top of that, it was bitterly divided into two rival ideologies: Singapore had been a British colony, and

so there were lots of people believing in democracy, the rule of democratic law and that sort of thing, but it was right up next to China, and so you had a lot of people believing in communism. So there was a bitter ideological split, communism/democracy, and another set of bitter racial splits. It was a very unequal society, a very corrupt society, and a very poor society.

And look at it now. It's managed to build common purpose that all Singaporeans, it's got a very strong sense of common community, forward-looking, always coming up with, here's a new problem, Covid, what can we do? We behave responsibly. And so Singapore has built forward-looking common purpose better than almost any other society. And it started doing it in 1961.

It turned a society that was bitterly divided and ethnically, culturally very diverse, into one that is absolutely capable of common purpose. Of course, people still have racial identities, right? But they've overlaid that with a sense of shared identity, we're all Singaporeans. And that's what, huh?

You can't get more diverse than men and women. But on the whole, we managed to unite in a common purpose, which is let's have some children and bring them up. So diversity is great when you bring complementary diversity together around some common purpose. If men and women can do it, and if the Chinese, Malays and Indians can do it, America can do it, used to do it, except shamefully with one racial group that it excluded, but America was a, a melting pot of all sorts of different European identities. People didn't destroy those identities, but they forged an additional identity that they shared in common. And that was great. You can do it again.

Richard Sergay: Perhaps a paradigm for other societies around the world. Paul, thank you. Your wisdom has been incredibly important as we dive into this topic of citizenship in a networked age. Thank you.

Paul Collier: Thank you very much for talking with me.

Tavia Gilbert: Since we spoke with Professor Collier, we've had an election in America, and after a long wait, an official winner has finally been

announced. For millions, the outcome is not only a bitter disappointment, it's worth waging war against, if only in the courts. For millions of others, it's cause for dancing in the streets – not figuratively, but literal dancing in the streets. What we can be certain about is that despite this election coming to a close, our painful polarization will continue.

But even with that truth, I'm finding so much hope, wisdom, and direction in the conversations we're bringing you this season.

As I shared with you last week, I'm shifting how I communicate, slowing down before I respond, or react, on social media, deepening my critical thinking, and recognizing the importance of the work that we have ahead, for individuals, for communities, and for nations.

When I hear assurances such as Professor Collier offered – that there are examples of deep cultural divides that have been overcome, that we have brought our fractured nation together before, and that we are capable of choosing to do so again, I'm heartened. That assurance gives me strength and energy to keep growing, keep grounding, keep opening my heart. I hope it does the same for you.

We'll be back in two weeks with another episode in our season focusing on Citizenship in a Networked Age. This time, Richard speaks with Baroness Onora O'Neill, retired Professor of Philosophy from Cambridge University. Professor O'Neill speaks with Richard about the ethics of communication in our networked age. Here's a clip from the upcoming conversation with Professor O'Neill:

Onora O'Neill: Well, in a world where a lot of people think shouting is a civic virtue, listening is quite hard, and it's also in a world in which we don't think about civility, listening is made even harder. Why do we hear so little about the various virtues that communication requires—truthfulness, honesty, civility, decency, all things that are familiar to many of us from early childhood? Why are we so little focused on them? Why do people constantly emphasize the

standards that we have in the human rights documents, the right to freedom of expression and the right to privacy, and nothing else?

Tavia Gilbert:

We look forward to bringing you the full interview with Professor O'Neill next episode. In the meantime, if you liked today's Story of Impact, we'd be grateful if you'd take a moment to subscribe to the podcast, rate and review us, and if you'd share or recommend this program to someone you know. Your support helps us reach new audiences. For more stories and videos, please visit storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. This episode written and produced by Talkbox and Tavia Gilbert. Assistant producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive Producer Michele Cobb.

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