Pro-Social Behaviour: the Future - it's up to us
By Matthew Taylor, RSA chief executive

1. I have spent twenty five years involved in party politics and for the last ten my Party has been in power. That experience, and particularly the last three years working in Government, has raised many questions, but two stand out. First, several of the goals we share for society rely on citizens themselves choosing to act wisely and responsibly; how should we reform politics, society and government to enable and encourage people to make those choices? Second, what can we do to renew the ragged relationship between citizens and politicians, particularly those elected to govern? I have concluded that these questions are connected and the same necessity provides part of the answer to both.

2. This is the need for a radical rethink about social change. Instead of a Government-centric model of change in which we assume our rulers should be given the blame for what goes wrong and the responsibility for making it right, we need a citizen-centric model in which we reinstate ourselves as the authors of our own collective destinies. Instead of expecting politicians (who we say we don't respect or like) to act on our behalf we should recognise that progress depends on our capacity to agree the future we want and to take the actions that will secure that future.

3. This essay focuses primarily on the implications of this view for democracy and the operation of government and public services, but it may also be relevant to current anguished debates around identity, social cohesion and meaning. The dominant culture of our country is secular, democratic, and individualistic, and we show no signs of wanting to return to a more deferential past. Yet, we find ourselves assailed by questions about the validity of this culture arising in part from alternative value systems, but more profoundly from doubts about its environmental, social and psychological sustainability. The world is heating up, signs of social pathology from violent crime to drug abuse and family breakdown are all around us, and every survey suggest that our broadly successful pursuit of wealth and status does nothing to make us any more content. Perhaps a way to grapple with the dilemma; 'who are we?' is to change it to the founding question of citizen-centric politics; 'what should we do?'

4. There are many consequences of this different way of looking at the world and our role in it. These include a focus on new forms of

collective action and more powerful and more relevant social norms (the tacit assumptions that guide our public conduct). The norms and behaviours I envisage reflect a commitment to the progress of society as a whole, so I label them 'pro-social'. This essay explores the idea of a 'pro-social strategy'.

5. Preparing the essay I have faced a paradoxical pair of challenges. On the one hand, it feels as though everyone is using a more citizen-centric language: talking about the importance of engaging citizens, tapping into their energies and making them partners in service delivery. Here is Ed Miliband the Cabinet Office Minister for the Third Sector speaking last month: '..we must bury the hierarchy…between provider and user' or 'my job is not to solve…problems, but to work with them [constituents] …so that it is engaged and active citizens who are making the change happen'. Miliband wouldn't thank me for saying it, but similar views have been repeatedly expressed by David Cameron. Looking around there are signs that different ideas of change and citizen responsibility are afoot, particularly in relation to the environment. The Government may have increased the car tax on four wheel gas guzzlers but this alone cannot explain the decline in demand for them: in a very short period of time people's attitudes to climate change and to their own role have turned a status symbol into an embarrassment. More and more people have an account of tackling climate change which recognises the mutual roles of government, business, localities and themselves.

6. On the other hand, despite the ubiquity of a cluster of ideas which can be connected to the notion of pro-social strategy it is hard to define exactly what the boundaries of the idea are: is it simply a set of good practices around user engagement and participative decision making or is it a more profound recasting of the citizen-state relationship? If it is the latter what does this mean for the basic tenets of how we think about and practice politics and policy making? In calling for a pro-social strategy I argue that we need to explore and combine a range of different insights and practices to accomplish a fundamental shift in the way we view ourselves and our society. Imagine a society where our account of how to promote learning, sustain safer neighbourhoods, or make diversity work shared the environmentalist's combination of what government must do, what my employer must do, what my community must do and what I must do? I am not claiming that the ideas in the essay are crystal-clear nor fully developed: if it was easy to imagine what a pro-social future would look like we would be half way to building it. This essay it is not a rigorous piece of research and analysis but

rather a call to arms based on the frustrations of a political life. It is less about providing new answers than about posing old questions in new ways.

7. The idea of pro-social strategy raises many issues. Is it necessary and could it make a difference? What is a citizen-centric model of social change? What do we mean by social norms and what do we know about them? What is the relationship between the idea of collective action and representative democracy? What are the particular challenges about agreeing new goals and sustaining new norms in today's society, and how might we actually go about doing it? These are the questions that I want to be the focus of a major new project for the RSA.

8. The RSA is an Enlightenment organisation committed to scientific, cultural and human progress. There is an overarching issue for us as we develop our research programme: what are the barriers to progress and what contribution could we make to removing them? The RSA's methodology - which combines high level debate, policy development, developing strong networks, testing the practical applications of ideas through experimentation and drawing on the insight and expertise of our 26,000 Fellows - is particularly suited to the challenge of exploring pro-social strategy. If the RSA can develop and advance the idea I believe we will be making an important contribution to lowering a major barrier to progress. Let me suggest some reasons why.

9. Plato argued that 'necessity is the mother of invention'. I believe we face a difficult but potentially liberating truth: for society to progress relies on citizens acting more often in ways which match their values and aspirations and doing more for each other than simply obeying laws. To have the society we want, we need to agree to give more back. This is particularly obvious in relation to four current public priorities: protecting the environment, improving public services, living together as strangers, maintaining a sufficiently strong democracy and civil society.

