

REITH LECTURES 2009: A NEW CITIZENSHIP

Presenter: Professor Michael Sandel

Lecture 4: A New Politics of the Common Good

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SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to Washington D.C. Tonight, for the fourth and last of this year's BBC Reith Lectures, we're in the capital of the United States at the George Washington University.

Our subject, appropriately, is New Politics. Here in America, and in Britain too, the phrase 'New Politics' is on everyone's lips. Barack Obama is six months into his historic presidency, and the world is watching and waiting to see what changes to the world's problems his new approach will bring. In Britain, revelations of how MPs spend public money to support their lifestyles has undermined the country's parliamentary system. Politicians in the public are calling for reform. It seems that the time is right for - as the title of our lecture has it - a New Politics of the Common Good. Ladies and gentlemen, will you please welcome the BBC Reith Lecturer for 2009: Professor Michael Sandel.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Michael, you said at the outset of these lectures that you might have been a politician, you might have been a political journalist. In fact, at the age of 21 - some time ago now, well in fact we can date it - you were present at the impeachment of Richard Nixon, were you not, in the role of the journalist. How come you were in such a pole position at such a young age?

MICHAEL SANDEL: Well I was very interested in politics and in political journalism and I was able, by sheer luck, to get an internship that summer in the Washington bureau of the Houston Chronicle. I'm not from Houston. I hadn't been there, and I still have never been to Houston. (LAUGHTER) But this was Washington in the summer of 1974 when the Supreme Court was hearing arguments over the Nixon tapes and whether he would have to give them over, and when the House Judiciary Committee was deliberating about the impeachment of Richard Nixon. It was a dream come true.

SUE LAWLEY: Indeed. And you were in that room, 35 years ago next month, when the vote was taken and he was impeached. Does the drama of that moment stay with you?

MICHAEL SANDEL: It does. The room, I remember powerfully, was hushed when they took that vote. It wasn't quite the way it was later when they impeached Bill Clinton when there was a partisan edge to it. There was a sense of constitutional moment and the members, as they called the roll, their voices trembled as they gave their votes - on both sides.

SUE LAWLEY: It's difficult to understand then, when you experienced the thrill of being absolutely at the heart of a story that was rocking the world, that you didn't carry on and become a journalist.

MICHAEL SANDEL: I was tempted, but at the end of the summer - and I was hoping that the impeachment would take its course in the Senate - but I soon had to go back to college, the term was about to begin, so I began hoping for a resignation, which was the only way I would see it to completion. And Richard Nixon obliged me. (LAUGHTER) He resigned just before I had to go back to college. At the end of the summer, I was talking with my boss, the bureau chief, about what an experience this had been. And he said - he was a man I suppose in his late 50s - he said that he was thinking of retiring because there would never be a story like this again. So I asked him, "Well you're thinking of retiring because it will never be this good again. What am I at age 21 supposed to think?" (LAUGHTER) I didn't wind up going into political journalism, but it was a fantastic summer.

SUE LAWLEY: And you didn't wind up becoming a politician either. You became a political philosopher. What would you say to people who said you took the easier option; that it's easier to be high-minded in theory than in practice?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I think that being in elective politics, being a politician is an extremely demanding job. And so for all of the shenanigans and misdeeds of politicians, I do think that they are engaged in what potentially is a noble exercise and they do, most of them, make great sacrifices to engage in it.

SUE LAWLEY: Well 35 years ago you were a cub reporter. We're looking forward to hearing what it is you've learned since then about politics and people. Michael, the floor is yours.

(APPLAUSE)

MICHAEL SANDEL: Well thank you, Sue, very much. It's a great pleasure to be here for this fourth Reith Lecture.

Over the course of these lectures, I've been arguing that we need to reframe the terms of political

argument in two ways. First, we need a public debate about the moral limits of markets. And, second, we need a more robust public discourse - one that engages more directly with moral and even spiritual questions.

In this lecture, I'll try to connect these themes and show how they can form the starting point for a new politics of the common good.

First, markets. For three decades, the governing philosophy of the United States and Britain was defined by the faith that markets are the primary instrument for achieving the public good. The financial crisis has put this faith in question.. The era of market triumphalism has come to an end. But we have yet to find our way to a new governing philosophy. Even President Obama has yet to articulate one.

One obstacle to a new public philosophy is a persisting assumption from the age of market faith. It's what I'd like to call "market mimicking governance." It's the idea that the primary purpose of government is to correct what economists call "market failure".

