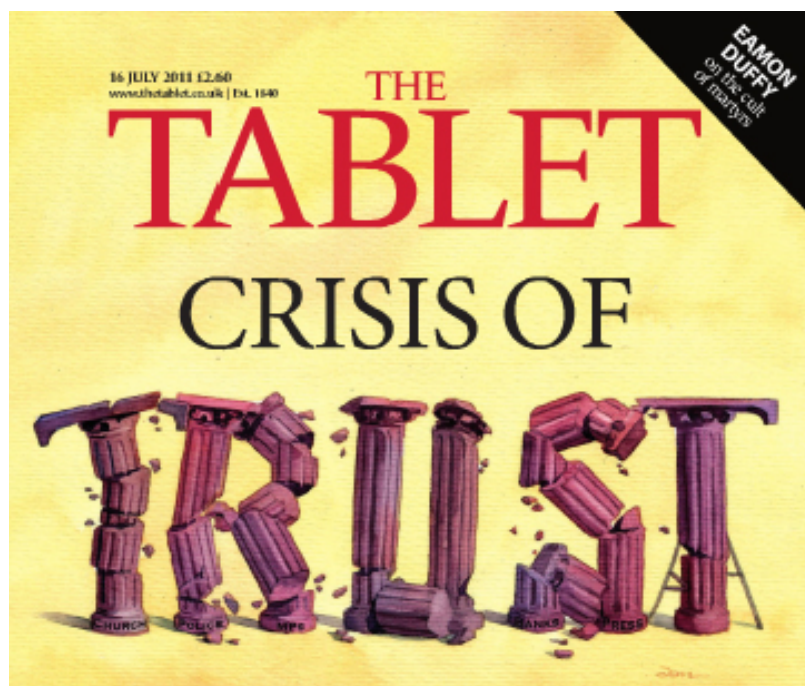


## This moral desert

## This moral desert



Opposition and media made great play of the fact that the Prime Minister was not in the House of Commons on Monday to address the issues arising from the misconduct of the News of the World, which died of shame the day before. He was making a speech elsewhere on the subject of his Big Society initiative, leaving the Culture, Media and Sport Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, to face the parliamentary music. He was seen to be fiddling, as it were, while Rome burned. Though neither his critics nor David Cameron may have been fully aware of it, however, there is a strong link between the violation of trust that is the moral centre of the storm raging round News International, the News of the World's owners, and what Mr Cameron is attempting to achieve through his Big Society idea. It is mainly by the revival of civil society, and the intermediate institutions that constitute it, that the sharp decline of trust – trust in the media, in politics, finance, the police, the Church, the health service and many other areas – will be reversed.

The fact that Catholic Social Teaching has something solid and significant to say about such contemporary crises as these shows how much it has come of age. This derives from the fruitful dialogue in recent years between the guardians of the social teaching tradition and the secular social sciences, in this case channelled through the Pontifical Council for Social Sciences. As a result, what the social scientists have to say about trust, as a key ingredient in the ecology of a sound society, is very similar to what the Church has had to say, for instance in Pope Benedict's 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. There is a similar parallel in economics and social philosophy. Many secular economists, particularly those outside the so-called mainstream, have analysed the financial and economic crisis that began in 2008 in similar terms to the analysis offered in that encyclical. In both discussions, the concept of trust lies at the core.

As Pope Benedict writes: “If the market is governed solely by the principle of the equivalence in value of exchanged goods, it cannot produce the social cohesion that it requires in order to function well. Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfil its proper economic function. And today it is this trust which has ceased to exist, and the loss of trust is a grave loss” (Caritas in Veritate 35).

### **Profit at any cost**

It was not just the loss of trust but trust misplaced that lay at the heart of the economic crisis; the assumption, for instance, that venerable banking institutions in London and New York could be relied on to behave with integrity when they had internally abandoned any such principles. Instead of “my word is my bond”, the cry was “profit at any cost”. Too many Members of Parliament had been trusted to make honest claims for expenses. But they had somehow assumed that as long as they remained within what they thought were the rules, written and unwritten, they could take whatever they wanted. Families placed vulnerable relatives in the care of health-service providers such as hospitals and residential homes, assuming that professions like medicine and nursing could be trusted to provide the care required while respecting their patients’ dignity and humanity. The Church, in particular the Catholic Church in Ireland, was guilty of a gross betrayal of trust when it failed to protect children from predatory child abusers among the clergy, as the Cloyne report, published this week, describes once more. The Metropolitan Police, meanwhile, will take a long time to recover from the damage to public confidence that will follow from the exposure of the inept and possibly even corrupt investigation into telephone hacking at the News of the World.

All these instances raise the question, to which Catholic social thought tries to provide an answer, of whether there is some structural or institutional factor, something deeply rooted in modern culture, at work in each of them. Attention is rightly focused on the role played by post-Enlightenment secular individualism. This strengthens the notion that an individual’s right and duty is the pursuit of its own self-interest. In so far as this has a philosophical basis, this may lie in Adam Smith’s famous proposition that if each individual operating in a free-market system pursues his own interests or goals, an “invisible hand” will ensure their combined efforts go to the general benefit.

### **Exercising civic virtue**

But Adam Smith’s principle presumed not only that there would be physical capital – money – available to be invested in the market, but also social capital – trust, prudence, integrity – that would govern how people would behave morally. One of the points made by Caritas in Veritate is that an economic system driven purely by self-interest not only cannot be relied upon to provide a moral basis for economic activity, but will actively undermine it. This dominant cultural bias towards self-interested individualism has leaked from the domain of finance and economics into other areas of public life, often described by words like commodification, commercialisation and marketisation. This

contamination has happened in sport, for instance, and in the academic world, and certainly in the mass media.

Civil society requires trust but, unlike market economics, can also generate it. When people take responsibility for what happens in society for the sake of society itself and not out of narrow self-interest, they are exercising civic virtue. And virtue grows by being practised. Since Aristotle, it has been observed that it is by being courageous that a person becomes more courageous; by being prudent, more prudent; by being just, more just. Catholic social thought is beginning to stress the priority of virtue ethics over an excessive reliance on rules and regulations – though they have a necessary role. But rules imposed by government can create a moral desert, where the question “What is the right thing to do?” is replaced by “How far can you go?” or even “How do we avoid being caught?” That leads to results just as ethically empty, and ultimately just as perilous to the common good, as a purely profit-based economic system where the only question is “How do we make money out of this?”

A sustainable society based on trust needs a thriving network of intermediate institutions, answerable neither to government nor to market forces. They already exist, though they are often ignored or treated as secondary. A convincing programme to promote the Big Society would have to reverse that, so that it became clear that it was civil society itself, and not the state or the market, that provided the fundamental matrix within which the market and the state could then function. They would be at the service of civil society rather than its masters. Calling for each individual to behave more morally can easily become so much empty sermonising. A more moral society will come about only when it has changed its fundamental priorities.

The Tablet 16/07/11