10. To protect the environment, and in particular to reduce carbon consumption to a sustainable level, national and international action by governments is vital. There are sound reasons for business too to make a contribution. But to meet exacting carbon reduction targets, citizens themselves will need voluntarily to change aspects of behaviour and patterns of consumption. Indeed, the most effective instruments may be those that combine the right incentives from Government with an ability and willingness among the public to support and act upon these incentives.

11. Many outcomes of public services have improved in recent years but this has coincided with a rate of increase in public expenditure which no major Party intends to maintain. The Government has ambitious targets for further improvements in outcomes, but polling evidence suggests that public expectations exceed even these goals. For example MORI recently found that nearly three quarters of citizens think the NHS should provide any medically effective drug treatment regardless of value for money. Also, it seems that what citizens value in public services often differs from the goals prioritised by politicians. One way, and arguably the best way, to achieve substantial improvements in desired outcomes is for public services more effectively to engage citizens: understanding what they want, agreeing what is necessary to achieve those goals, and mobilising their efforts. Schools achieve better results if parents get involved in their children's education (indeed parental engagement has now been shown to be more powerful than school in shaping a child's educational outcomes). Skills strategies rely on workers wanting to be more skilled. Health outcomes improve and the NHS can be more efficient if patients follow advice, if those with long term conditions self manage those conditions and if all of us use services responsibly, for example, cancelling GP appointments we don't intend to take up. The police can focus more fully on serious crime if communities act together to prevent and tackle low level nuisance and anti-social behaviour. As well as the better outcomes achieved by a more collaborative approach, citizens seem to prefer the experience of being treated as contributing partners rather than passive service recipients

12. Most people in the UK live in communities that are more demographically diverse and socially heterogeneous than a generation ago. Ethnic diversity and the arrival of new migrants is the most obvious change, but there is also greater diversity in family forms, lifestyles and cultural norms between, but also within, different types of community. Growing inter-generational conflict – often expressed in anxiety about the behaviour of young people – can be another symptom of a fractured value system. Diversity and difference can give individuals greater freedom and make society more dynamic, but survey data shows us that issues of race and migration are now top of people's concerns, that levels of life satisfaction and trust are lower in diverse communities with fast changing populations and that there is anxiety about the behaviour of young people. For diverse communities to succeed as places that are safe and tolerant there needs to be a framework of agreed norms about

how strangers behave with each other. This might only be about respecting difference and avoiding offence, or it might be about forms of behaviour that actively contribute to the local security and quality of life (for example, certain standards of courtesy, greater parental responsibility, watching out for elderly people living alone).

13. More can and should be done to encourage people to engage in politics, decision making and community activism. As the political theorist Stephen Coleman has been heard to say 'the problem with democratic engagement is hard-to-reach groups, and there is no harder-to-reach group than politicians'. But the modernisation of our democratic institutions and the opening up of decision-making will only make a difference if new opportunities are matched by the willingness of a sufficient number of citizens to take them up.

14. So, the argument in essence: more citizens more of the time to behave in more 'pro-social' ways if we are to create and maintain the society to which most of us apparently aspire. The initial response to this idea is usually not to deny its truth but to question its relevance. The reaction is 'yes, but so what?' or more expansively 'of course society would make more progress if more people acted responsibly but people don't, so we will carry on living in an imperfect world and rely on the state to use laws, taxes and regulation to force us to do the things that are really necessary'.

15. One of the tasks of the RSA's 'pro-social' project will be to explore a model of how individual behaviour is shaped and - as a consequence - social outcomes achieved. Such a model needs to be nuanced and dynamic. On the one hand, there is a spectrum of factors influencing behaviour stretching from legal compulsion to individual predisposition. It is difficult to draw a clear distinction between points on this spectrum. For example, philanthropy can be seen to reflect both individual morality and cultural norms. On the other hand, different influences interact. So, hard incentives will tend to be more successful if they go with the grain of and reinforce social norms.

16. Too often we assume that most people will only give back to society (which I am distinguishing here from the private sphere of family and friends) that which they are compelled, or strongly and concretely incentivised, to give. Of course, there are lots of us who make personal decisions to contribute to social goals by donating to charity, volunteering and joining campaigns. This is vital to the health of society. But in as much as these altruistic

decisions are based on a truly personal commitment, the distribution of spontaneous goodness is by definition not easily amenable to external influence.

17. An important part of my argument is that politicians, policy makers and public officials pay too little attention to the span of the spectrum of behavioural influences that lies between laws, taxes and hard incentives on the one hand and individual commitment on the other. This space is comprised of two overlapping factors shaping behaviour: collective goals and social norms. The former are those projects which we consciously sign up to trying to achieve with our fellow citizens: examples include giving to Comic Relief or recycling domestic rubbish. Social norms are those conventions that lead us to act in certain ways not because we are compelled to, nor because we make conscious choices to, but because we have internalised a set of expectations following patterns of behaviour which we have learned (usually unknowingly), accepted (usually tacitly) and which are daily reinforced by the behaviour and expectations of others. The origins of social norms are complex. They can stretch back to old traditions, they may be historical accidents (spitting in the street was originally frowned upon not for being impolite but because doctors feared it would spread infectious diseases), or they may involve the internalising of more what were once more explicit collective debates and controversial governmental actions.

