

If the pandemic taught us anything, it is that 'care' has to be central to politics ^[1]

Care work, paid or unpaid, is mostly unsupported. For this to change, state institutions must themselves become caring

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EXCERPT

As we reflect on 2020, many tell us that it was a lost year, a year to forget. That's not quite how we see things. What has been invaluable about the past 10 catastrophic months is that this pandemic has brought the issue of care to the very centre of public discussion. This very old word is newly fashionable, and with some unexpected twists.

We have always undervalued the work of care. Historically, most hands-on caring has been marginalised as women's "unproductive" housework or, more recently, offloaded as underpaid work, largely shouldered by precarious, often immigrant workers. Sexism combines with racism to further devalue this vital work. Decades of welfare cuts followed by the savage austerity policies initiated in 2010 have produced a lack of adequate care provision now evident at every level in British life, from cradle to grave.

Cuts to the NHS, its selective privatisation and the removal of nursing bursaries had already left massive shortages of hospital beds, doctors and nurses. It's why we have seen such uneven infection rates and exceptionally high mortality levels throughout this pandemic – more than double that of Germany. As Richard Horton, the editor of the *Lancet*, noted, Britain was already "the sick man of Europe" well before Covid-19 appeared.

This is why, in 2017, five of us from differing academic backgrounds formed the Care Collective, and wrote *The Care Manifesto* to highlight just how uncaring our society has become. The ongoing calamity of social care, especially for the disabled and elderly, is merely the nadir of this systemic carelessness. With public services weakened or outsourced, often to global corporations, paid care workers are themselves facing intolerable and precarious working conditions, curtailing any continuity of care. The resulting provision often mocks the very name of care, with so little security for either the cared-for or the care workers.

Meanwhile, many corporations have been busy promoting themselves as caring through numerous "carewashing" and "coronawashing" campaigns. Others have been making massive profits from outsourced "care" and, more recently, failing test and trace systems. Combating such systemic carelessness requires a radical approach: we must begin to place care and wellbeing at the centre of politics. This starts with expanding public health provision and empowering local communities to deal with our ongoing health emergencies, and continues with pioneering new ways of ensuring social and environmental wellbeing. In a growing global movement promoting radical municipalism, for example, we see councils pursuing approaches such as the "Preston model", seeking to insource hitherto outsourced local infrastructures, while offering support for alternative forms of ownership and economic cooperation.

Placing care at the heart of politics also requires us to recognise that "hands-on" care does not exist in a vacuum. The reason care is in such a multifaceted crisis today is because of the stubborn interconnectedness of everything around it. To be able to cook a nutritious meal for our loved ones, for instance, we need to have access to appropriate housing, kitchen equipment and ingredients sourced in our local (digital or physical) marketplace. Our vegetables may be locally produced, fairly traded or, conversely, unfairly traded and at risk of relying upon extreme labour exploitation in their supply chain. Different forms of care in the home, on the street or at work are practically and structurally interconnected.

Working to create more caring communities requires that they be more democratic, too; forging a society where everyone feels their voices are being heard. It also requires collective engagement in making them heard, as opposed to indulging in consumerist, individualist and apolitical lifestyles. For example, whereas most accounts of "care economies" primarily (and narrowly) focus on workers in the care sector, a 2020 report by the Women's Budget Group also explicitly embraces broader issues of gender equality and environmental sustainability. Our manifesto argues for a truly capacious understanding of care, one that encompasses all the economic and ecological challenges feeding into it.

As we begin a new year, many of us are at last paying more heed to caring. But we have seen little material change. We clapped for carers and other essential workers, yet have seen no pay increases, better conditions or reduced working hours. Good caring, paid or unpaid, requires time, patience and flexibility, as well as ample support and resources – exactly what is usually lacking in unsupported home care

and a lot of marketised care. It is still mothers, for instance, who have been most over-burdened throughout this pandemic. For all this to change, we need state institutions and communities to themselves become caring, to help to nurture and enable all our capacity to give and receive care.

This is why we call for an expanded notion and language of care if we are ever to appreciate all that it really involves. “If you have the words, there’s always a chance that you’ll find the way,” as Seamus Heaney reflected. We are never outside the social, we are not the autonomous individuals some fantasise themselves to be. There is only interdependence in human existence, as we lean towards and upon each other, as well as on all that sustains the world we inhabit.

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