It's the idea that government should try to replicate the outcomes that competitive markets *would* produce if all goods and resources were properly priced.

Consider environmental policy. If air and water are "free" - that is unpriced - then companies and consumers will produce too much pollution. So government's job is to set regulations to correct for this market failure - through cap and trade, for example, or a carbon tax.

To do this, the policymakers have to ask how much pollution is too much. And to answer this question, they have to figure out what *value* to place on clean air, clean water, and the resulting health benefits. Here's where "market-mimicking governance" comes into play. In order to make these calculations, regulators often use "cost-benefit analysis": they place a monetary value on the benefits of clean air and water, compare them with the costs, and set regulations accordingly.

It sounds perfectly sensible. What's wrong with comparing the costs and benefits of government regulation? Nothing - if by comparing costs and benefits you simply mean assessing the advantages and disadvantages of a given policy.

But cost-benefit analysis aspires to scientific rigour. It tries to assign a monetary value to costs and benefits. It tries to mimic the market. And here's where it goes wrong. Many of the benefits of public policy involve values that can't be captured in monetary terms - most notably, the value of human life. Let me offer a few examples.

The first involves smoking. In the Czech Republic, many people smoke. Philip Morris, the tobacco company, sells a lot of cigarettes there. Some years ago, the Czech government considered raising taxes on cigarettes. Philip Morris wasn't happy about this. So the company commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of the effects of smoking on the Czech national budget.

The study found that the government actually makes more money than it loses from smoking. Although it's true that smokers impose higher medical costs on the budget, while they are alive, they die early and so save the government considerable sums in pensions, housing, and healthcare for the elderly. (LAUGHTER) According to the study, the so-called "positive effects" of smoking, once taken into account, lead to a net gain to the Czech treasury of \$147 million per year. So lung cancer, it turns out, has its fiscal advantages.

Now you might say that the cost-benefit analysis, callous though it was, was simply incomplete; it failed to calculate the cost - to the smokers - of their early and painful demise. But how might such costs be calculated?

A few years ago, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tried to do this. In presenting a cost-benefit analysis of new air pollution standards, the agency assigned a monetary value to human life: \$3.7 million per life saved, except for people over the age of 70 whose lives were valued at \$2.3 million. Lying behind the different valuations was a market-mimicking assumption: younger people, with more years still to live, would presumably pay more to save *their* lives than older people would pay to save *theirs*. Advocates for the elderly didn't see it that way. They bitterly protested the "senior citizen discount". (LAUGHTER)

The difficulty of placing a monetary value on human life and other non-market goods is one problem with cost-benefit analysis. Another is that monetising all costs and benefits makes for a spurious science that shifts decision-making from democratic politics to technocrats.

Consider cell phones: should it be illegal to talk on the phone while driving? A few years ago, the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis did a cost-benefit analysis to find out. It concluded that crashes caused by cell phone use while driving cost about \$43 billion per year in medical costs and loss of life. A sizeable sum. But the study found, by strange coincidence, that the economic benefits of cell phone use while driving *also* amounted to \$43 billion, making it a break-even proposition. (LAUGHTER)

But if you look at the assumptions behind the numbers, you find that they are hardly scientific. The study assumes that cell phones cause 2600 deaths per year. But it admits that the actual number of such deaths per year is somewhere between 800 and 8,000! So depending on which number you choose, the benefits of a ban on cell phones while driving is either \$9 billion or \$193 billion per year! Or maybe somewhere in between. So there's nothing scientific to the conclusion that the costs and benefits of cell phone use while driving are equal. The market-mimicking calculus is no better than a hunch.

An even better example of the spurious science of cost-benefit analysis is one offered by Richard Posner, a prominent U.S. legal scholar and judge and the founder of the law and economics movement. Posner analysed the costs and benefits of a powerful particle accelerator built at Brookhaven, Long Island, a federal research facility. He wanted to weigh the benefits of the research against the very slight but rather alarming risk that the particle accelerator would destroy the earth. Posner estimated the value of the research to be \$250 million per year, and the risk that the thing would destroy the earth to be one in ten million. To decide whether it was worth it, he assigned a monetary value to the potential extinction of the human race - (LAUGHTER) \$600 trillion dollars. Doing the math, he calculated that the cost of the project outweighed the benefit by \$100 million. And so, he concluded, it shouldn't be built. (LAUGHTER)

Cost-benefit analysis is one instance of what I'm calling "market-mimicking governance." It's objectionable on two grounds: First, it puts a price tag on goods - including human life - whose value can't be captured in monetary terms. Second, by claiming to be a *science* of public choice, it elevates technocratic decision-making at the expense of democratic deliberation.