18. Social norms can be observed and measured, they can be powerful - sometimes more powerful than the hard incentives of law or economic gain - they can change and they can be influenced. Social norms can be about major shifts in the way a whole society thinks – for example, the transformation in attitudes to homosexuality in the last two decades. They can be about the way people live together in particular localities: you might want to contrast the winners of the annual 'Friendliest street of the year competition' with the street you live in, or to wonder why people in Leicester seem happier with diversity than those in Bradford. And norms can emerge from specific contexts and relationships, which is one of the reasons why some doctors are better at encouraging their patients to be healthy than others, some police forces better at engaging local communities in crime prevention.

19. There is a substantial literature about social norms in the fields of psychology sociology and anthropology. This relates to what social norms exist, how they were created and by whom, how they vary across time, across society and across groups within

society and what function they perform. There is also a growing body of more policy related research on the impact of social norms, and attempts to shape them. Some examples from this literature hint at the scope for developing more effective strategies for pro-social norms and behaviour.

20. Research suggests that not only do accurate perceptions of existing patterns of behaviour shape individual choices (which is what we would expect) but so do inaccurate perceptions. In US colleges it has been found that students who over-estimate the prevalence of excessive drinking among their peers are more likely themselves to become excessive drinkers. The perception shapes the norms. The norms shape the behaviour. Over time the behaviour comes to make reality more like the myth.

21. The impact of media consumption on attitudes and behaviours was the central concern of cultivation theory, an approach developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s. In seeking to demonstrate that heavy viewing of TV drama led people to over-estimate the level of violence in society Gerbner developed the vivid concept of 'mean world syndrome'. Gerbner's work has been subject to various critiques and elaborations, but there is certainly a case for examining whether the systematic tendency of UK citizens to exaggerate the likelihood of being the victim of violence by a stranger reflects a mean world syndrome generated not just by crime drama but by news reporting and political rhetoric. Fear of crime contributes to people withdrawing from certain public spaces and losing the confidence to engage with strangers, particularly those of a different age or ethnicity, and this in turn can make our streets less safe. Imagine if as much media time was given to investigating why a street won friendliest of the year as to reporting the tragic but isolated stabbing of a good neighbour.

22. Robert Cialdini, Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University, is one of the world's foremost experts on how to influence behaviour. One of his arguments is that the under-estimation and misunderstanding of the influence of social norms leads to glaring mistakes in political and policy communication. He found, for example, that people were more likely to protect a local forest not when they were told how others' behaviour was damaging it, but when they were encouraged to believe that the despoiling was rare. This may reflect notions of reciprocity (I will if you will) and also the impact of the desire to conform. At his lectures Cialdini shows one of the most frequently aired public service films in American broadcast history. In the film, a proud native American paddling downstream gradually becomes

engulfed by litter while the camera pans back to reveal a grim industrial landscape. A voiceover bemoans the impact of human behaviour on the American environment while on screen a travelling car window opens and a bag of rubbish is thrown at the feet of our 'noble savage'. Cialdini argues that the film not only gives a false impression by implying that most Americans are uncaring about the environment and casually drop litter (neither of which is true) but worse it normalises irresponsibility and thus makes it more likely that the viewer we will imitate it.

23. Research like this is only one of many departure points for a pro-social strategy. Conducting small scale social experiments to increase our knowledge is a very different to implementing large scale programmes of social engagement and marketing. While researchers can create artificial circumstances, control for confounding variables and manipulate their unknowing subjects, politicians and public managers work in a complex world and have to explain their motives and methods to a public with ever more access to information. But this research does suggest two important insights: first, that it is possible to change behaviours significantly through the right forms of information, engagement and persuasion. Second, that the way the entertainment and news media and politicians talk about social problems and our role in tackling them may often be counter-productive. There are parts of the UK Government that are drawing on this kind of evidence and giving serious attention to how to persuade citizens to act in their own best interests, for example the work by the Department of Health on social marketing of public health. But if pro-social behaviour is vital to making progress on the issues we most care about, then debate, innovation and learning about public mobilisation and norm shaping should be a vital part of politics, public policy and the day to day practice of public service managers and providers.

24. Of course, politicians, policy makers and public officials do hold views about social norms, albeit often tacitly. To generalise, these views are based on intuition rather than evidence, they are often pessimistic or resigned about the scope to shape norms. When they are more optimistic this tends to be based on an often ill-founded reliance on laws and exhortation as the drivers of norms. Finally, ideas about social norms are only dimly and inconsistently reflected in day to day decision making and practice. So while there are areas of public service practice where ideas of co-design and co-production have really taken root – such as the NHS's Expert Patient Programme – these are not only exceptional but they prosper despite, not because of, the overarching ethos of public service delivery.

