

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 30

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 30 Monday 21st January 2019

Topic; Film “I, Daniel Blake” and Brexit update

The film “I, Daniel Blake” released some two years ago and shown in small cinemas, was shown on BBC TV and was subsequently available on Iplayer for much of January. As it deals with important current political issues in a compelling way group members were asked to watch on Iplayer and share their thoughts and reactions at our meeting

Summary

Some 20 members had watched to the film and all had strong opinions and reactions.

While all recognised that the film is a drama, not a documentary, most felt that it portrays some negative aspects of the welfare system that are uncomfortably close to reality.

Generally members agreed that in operating the welfare system the state should treat its “clients” in a way that respects their dignity as human beings and lead to outcomes based upon needs.

However there was considerable discussion around the appropriate extent of state welfare provision and the consequences of such provision.

Discussion

From a film critic viewpoint, members highlighted the scenes which had the most emotional impact for them. Often these were small details, Daniel running the mouse on the computer screen, the food bank scene where the can of tomatoes is torn open, the child needing shoes, the child speaking through the letterbox.

Members remembered these scenes vividly and commented on the ability of the producer to evoke powerful emotions through these seemingly trivial details.

Some of the more political issues raised were-

- Use and impact of technology. Absence of training, unfamiliarity with the equipment, lack of access to the equipment, incomprehension of the terminology all are barriers to access to the welfare system by its clients. These are not addressed adequately.
- Needs and entitlement. The welfare system is based on assessing entitlement based on some identified criteria, such as medical condition or efforts to find work. Consequently if there are genuine needs that do not fit within the criteria these are not recognised and receipt of welfare may be denied. The need remains and this may provoke undesired consequences. Responsiveness to genuine needs was felt to be an important feature of an effective welfare system.
- How far should the state go in supporting its citizens? A fundamental political question, with suggestions ranging from the view that a universal income should be provided by the state to the view that the citizen should support himself. The view that state provision is a disincentive to hard work and self betterment, that his own poverty is the citizen's own problem, that is life, and that consequently the bounds of the welfare system should be reduced was firmly held. The experience that a normal citizen can watch his life collapse around him, through job loss, divorce, illness and similar in combination led to support for the view that the state has a role in providing a safety net, from which its citizen can pull himself up and regain a normal life when he falls on hard times.
- Changed attitudes to poverty. The advent of the welfare state has caused attitudes to poverty to change. Those with means may now consider the relief of poverty to be the duty of the state. In previous times private attempts to alleviate poverty in often minor but useful ways were considered to be the duty and therefore the normal behaviour of a responsible and reasonably prosperous citizen.

The film provided an effective stimulus to an interesting discussion of these political issues.

Brexit November and January

Snap poll of members without discussion. There are three outcomes postulated.

November Number of responses to "Which do you **expect**?"

May's plan or close variant 6 No deal 9 No Brexit 2 (35%; 53%; 12%)

But to "Which would you **prefer**?"

May's plan or close variant 2 No deal 5 No Brexit 10 (12%; 29%; 59%)

January Number of responses to "Which do you **expect**?"

May's plan or close variant 8 No deal 4 No Brexit 6 (44%; 22%; 33%)

But to "Which would you **prefer**?"

May's plan or close variant 8 No deal 4 No Brexit 6 (44%; 22%; 33%)

Significant swing towards May's deal from both sides. Is this a portent?