But cost-benefit analysis is only one expression of market-mimicking governance. Another is the broader idea that the primary purpose of government is to correct for "market failure." Economists have long recognised that markets don't produce efficient outcomes in certain circumstances: when economic activity produces externalities (effects on third parties, such as pollution). Or when it would be impossible for a private company to collect payment from everyone who uses a service. These are classic market failures that require government intervention.

But the idea that correcting for market failure is the main rationale for government, that idea has emerged only recently. It was the way that centre left parties, on the defensive after the Reagan-Thatcher era, tried to restate the case for government. For a time, it seemed to succeed - with New Labour in the U.K. and with Bill Clinton and the New Democrats in the United States.

As a governing philosophy, however, the task of correcting market failures is too humble and too narrow. Democratic governance is radically devalued if reduced to the role of handmaiden to the market economy. Democracy is about more than fixing and tweaking and nudging incentives to make markets work better.

The purpose of markets is to organise productive activity, so as to maximise consumer welfare. But democratic governance is about much more than maximising GDP, or satisfying consumer preferences. It's also about seeking distributive justice; promoting the health of democratic institutions; and cultivating the solidarity, and sense of community, that democracy requires.

Market-mimicking governance - at its best - can satisfy us as consumers. But it can do nothing to make us democratic citizens.

Why then have we drifted - on both sides of the Atlantic - away from older traditions of solidarity and civic virtue and toward more market-oriented ways of conceiving public life?

The answer does not lie simply in the market fundamentalism of the Reagan-Thatcher years. Or in the heady economic times of the 1990s and the years before the crash.

Market-mimicking governance is appealing because it seems to offer a way of making political choices without making hard and controversial *moral* choices. It seems to be non-judgemental. So, for example, rather than engage in a morally charged debate about the proper way of valuing the environment, or about the attitudes toward nature we should try to cultivate - rather than do this, we try to set environmental policy by working from people's market preferences. So we ask people how much they would pay to save the spotted owl; or we try to determine the monetary value people implicitly place on their lives when they accept risky jobs. And then we crank the dollar value of human life - or of spotted owls - into a cost-benefit analysis, and we do the math.

Actually, *we* don't do the math. Experts and technocrats do it for us. The non-judgemental impulse is also an anti-democratic impulse. This brings me back to a theme that has run through these lectures. The attempt to empty politics of moral controversy may seem to be a way of respecting our differences, but it is actually corrosive of democratic life.

The flight from moral judgement and moral argument in politics predates the era of market triumphalism. It found expression - on both sides of the Atlantic - beginning in the 1950s and 60s, partly as a reaction against fascist and communist ideologies, and partly as an attempt to spare politics from becoming embroiled in religious strife. And it also reflected a growing faith in economics as a value-neutral science.

Harold Macmillan expressed this sensibility when he said in 1963: "If people want a sense of purpose, they should get it from their archbishop. They should certainly not get it from their politicians." And John F. Kennedy, a very different kind of politician, articulated a similar sentiment: "Most of the problems that we now face", Kennedy said in 1962, "are technical problems, are administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgements which do not lend

themselves to the great sort of ‘passionate movements’ which have stirred this country so often in the past.”

Kennedy was referring to the economy, not to the Civil Rights Movement - a passionate movement if ever there was one - in a powerful example of a morally-contentious and spiritually-inspired form of politics.

The renunciation of moral and religious argument in politics, in the decades following World War II, prepared the way for the market triumphalism of the past three decades.

But times have changed. The financial crisis has discredited market triumphalism in both its laissez-faire and Neoliberal versions. And the election of Barack Obama has given powerful expression to the hunger for a public life of larger meaning that engages more directly with moral and spiritual questions. All of which suggests that the time may be right for a new kind of politics - a politics of the common good.

What might such a politics look like? Unlike market-driven politics, a politics of the common good invites us to think of ourselves less as consumers, and more as citizens. Here’s why this matters. Market-mimicking governance takes people’s preferences as given and fixed. But when we deliberate as citizens, when we engage in democratic argument, the whole point of the activity is critically to reflect on our preferences, to question them, to challenge them, to enlarge them, to improve them.

Every successful movement of social or political reform has done more than change the law. It has also changed attitudes and dispositions, what Tocqueville called the “habits of the heart.”