25. Thinking seriously about the area of the motivational spectrum that encompasses collective action and social norm shaping can help us ease some of the worst pressure points in the ailing body politic. There are two obvious examples. First, there is the truth captured by Mark Twain's aphorism: 'to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail'. By underestimating the impact of social norms and the capacity for shaping them, politicians may end up relying too much on the most obvious tools at their disposal: laws, regulations, state spending, structural reform and taxes. This over-reliance leads to ineffective or inappropriate governmental interference and contributes to citizen disenchantment.

26. All the social priorities I described earlier could be addressed through new laws or taxes. We could tax carbon use much more directly and punitively, we could impose legal contracts or new conditional charges on public service users, we could have more legislation to try to criminalise behaviour that might cause offence and we could have compulsory voting or pay people to join political parties. Such proposals need to be looked at on their merits, but overall do we think we need more laws, new taxes and more regulations? Do we believe measures such as these always or even often achieve their intended objective? And what are we saying about society and ourselves if we believe that we always need the state to force us to do things to meet objectives (like tackling climate change or improving public services) which we apparently support?

27. Second, understanding and shaping social norms should be integral to the design of political programmes and government policy: if hard incentives go with the grain of social norms (or use effective methods of shaping them) they are more likely to succeed and less likely to be resented by citizens. Drink driving and seat belt wearing are often cited as examples of laws going hand in hand with shifting social attitudes.

28. So if politicians and public officials thought more about collective mobilisation and social norms they could govern better. But a citizen centric approach also asks us to rethink the subject matter of governance itself. A vital step towards revivifying politics may be to move from a government centric to citizen centric democratic discourse. This analysis is categorically different from the usual accounts of the failings of the modern political system. Whatever the undoubted good sense of many of the recommendations of reports like the Power Commission they have a largely procedural and/or institutional emphasis. But what

if the problem is not how politicians and the public conduct their interaction as much as it is the subject of that interaction?

29. As long as politics is understood primarily as the process by which 'we' tell 'them' how to govern us, proposals for procedural and institutional reform are unlikely to address the fundamental lack of fit between the framing of political discourse and either our nature as modern citizens or the actual social challenges we face. Indeed, it may be that some of the weaknesses of our democratic system arise from an anachronistic approach to social and political change. Politicians and officials often complain that when do consult the public they tend to are given a hard time and faced with impossible demands. Could this be because the very content and parameters of many consultations (not to mention the weight of previous misunderstanding and disappointment) virtually rule out the possibility for a constructive dialogue.

30. Pro-social strategy involves changing the subject matter of democratic discourse. It means developing an idea of democracy which is both relevant to the demands of today and harkens back to ancient ideals. We have come to think of democracy as being exclusively about a distant group of people (politicians) working though anachronistic organisations (today's political parties). These people then ask us to give them a doubly weak mandate: weak numerically (one in four citizens could be enough in a General Election) and weak directionally (a cross in a box every four years to 'endorse' a manifesto that may contain hundreds of policies, not to mention all the issues that will emerge between elections). In the face of the complex challenges of today's society and people's expectations of autonomy and respect (reinforced - albeit superficially - by modern consumerism), this 'majoritarian' model of democracy drives citizens into a classic passive-aggressive stance. Instead we need a citizen-centric participative democracy in which citizens work out together what they want to achieve while through the same process agreeing how they are going to achieve it. (By the way, it is surely instructive that we see democratic debate and process as primarily about generating new laws).

31. The way we do politics not only reflects but reinforces a loss of confidence among citizens and communities discussing and solving problems for themselves. The most disabling aspect of political discourse is the paradox (exploited by the news media) that the state is seen simultaneously as omnipotent (responsible for every social failing and public mishap) and incompetent (despite the fact that we are generally a successful country with

improving public services). Observing the family resemblance of this combination, many commentators have suggested that citizens view the state with the same incoherent rage that teenagers often present to their parents.

32. One of the ambitions of pro-social strategy is that by creating a vibrant debate about common problems, aims and responsibilities outside conventional politics we can help reinstate politics itself as the process by which citizens willingly give permission to their representatives to act on their behalf. In other words, use of state power is seen to be the result of citizens identifying areas where voluntary or normative action by individuals and communities is insufficient, rather than the working assumption of our current culture of 'sullen statism', namely that voluntarism has a role only in the margins left by the state's incompetence or negligence.

33. This shift in thinking about the state is not simply about rolling back the state or taking politicians down a peg or two. The implications for the state of social behaviour are not so much about its size but as about its ways of working. The implications for politics are not so much about politicians letting go as about citizens taking hold. Pro-social politics would not be seen in terms of conflict between us (citizens) and them (politicians). Politics would be about us and us and us.

- 'Us' because it would be about what we as citizens want to achieve and what we need to do to achieve it.

- 'Us' because it would be about recognising the different interests, views and resources of different parts of society and accepting the challenge of reconciling these differences rather than simply asserting our own demands and expecting politicians to sort it all out (and then complaining bitterly when they haplessly search for an acceptable compromise).

- 'Us' third because this would be a process in which we would need to confront more fully the truth that we each of us have our own conflicting interests, views and aims. The apparent incompatible of our own individual preferences is a growing characteristic of modern policy problems. For example, we want to fly cheaply and protect the planet, to see our children as home-owners but to protect the green spaces around our towns and cities, to enjoy low labour cost inflation but to manage migration.

