

COMMON WEAL



WHAT IS COMMON WEAL? THE KEY IDEAS SHOP LIBRARY
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LATEST

The Principles of the Common Weal

Paul Spicker, professor of Public Policy at Robert Gordon University, outlines the seven key principles of the Common Weal.

Society

We live together in society

People do not live in isolation from each other; we live in families and communities. Most of us belong to a wide range of groups and networks - joined together by, for example, culture, education, religion, mutual responsibility and our shared experiences. A society is a group of all those groups. A society may seem distant to some, and there are parts of the world where it is, but Scotland is not one of those places. Many of the things that make life in Scotland work, happen at the level of society as a whole: education, health care, pensions, roads, parks and many other services are organised socially, and they make us all better off than we would be without them.

The common good

The welfare of every person depends on the welfare of each of us.

The idea of the common weal begins with the idea that the welfare of each and every person matters for the welfare of all of us. Every member of a family shares, to some extent, the pleasure and pain of others; it is hardly possible for a family to be content and satisfied with their circumstances when one of their number is deprived or dangerously ill. In the same way, it is difficult for the members of a society to be content if the most vulnerable people in that society are suffering. There are differences, of course, between families and societies; the relationship we have to members of our family is closer and stronger than it is to others. But wherever other people lack welfare, it affects us, too. Poverty makes life worse, not just for the poor, but for everyone.

Solidarity

We have obligations to each other.

The idea of 'solidarity' is widely used in Europe to mean that people are held together by bonds of mutual obligation - the ties of family, community and society. People are included in society when they are part of those networks, excluded when they are not. The common weal is an idea that includes people, and binds them together. It means that we are all of us responsible for each other. This does not mean that people are not also responsible for themselves; but it does mean that looking out for oneself is not enough, and never can be. "All the members of human society", Adam Smith wrote, "stand in need of each other's assistance." Every one of us depends on the help and support of others.

Stewardship

We have a duty to future generations.

Edmund Burke, the great conservative philosopher, argued that society is a partnership, not just of those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born. Part of the responsibility we have is to each other. Part is to those who have come before us - to preserve our common heritage. Part is to those who will come after us. Each generation has a duty of stewardship for the generations to come - a duty that goes beyond the narrower idea of 'sustainability', because it is a commitment to make things better, not just to keep things going. The common weal calls for us to build for the future.

Rights

A society has to protect the rights of every person in it.

The common weal cannot be achieved by sacrificing the welfare of some people for the good of others. A society where some people are poor, homeless or excluded, is a worse place to live for everyone else. Most people in Scotland look at exclusive societies - like the gated communities of South East England - with some disquiet. As *The Spirit Level* shows, societies that are more unequal are less healthy, more prone to crime and poorer than others. **People need rights - freedoms to protect them from oppression, and positive rights to make it possible to live with dignity.**

Equality

Everyone needs access to the conditions of civilisation.

There are many differences between people - for example, differences of gender, of religion, of physical capacity. Equality means that wherever there are such differences, people should not have to suffer from disadvantages because of them. The most basic type of equality is about respect for persons: people of any kind should not be treated as inferior. Then there is equality of opportunity; people should not be denied opportunities because of who they are. Our common weal calls for equality, however, in a deeper sense. The real argument for equality, Tawney argued, was that every person in a society should have 'access to the conditions of civilisation' - including, amongst other issues, education, housing, sanitation, health care and a basic income.

A common enterprise

To build more we must share more.

The common weal depends on common action. We are part of a joint enterprise, which every person contributes to, so that every person can benefit. By working together, every one of us can achieve more than we can do alone. And acting together has another, less immediate advantage: when people co-operate, they have the opportunity to build a community, and identity, and a sense of purpose. Together, we can make Scotland a better place to live.