Political leaders should bear this in mind when making the case for change. Consider health. Britain was able to create a taxpayer financed National Health System because of a widely shared sense of social solidarity that said access to health care should not depend on a person’s ability to pay. The United States has not yet been able to summon that solidarity. If President Obama succeeds in getting universal health care, it will not only be because people conclude that the present system is too costly and inefficient. It will happen if and when Americans are persuaded that providing for the health of *everyone* is among the mutual responsibilities of citizenship.

Consider the environment. If the countries of the world are able to change patterns of energy use and bring about a meaningful reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, it will not be because emissions trading schemes allow countries to buy and sell the right to pollute. Market mechanisms can be useful instruments. But real change will depend on changing people’s attitudes toward nature, and rethinking our responsibilities toward the planet we share. This is a moral and spiritual

project, not only an economic one.

Finally, consider an issue that doesn't get much attention in our politics these days: inequality. In the United States, as in most countries, the gap between rich and poor deepened during the decades of market triumphalism. Inequalities of income and wealth are now at levels not seen since the 1930s.

Politicians find it difficult to talk about inequality. Even Barack Obama's modest proposal to return income tax rates to where they stood in the 1990s prompted charges during the campaign that he was a dangerous socialist who wanted to spread the wealth. Part of the problem, I think, is that we tend to talk about inequality as if the problem were how to redistribute access to private consumption. But the real problem with inequality lies in the damage it does to the civic project, to the common good.

Here's why. Too great a gap between rich and poor undermines the solidarity that democratic citizenship requires. As inequality deepens, rich and poor live increasingly separate lives. The affluent send their children to private schools (or to public schools, as we call them in the United States) in wealthy suburbs, leaving urban public schools to the children of families who have no alternative. A similar trend leads to the withdrawal by the privileged from other public institutions and facilities. Private health clubs replace municipal recreation centres and swimming pools. Affluent residential communities hire private security guards and rely less on public police protection. A second or third car removes the need to rely on public transportation. And so on.

This trend has two bad effects: one fiscal, the other civic. First, public services deteriorate as those who no longer use them become less willing to support them with their taxes. Second, public institutions such as schools, parks, playgrounds and community centres cease to be places where citizens from different walks of life encounter one another. Institutions that once gathered people together and served as informal schools of civic virtue have become few and far between. The hollowing out of the public realm makes it difficult to cultivate the sense of community that democratic citizenship requires.

So rather than focus on access to private consumption, a politics of the common good would make the case for rebuilding the infrastructure of civic life; public schools to which rich and poor alike would want to send their children; public transportation systems reliable enough to attract commuters from all walks of life; public health clinics, playgrounds, parks, recreation centres, libraries and museums that would, ideally at least, draw people out of their gated communities and into the common spaces of a shared democratic citizenship.

In the course of these lectures, I've argued for a greater role for a moral argument in public life, and

for the need to keep markets in their place. I would like to conclude by anticipating one possible objection. The distinguished economist Kenneth Arrow once wrote - and I quote: *Like many economists, I do not want to rely too heavily on substituting ethics for self-interest. I think it is best on the whole that the requirement of ethical behaviour be confined to those circumstances where the price system breaks down. We do not wish, he said, to use up recklessly the scarce resources of altruistic motivation.*

The notion that ethics, altruism and fellow-feeling are scarce resources, whose supply is fixed once and for all and depleted with use, this idea seems to me outlandish - outlandish but deeply influential. My aim in these lectures has been to call this idea into question. I've tried to suggest that the virtues of democratic life - community, solidarity, trust, civic friendship - these virtues are not like commodities that are depleted with use. They are rather like muscles that develop and grow stronger with exercise.

A politics of moral and civic renewal depends, it seems to me, on a more strenuous exercise of these civic virtues. Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Michael Sandel, thank you very much indeed. I'm now going to invite questions from the audience here at George Washington University. I want to begin with a student here at the George Washington University. His name is Brandon Heinz and he's Chairman of the Republican Group.

BRANDSON HEINZ: You say we have a choice between being consumers and citizens, and that now is the time for us to be citizens because free market consumerism in your view has failed. Republicans believe this is a false choice. We are always citizens because we believe in America and what it represents - free market capitalism, the free exchange of ideas, and the freedom to choose your *own* destiny. Why does the only solution lie in the hands of government intervention and the invention of a state where more and more of its citizens rely on government?

MICHAEL SANDEL: Well I'm tempted to put a question back to Brandon. Am I allowed to do that?

SUE LAWLEY: You can do that.

MICHAEL SANDEL: Do you think, Brandon, that the freedom of the citizen is realised in market relations, or do you think that it requires a stronger civic engagement?