34. This is not to say that debate about strategies for social behaviour should supplant representative democracy or traditional governmental policy making. Instead, nationally and locally (one day internationally), we can envisage interweaving debates: about what citizens want collectively to achieve and what commitments we are willing in principle to make to achieving these goals; about how public policy and administration can facilitate citizens achieving agreed goals; and about what people now think of as politics – those areas where we give the state delegated power to act on our behalf by providing protection, welfare and security (and, of course, the electoral choice of which politicians we prefer to exercise this power).

35. I want to address some of the objections to an emphasis on social norms. But before doing so I want to lay my own political cards on the table. The RSA is a determinedly non-party political organisation and we engage with opinions and opinion formers from right, left, centre and those who defy categorisation. But I hope I can be permitted to admit my own social democratic political leanings. From this perspective pro-social strategy rests upon a progressive assumption but also leads us to ask difficult questions about the relationship between collective action and the state.

36. The idea that social behaviour could be a powerful force for progress implies an optimistic view of human nature and potential. One of the problems with the discourse about citizen responsibility in recent times has been the explicit or implicit focus on tackling deviance and pathology rather than encouraging new collective commitments. At school I remember class being asked to list non existent or rarely used words that were the apparent roots of commonly used negations; 'couth', 'kempt' and 'shevelled' for example. Anti-social behaviour is another example of a negative that seems to have no positive. Pro-social strategy is in part about ways of discouraging citizens from behaving anti-socially. But, more importantly about removing the intellectual, cultural and practical barriers to people being able to act together to achieve progress. The assumption that what is right for society is also generally right for the individual - both in terms of concrete outcomes and self-worth - reflects an Aristotelian belief that what is wise is also what is good.

37. More problematic for social democrats is the relationship between collective action, social norms and state action. I do not subscribe to an ideological presumption that state action necessarily crowds out citizen action. Not do I assume that whatever the state does it tends to alienate and disempower

those it is claiming to help. As the strengths and weaknesses of public services and civil society in America and Scandinavia illustrate, the responsiveness of the state to the preferences of citizens and its capacity to mobilise the efforts of citizens is not – at least within the general parameters of the state in market democracies - a function of its size. However, as others have argued, there has been a distinct tendency among British social democrats to conflate collectivism with statism. This may reflect the victory of particular strands in the ideology of the British left (most obviously Fabianism), that expanding and defending the welfare state became Labour's priority for large parts of the second half of the twentieth century, or the power of key pressure groups such as public sector trade unions. The Blair Government's reform programme is in part about opening up state monopolies to the private and voluntary sector. This is only part of a bigger question about the means and ends of social democratic politics. One way of putting this question is whether it is tenable to be an enthusiast for collective action but sceptical about state action?

38. The answer in part lies in where we draw the boundaries round the state; one of the goals of pro-social policies like devolution and co-production is to blur the boundaries between state and civic action. It is also about enabling institutions to span comfortably the state and civic spheres. There is an interesting debate currently raging in the voluntary sector about the sector's role in service delivery. On the one side stand those who worry that by relying on state contracts the voluntary sector becomes compliant and loses its vital advocacy role. On the other side are those who argue that voluntary organisations that engage in service delivery are able to develop more informed, balanced and realistic policy and campaign programmes. Just as shrill interest groups politics can contribute to the current shallowness of much policy and political debate, so a citizen-centric democracy will benefit from the capacity of organisations to constructively mediate the dialogue between the state and civil society. Indeed, interest groups need sometimes turn their attention away from government to citizens. This was the incisive strategic judgement made by Trevor Phillips when he saw that the main issue for the Commission for Racial Equality was not to persuade the Government to do more for race equality but to engage with the rising concern in the British population about the impact of mass migration.

39. I want now to turn to some of the objections to the promotion of pro-social norms and behaviour. This is not merely an intellectual exercise; versions of these objections tend to be heard whenever

debate takes place about how we might make society stronger. Understanding the objections to the idea helps identify key questions an RSA project should explore in more detail

40. One objection is structural. It is the 'free rider' problem. If something can only be accomplished by lots of citizens working together, why don't I just opt out and leave it up to other people? Or, conversely, if my behaviour will make little impact on its own what's the point of me making a meaningless sacrifice? The objection here is that collective agreements and social norms – especially ones we might seek to generate ourselves - are simply too weak to make a difference. In essence this is why we need laws, to compel people (or at least to encourage them) to do things that might not otherwise be in their individual interest. Does this mean the call for social behaviour based not on laws but on voluntarily agreed norms is unrealistic? I don't think so. As I argue below in relation to equalities, there are examples of new social norms which shape individual behaviour regardless of any clear self interest. Indeed, the very idea of social norms is that our behaviour is shaped by explicit or tacit agreements about collective goals which relieve us of (constrain us from) a constant re-calculation of our own self interest in any given situation.

41. Also, many of the things citizens could choose to do to improve society are not intrinsically onerous or self sacrificing. Patients who act as partners in their care, or people who are good neighbours are likely to end up healthier or more popular than people who don't, as well as making services run better and communities feel safer. This is not to say that there won't be people who ignore collective agreements or opt out of new social norms and behaviours, but, as giving to Live8 or voting in X Factor show, just as often the reverse motivation applies – we are enthusiastic about being a small part of something big.