BRANDON HEINZ: I believe that the choice between being a consumer and a citizen is a false choice. I think it's both: you have to be a citizen but you're also a consumer, and you have that right to choose your own destiny as an entrepreneur or whatever you choose to be in our system. And that's what is different about every other country on the face of the planet, in my opinion - is that you can come here with *nothing* and you have the freedom to choose your own destiny and to go out and pursue your dreams.

MICHAEL SANDEL: I think actually pursuing one's dreams, that is a larger freedom than merely consumerist or market freedom. I'm not sure I would agree that only in the United States are people free to pursue their dreams. But I would say that that way of describing your ideal of freedom does begin to take us to a larger moral vision that may be not identical to the one that I've been proposing, but it does take one important step away from the idea that all freedom consists in is the right to be a consumer in the marketplace.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to call in now Toby Harnden, if I may, just up there. He is the U.S. Editor of the Daily Telegraph.

TOBY HARNDEN: The MP scandal in the UK has prompted a desire for a new kind of politics, and I feel there's the same desire here in the U.S. but also the same widespread dissatisfaction with politicians. How do you change the politics without changing the politicians? And if you can't do that, how do you change the politicians?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I think that you have to try to change both - so you need reform to clean up the kind of corruption that your newspaper exposed in Britain, but that's not sufficient, I don't think. If you cleaned up the system of expenses, that would not be enough to answer the public desire for a kind of political argument and debate that really addresses the things that they care about most. It wouldn't. Which is why one has also to attend to what I've here called the terms of political discourse, the shape of the political agenda, the way we argue about politics.

SUE LAWLEY: I can see E.J. Dionne. He is of course the Washington Post journalist and political commentator.

E.J. DIONNE: Well I just want to come back by going to the part of your lecture where you talked about the role of expertise.

MICHAEL SANDEL: Right.

E.J. DIONNE: And while it's easy to make fun of cost-benefit analysis that involves the destruction of the entire planet, I'd like you to talk about where is expertise legitimately used in a democratic society and what is the role of experts to inform this democratic choice?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I think that in so far as experts exert influence and authority, they have a responsibility and public institutions should encourage that the experts themselves be participants in public deliberation about those questions. So that they're not just people in a back room cranking out cost-benefit analysis calculations, but that the experts themselves - be they scientists or economists, whomever they may be - join in a public debate, argument, and not only answer questions but address challenges that may be put to them by their fellow citizens.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to move on. I'm going to call Stuart Butler.

STUART BUTLER: I direct research at an institution here called the Heritage Foundation. My reaction to your lecture was while I agree very much with your emphasis on solidarity, on the way we think about politics, I think you set up somewhat of a straw man in suggesting that it's sort of either that or markets, or that we've gone through an era where markets in some way have pushed aside these other important ways of looking at politics. Markets I think come into the picture more as a tool, as a factor in how we think about these things. When we look at something like education, markets enter the picture as an argument that in fact the public institutions here have let down the very people they were supposed to serve and that we can use forms of markets of choice, of empowerment with financial power to beef up these institutions, to force them to do the job that they were supposed to do that they've not been doing.

SUE LAWLEY: Okay. Michael, comment on that?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I certainly agree that markets can be effective mechanisms. The challenge for democratic politics is to keep markets in their place. Where we may *disagree* is in the estimation of the extent to which markets have reached beyond their proper role over the last few decades. In the war in Iraq, to take one very conspicuous example, by 2007 there were more private military contractors in Iraq than there were U.S. military troops. Now that may or may not be a good thing. My point is we never had a debate about whether we wanted to outsource war to private, paid military contractors or not, and yet it happened. And that is fateful for the condition of a democracy. We never had that debate.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to bring in Robin Sproul next. She is the Bureau Chief of ABC News here in Washington.

ROBIN SPROUL: Thank you. Professor Sandel, since the 1960s American public discourse has

often been quite divisive - particularly over issues like abortion, same sex marriage, evolution versus creationism - which has led us to this you're with us or you're against us political mentality. And I'm curious how you think we can move beyond some of those divides towards a more civil discourse, and do you think we *need* to in this country?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I do think we need to, and I think the way to do it is actually to be more willing to engage, to listen, and even to argue about the competing moral and religious convictions that citizens bring to public life.

SUE LAWLEY: Where is Maeve Duggan? You're a student here at George Washington University.

MAEVE DUGGAN: My question is do you think that this attitude of politics for the common good can really be reconciled with this economic crisis and market-mimicking governance because really innovation comes not in times of necessity but in times of peace when all of your basic needs are met?

MICHAEL SANDEL: Alright, it's a really good question. I'm not sure I agree with the last bit because sometimes political innovation and change can come about during times of great pressing necessity. Think of FDR and the New Deal, for example. I do think there does seem to be a lack of fit, or at least a tension, between the promise of moral and civic renewal that so moved the country during the Obama campaign and dealing with the financial crisis essentially by trying to give enticements and subsidies to the same investment bankers who had gotten us into this mess. So I do think that you are right to point to this way in which the treasury and the administration went about trying to use private markets to solve a credit crisis, which may or may not work.

SUE LAWLEY: We've moved back towards politics and we have, I see in our audience here, Tom Friedman, the author and Pulitzer prize-winning journalist. Mr Friedman, your question if you would?

TOM FRIEDMAN: In many ways, the Bill Clinton-Tony Blair Third Way Neoliberal model was kind of Thatcherism-Reaganism lite, and by the previous questioner one might wonder whether President Obama really is following that path. Do you think he really is in the Clinton-Blair mould ultimately? And if he isn't, what would be the sign? What would his approach to this financial crisis look like, from your point of view, if he were indeed a radical departure?

MICHAEL SANDEL: The jury is out on what the political identity of the Obama presidency will

ultimately be, and the handling of the financial crisis does give reason for pause, hesitation, and even, I would say, some concern. So what would another approach look like? Well some people say that nationalising the banks in the public interest would have been a better, more frontal, and ultimately simpler, cleaner way of doing it. It would have had one advantage, which would be to make explicit that the purpose here is the public purpose and however we resolve the financial crisis, we should do so in a way that minimises the unfair advantage to be enjoyed by bankers and investors whose conduct of their companies got us into this mess in the first place. And nationalising would at least send that message in a way that a complex, public-private partnership involving yet more leverage doesn't.

SUE LAWLEY: Tom Friedman?

TOM FRIEDMAN: Would you be ready to do that even if, just to be provocative, the experts told you that the net result would be a poorer society with less risk taking?

MICHAEL SANDEL: Whether I would trust those experts would partly depend on whether they, too, might not have been implicated in the deregulation that led to this problem. (LAUGHTER)

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to call Elliot Gerson.

ELLIOT GERSON: I wonder, Michael, what makes you think that market triumphalism is dying or has passed some kind of inflection point? I wonder if we really are seeing a change?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I think we're at a point where it could go either way, and what lessons we learn from this experience will go a long way toward shaping the political possibilities, including the possibility for a politics of the common good. That's the hope.

SUE LAWLEY: Michael, we talked just briefly earlier on about whether this was the right moment, whether the moment was ripe for change. And maybe do you feel that when people are uncomfortable and when the systems on which they have depended for so long suddenly collapse underneath them, is this an idea that's found its moment?

MICHAEL SANDEL: We'll have to see. I don't think that the financial crisis by itself is the primary source of hope for a more morally engaged public life. So much of political leadership on this level is in the doing. In 1932, when he ran for President, Franklin Roosevelt did not run on the platform of the New Deal. His platform was we have to balance the budget.

SUE LAWLEY: But great leaders seize that moment. Great leaders corral a feeling that's coming from the public as a whole, don't they? Whether it's Churchill in the Second World War, whether it was Lincoln after the Civil War, suddenly they are actually reflecting - corralling that emotion and reflecting it and putting it into operation. That's really what you're hoping, you're saying, is happening today?

MICHAEL SANDEL: Yes. And they rearticulate their purposes in governing vision. When the Civil War began, Lincoln's purpose was to save the union. Only later, after the enormous sacrifice at Gettysburg and elsewhere, did Lincoln redefine the purpose of the Civil War, which was now freedom, not union. So great leaders, they have to begin with a certain moral and political imagination and depth, but they deploy those resources and that creativity by articulating as they go, by making sense to the public the full measure of the meaning of the events as they unfold.

SUE LAWLEY: Michael Sandel, thank you very much indeed. Thank you for four lectures that have explored with great clarity and depth the moral issues implicit in many aspects of our everyday lives. They've provoked great interest and debate is surrounding them. It will undoubtedly go on. But for now, we finish. My thanks to our hosts here at George Washington University and to all of you who've either attended or listened to our programmes. From Washington and the BBC Reith Lectures 2009, goodbye.

(APPLAUSE)

MICHAEL SANDEL: Thank you.