42. Another potential objection to social behaviour strategy is sociological. The argument here is that social norms can't be created, especially in a society as diverse and fast changing as our own. This is the Humpty Dumpty view: the social foundations shift, the egg falls shattering the shell of social norms never to be put back together again. In a way this is true, we probably can't go back to the kind of values and assumptions that prevailed in a more homogenous and closed society. But there is one very obvious and powerful example of new social norms emerging.

43. Most people would accept that in day to day interactions treating people equally and with respect regardless of gender,

race, sexuality or physical disability is now expected of ordinary decent people. Yet just a generation ago the goal of equal treatment for all was espoused by few outside the ranks of left wing radicals, whose aims and methods were largely derided by the political and media establishment. Of course, this shift has been reinforced by changes in the law (just as the state and its agencies have a vital role in encouraging social behaviour), but the change in norms has gone well beyond what is prescribed in legislation. In one case at least - lesbian and gay rights – widespread attitudinal change was well ahead of legislative reform

44. A range of factors transformed everyday attitudes to disadvantaged or minority groups. It can be argued that equality for women was driven primarily by the labour market needs of service industries, or that AIDS was the key factor driving a more assertive form of activism among gay men. But the causality of major social change is rarely that simple. In the story of equality's advance it is surely impossible to leave out the contribution made to these new social norms by pioneering campaigners, political movements and social theorists. Pro-social strategy will rely on a similar mix of practical necessity, intellectual insight and political activism.

45. There is another instinctive objection to address. This is that the call for social behaviour sounds at best like pious middle class busybodyism and at worst like back door totalitarianism. When we talk about new social norms and behaviours, whose will these be? When citizens face so many taxes, laws, regulation and surveillance the last thing we need is to add another layer of demands, even if only enforced by soft incentives and the threat of social disapproval. This criticism combines concerns about the imposition of the values of the elite or the establishment with worries about authoritarianism or the further infantilising of the population

46. These are important issues but I think they can be addressed. Firstly we should remember that the alternative to one set of social norms isn't no norms, it is a different set of norms. For example, to argue that people should queues up for buses is to argue for one set of norms: fairness, politeness, respect, to replace the norms which otherwise prevail: the fastest, fittest and most aggressive have the 'right' to get on the bus first. If you refuse to do anything about cutting your carbon footprint you are obeying norms of individualism and materialism over those of sustainability and collective responsibility.

47. From a libertarian perspective norms must be preferable to laws. Norms are generally weaker in the power they have over behaviour but balancing this weakness is a converse strength. Norms can have an important impact in shaping the behaviour of the majority without having to infringe the freedom of everybody: think of the difference between eccentricity and criminality. Also, while laws usually have an all of nothing boundary between what is legal and what illegal with consequent problems of inflexibility and sometimes apparent arbitrariness, norms tend to be a continuum with our decisions on how to follow them placed in the situational context we find ourselves.

48. So, even if strong new expectations of social behaviour emerge not everyone will follow them. Dissenters may disagree with the aims, the methods, or just not be bothered to change their behaviour, and few of us live up to our best intentions all the time. Indeed those who constructively dissent from collective agreements and disobey norms may not always be wreckers but may instead be social innovators presaging the emergence of better ideas about social change. Collective actions and norms have a greater capacity to evolve than the rigidities and brittleness of laws. And even when some people dissent or opt out, if the majority (or even a sizable minority) change it could still make a noticeable impact on shared aims like tackling climate change, improving schooling or making the streets safer.

49. The argument that trying to shape norms is authoritarian may be rebuffed, but what about the idea that such a process is elitist, imposing the values of the powerful on those with quieter voices. This is important both from the perspective of justice and practicality. Trying to impose norms on people without their support may be wrong, it will certainly fail. When we develop pro-social strategies we must always remember that people have different lives, different priorities and different resources. It is easier for an educated, self confident English speaking parent to be active in their child's schooling than, say, a recent immigrant who had little formal education and has little English. Encouraging healthier lifestyles is easier with people used to the idea they are in control of their lives and who can afford to join a gym or buy a good pair of running shoes.

50. This is not only about those with power sympathising with those who have less. It is also about understanding and respecting the norms which exist in different communities (although not being afraid to talk openly when those conflict with the norms in the rest of society). Sometimes it could be about importing the norms

and behaviours of minority groups and seeking to import them into the rest of society. Take an example I heard from someone researching palliative care; there is a tradition in Afro-Caribbean culture that when someone is dying, their close family should gather round them able to see them and touch them. But in many NHS hospitals visitor rules mean that only one or two people can be at the bedside. Thus a benign social norm – that families offer support to each other and their dying relative at the end of their life (one that other parts of society might benefit from adopting) - is weakened by the imposition of a rule with limited medical and administrative benefits.

51. The most important response to the concern that new social behaviours and norms might feel like unwelcome, unrealistic and unsympathetic impositions is to return to the need to recast the content and form of the relationship between citizens, on the one hand, and politicians and public officials, on the other. Like all major social movements the momentum behind social behaviour must come as much or more from the bottom up (popular will) and the side in (spreading innovation and successful practice) as from the top down. Politicians may welcome pro-social behaviour and Government may be more likely to deliver its outcomes with it, but change from the top will only succeed if it comes as a response to ideas, demands and practices generated away from Whitehall and town hall. Pro-social strategy must involve a new type of debate in society, a new set of practices in politics and new ways of working in public services and making local decisions. Pro-social strategy therefore allies itself with three other sets of arguments: for participative forms of policy making, for devolved forms of decision making, and for co-productive forms of public service management.

52. In my opening words I said that this essay is a call to arms. I have described the elements of a pro-social strategy but I am also calling for a pro-social campaign. What might this involve? It is important to understand the nature of the challenge. The problem is not that we lack a philosophical framework to promote social behaviour; there is a rich literature in the social contract, communitarian and civic republican traditions of political philosophy. It is not that there is strong explicit political opposition to the idea; the argument between the political parties is not about whether to mobilise the efforts of citizens but how (which is not to say that the practice of politics or government often lives up to this rhetorical recognition). In opinion polls, focus groups and everyday conversation people understand the problem of a lack of social behaviour and are interested in solutions. The idea of engaging citizens as partners is

an inevitable element of any discussion of public service reform, tackling climate change, making communities stronger and renewing democracy and civic society.

53. It isn't that there is lack of new thinking in this area: the Government's Strategy Unit has commissioned and published work on how to influence public behaviour, the Department of Heath has also produced material on the scope of social marketing to influence lifestyle choices. Many of our leading social commentators – people like Ed Mayo at the National Consumer Council, Charlie Leadbeater of DEMOS, Geoff Mulgan at the Young Foundation - all regularly write and speak about user and citizen engagement and promote this type of innovation. There is a growing literature about how people can be persuaded to act in socially benign ways. In evaluations of initiatives like Sure Start and the New Deal for Communities there is a wealth of potential learning about how to mobilise individual and community efforts (and how not to do it). Indeed, dotted across the public and voluntary (and to a lesser extent private) sector are individuals who see the promotion of citizen engagement and social behaviour as intrinsic to their ways of working. Bringing together the commitment and knowledge of these people is a crucial aspect of a social behaviour strategy

54. But yet despite all this, do our mainstream public services yet feel like co-productions between providers and citizens, are we doing enough as citizens to tackle climate change, are we voting and participating in local decision making, are diverse communities spending more time integrating and solving problems together? And in the way we think about social change and relate to politics aren't we are still a long way from a citizen-centric democracy?

55. In my closing comments I want to explore what the RSA might hope to ensure that the signs of change I alluded to at the outset coalesce into a deeper and wider cultural shift. If we are to achieve the kind of shift in thinking, language, and practice implied by the idea of citizen-centric democracy it will take debate and action at many levels and it will involves combining two virtues which wrongly tend to be seen as opposites; patience and creativity. This is not about generating a set of recommendations for Government (although that might be part of it), it is not simply a debate among the chattering classes, the momentum needed will not come through isolated bits of good practice however commendable each is. It involves all this and more. The aim of the RSA is not to colonise this territory but to act as a focus, a hub and a rallying point for those who share at least

some of our analysis and vision. Achieving a tipping point will involve making progress in several different areas. I outline these below.

56. In politics and social activism successfully defining the problem is prior to, and more powerful than, persuading people of the right answer. Pro-social strategy needs a convincing and attention grabbing account of why social progress relies on the development of new voluntary behaviours and social norms. Ironically, the challenge may be that this view is so easy to support that it doesn't engage people or get adequately probed. So we need to test out the idea in relation to specific challenges. For example, I argued above that individual voluntary action is essential to meeting carbon reduction targets. Is this true? Isn't it really down to the actions of Governments and big business? Could putting too much emphasis on shaping citizens' behaviour gives us a warm feeling while allowing us to allow our Government to duck the tough fiscal and regulatory choices that would really make a difference? Doctors, teachers and police officers may feel obliged to say they need the engagement and help of citizens but do they really? One response to the pro-social argument is 'I don't want to be engaged in social change or to be a partner in services; that's why I pay my taxes'. Is pro-social behaviour primarily a functional answer to a problem of social outcomes (inadequate public services, rising carbon emissions) or part of a more idealistic attempt to create an engaged citizenry who understand that with the right of social influence must come the expectation of social participation?

57. New concepts and language are important to shaping the way opinion formers, decision makers and citizens themselves think about the challenge and scope of social behaviour. Sometimes new concepts are grounded in exhaustive research – for example Robert Puttnam's popularisation of 'social capital' – other times they are an intuitive leap which pulls together a set of trends in a single concept – for example the idea of 'Web 2.0'. There is the danger that concepts enter the political bloodstream despite lacking sufficient clarity about what they mean and how they help; arguably this has been the case with 'social exclusion'. It may be that the concepts I have used in this essay – 'citizen-centric', 'social norms', 'pro-social' are too broad or imprecise. Might there be better ways of capturing or developing the idea, does it have to be broken down into its different applications? How can ideas as disparate as new narratives of democratic decision making and changing the way that doctors, teachers

and police officers operate be usefully corralled under the same conceptual umbrella?

58. Developing a new vocabulary of pro-social behaviour would aim to change the everyday framing of debate about social and political change; for example my suggestion of replacing the 'us and them' of political discourse with the three us's. This could mean applying a consistent and compelling critique of the way politicians talk, the media reports and interest groups make complaints and demands (just as happened with the equalities movement). Politics at all levels is about issue entrepreneurialism, the process whereby activists spot, define, articulate and organise around an issue. What happens to politics if one consistently redefines the big issue from; 'what should they be made to do for us' to 'what should we decide to do for ourselves'?

59. Building networks is a horizontal and vertical process. Vertically it involves connecting the many practitioners who are seeking to develop more co-operative and reciprocal ways of working with people to the champions of this approach in academia, think tanks the media and mainstream politics. The practitioners get to place their work in a broader political and intellectual context while the theorists and campaigners get to ground their ideas, to understand the concrete barriers to progress and to furnish their arguments with powerful case studies. Horizontally, networking is about finding threads and laying trails to connect the aims and principles of disparate activities which share a commitment to pro-social behaviour principles. This is not only about connecting people in different parts of the country (and world): the silos that can exist within the public services and between the public sector, voluntary and community sector means that people working in the same town or city can remain unaware of the local potential for collaboration and mutual support (we would hope here to develop a role for the RSA Fellowship as a local rallying point).

60. Networks provide the grid over which news of innovation and learning can travel. The task of identifying credible examples of successful and progressive norm and behaviour shaping is vital if the idea of social behaviour is to capture people's imagination. It is all very well to argue that schools could do more to create the expectation from parents that they get involved in their child's education and in supporting the school, but where has it been done, was it worth the effort, did it endure past the first flush of enthusiasm? Have 'Respect' partnerships to tackle anti-social behaviour really engaged the community and changed their

sense of what is appropriate or unacceptable in the community? What can we learn from the most successful examples of attempts in other countries to engage citizens in major changes in attitude and behaviour; for example, how important was this in the public health and fitness revolution in Finland?

61. It would be good also to explore more high profile demonstration projects with the potential to achieve a breakthrough into media and public awareness. One idea is to work in depth in a city, town or neighbourhood to develop a set of voluntary measures that citizens agree are reasonable and will lead to a tangible improvement in local quality of life. The aim would be to see whether such a process can grab the imagination of local people and then to test whether an agreement of this sort will actually change behaviour over a reasonable time frame. There have been other similar experiments at home and abroad (for example the BBC's 'Making Slough Happy' project) so useful lessons can be learnt before embarking on a project where success could be very powerful and failure very public.

62. In the late 90s as the internet became an everyday part of our lives many of its pioneers foresaw the web transforming the way we do democracy and promising a flowering of new forms of community activism. While it would be unfair to say there has been no progress or innovation, these early hopes remain largely unfulfilled. Most attempts by public authorities to use the web simply involved putting existing information and processes on-line. The communication model has been vertical and mainly downward. There have been major advances in some areas of service – for example, drivers' licenses, fine payment and tax form-filling but whilst they improve the service it does not alter the relationship of citizen to government or citizen to citizen. After a series of inconclusive reports and meetings the Government quietly shut down its work stream on e-democracy. Despite 10 Downing Street being remarkably innovative in using web based means to try to connect the Prime Minister to the people, overall responsibility for what is termed 'digital strategy' has fallen between the Departmental cracks. There is good practice in local government but even here the buzz of expectation that the web would revivify local democracy and spur a new wave of community activism has subsided.

63. Social behaviour strategy needs to revive the idealism and pioneering spirit of a decade ago. With the emergence of 'Web 2.0' come many new possibilities. Whilst 'Web 1.0' was primarily about stretching and speeding up existing relationships (seller-buyer, provider-recipient, consulter-consulted) Web 2.0 sees users

themselves take ever more control. This is not just user generated content, but about applications which evolve around the views and needs of users. As one description puts it Web 1.0 is exemplified by Britannica On-line, while Web 2.0 sees the emergence of the wiki, a collectively constructed and continually evolving source of information. So while Web 1.0 offers to make us and them engagement and mobilisation more effective, Web 2.0 provides a framework for the emergence of us and us dialogue and action. In on-line social networking, virtual reality gaming, open access product and process development there is surely a wealth of ideas that could be applied to the aims of pro-social strategy?

64. The emergence of new on-line tools for decision making and social mobilisation will be one sign that the idea of citizen-centric democracy is taking root. But if norms and behaviours are really to change as a result of a new democratic discourse it will require much wider institutional reform. Social behaviour will not simply be able to be bolted on the ways that our democratic institutions, public bodies and services currently operate (this has been precisely why so many attempts at citizen engagement have fallen flat). So as our thinking develops we need to imagine new more participative and adaptive institutions and processes.

65. The transformation of our national infrastructure in the nineteenth century required the spread of new institutions – from joint stock companies to local authorities. Similarly, the emergence of the universal welfare state in the twentieth century required the institutional capacity of the modern nation state. Now we need the emergence of a new democratic and social infrastructure which enables citizens to be the architects and builders of the future we want.