

“It’s Doing the Right Thing”: David Cameron’s Rhetoric of Responsibility.

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“The change we need in our society, it’s not some sort of vague change, it’s based on a very clear principle, a very clear value of responsibility. We think the responsible society is the good society. We believe in standing up and helping those people who want to do the right thing, not the wrong thing.”
(DC, 28/02/2010)

This paper draws upon the research presented to PSA last year in which I outlined the basic structure of Cameron’s rhetoric regarding the need for a/the ‘Big Society’, what I called the “Underpants Gnomes” line of argument. This paper focuses in on one of the key rhetorical motifs to emerge from that analysis – the central role played by the concept of ‘responsibility’.

A Gnostic Argument

To briefly summarise the argument presented last time. The ‘Underparts Gnomes’ argument, taken from the TV show South Park, was the titular Gnomes’ business plan which ran along the lines: “Stage 1 Collect Underpants. Stage 2 ? Stage 3 Profit! As the Gnomes explain to the boys in the episode, they haven’t worked out what the middle stage is yet, but until they do they keep collecting underpants anyway.

Cameron’s own Gnostic argument goes as follows:

- Stage 1. Britain is Broken because it is irresponsible;
- Stage 2. Put in place Big Society;
- Stage 3. Britain is responsible and no longer broken.

To quickly reiterate this argument:

Britain, Cameron has repeatedly stated, is in various ways “**broken**” or has suffered a “**breakdown**” (e.g. DC, 26/05/2009; 08/10/2009; 22/01/2010; 27/04/2010). It is a theme which did not disappear with his election, making significant returns in speeches following the August 2011 riots (DC, 11/09/2011; 15/09/2011). The question for the Conservatives and country as a whole was/is therefore what caused this breakage – and how to cure it. Cameron’s answer is that **Britain became broken because of a lack of responsibility**, claiming in opposition that “when you spool back to the source of so many of our problems today, you’ll find the same cause: a lack of responsibility”; as “[a] lack of responsibility – and a low expectation of responsibility – have led us to our battered economy, our broken society our beleaguered public services – and our broken politics too” (DC, 11/05/09).

“Think of **any single subject**,” he told party members in the run-up to the election, “and it’s **all about the responsibility** we need to bring to our lives, to our country, to our communities” (DC, 10/04/2010) – describing a “tangible feeling that we have been slowly losing the value of responsibility in our society ... a sense that more and more people are less concerned about their responsibility to themselves, their duty to their family, their obligation to their community” (DC, 27/04/10). Similarly, after the aforementioned riots of 2011, the now Prime Minister spoke of “the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few decades” singling out “irresponsibility, selfishness” and “rights without responsibilities” as the cause (DC, 15/08/11).

This is where the **Big Society** comes in since, stripped to its essentials, what the Big Society means is the **return of responsibility**. As he himself has put it: “Big Society – that’s not just words. It is a guiding philosophy – a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control” (DC, 31/03/2010). Indeed, the term is often used interchangeably with the term “responsible society”, with Cameron talking of how his government will “help build a responsible society” (29/03/2009), that “building this responsible society is the avowed mission of the modern Conservative Party” (DC, 11/01/13), and this will mean “spread[ing] responsibility to every area of national life” (DC, 11/05/09). Or clearer still, in one of his first speeches as Prime Minister: “You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.” (DC, 19/07/2010)

Clearly then, “responsibility” is at the heart of Cameron’s expressed politics: **it is the “?” which turns underpants into money, or a broken Britain into a bigger, stronger Britain**. The rest of this paper looks at Cameron’s use of the concept in his speeches and how, rhetorically, it emphasises the *ethos* of his government, but more specifically of he, himself, personally, while playing a game of emotional blackmail by asking of and questioning the *ethos* of the voting public to support him – a dangerous game as here related.

Repetitive Responsibility

First, let’s really hammer home the significance role “responsibility” plays in Cameron’s rhetoric – looking initially at the sheer amount of times he deploys the concept.

In a speech given in the run-up to the 2010 General Election, David Cameron claimed that “the most important value in our country of all” was “a word that’s missing from this election, and that word is responsibility” (DC, 19/04/10). The idea that the word was ‘missing’ from the political discourse was hardly the case, however; in fact, the term had already been used by Cameron 79 times across the 16 speeches he made that year. But that is not all: across the four year between April 2009 to March 2013, David Cameron referred to “responsibility” positively or lambasted “irresponsibility” **375 times across 66 separate speeches** (an average of 5.7 times per speech). Within these 66 speeches there were 21 full sections labelled in devotion to the topic (see bibliography – not exhaustive).

The concept was applied broadly across a wide canvas of topics:

David Cameron has called for:

“personal responsibility”

“social responsibility”

“professional responsibility”

“moral responsibilities”

“civic responsibility”

“corporate responsibility”

“fiduciary responsibility”

“fiscal responsibility”

“economic responsibility”

“environmental responsibility”

“mutual responsibility”

and “shared responsibility”

He has also appealed to a

“responsible character”

“responsible individuals”

“responsible people”

“responsible parenting”

“responsible children”

“responsible adults”

“responsible politicians”

“responsible politics”

“responsible choices”

And called for

The aforementioned “responsible society”

“a responsibility agenda”

“a responsible country”

“a value of responsibility”

“a culture of responsibility”

“a sense of morality and responsibility”

“an ethic of responsibility”

“the principle of responsibility”

“the crucible of responsibility”

“the responsible majority” (x1 only)

As well as these ‘positives’, however, he has also pointed to ‘negatives’. Denouncing:

“moral irresponsibility”

“irresponsible behaviour”

“an irresponsible society”

“an irresponsible banking culture”

“the age of irresponsibility”

And identified an:

“epidemic of irresponsibility”

“I know I use that word a lot”, Cameron himself admitted, speaking a year into his period as Prime Minister (DC, 23/05/11). But if the repetition and broad application of the term wasn’t enough, Cameron has made a number of declarations which emphasise the point. To take 2009 alone: In March he stated simply that “Responsibility is what this [Conservative] Party is all about” (DC, 29/03/09) and in November of that year that “this emphasis on responsibility is absolutely vital” (DC, 10/11/2009). In May he told his audience that “Our vision for the country is based on one simple value: responsibility” (DC, 11/05/09), calling it “our central belief” (*ibid*) and claiming in another speech four days later “I want that word – responsibility – to be at the heart of everything a Conservative Government will do” (DC, 15/05/2009). How much so? All the way: “We are going to solve our problems with a stronger society. Stronger families. Stronger communities. A stronger country. **All** by rebuilding responsibility.” (DC, 08/10/2009)

In January 2010 he opened the election year by declared that “Responsibility is central to my beliefs, my politics, the change I want to bring to this country” (DC, 11/01/13). Indeed, it was more than a value or an end: as he declared in the final weeks of the election campaign, “an emphasis on responsibility” was a “method” (27/04/10) through which his Government would deliver its promised changes to society; and so it was that in his first speech as Prime Minister on the steps of Number 10 Downing Street, Cameron emphasised his aim was “to help try and build a more responsible society” (DC, 11/05/2010) – this, he summarise almost a year later, having been his party’s “promise at the election to the British people: we would bring responsibility back...” (DC, 01/04/11).

You get the point.

It is here we return to the Big Society and the need to fix broken, irresponsible Britain. But the manner in which Cameron has articulated his political vision around the concepts of responsibility and irresponsibility respectively, **creates a dilemma** for him in terms of how he should appeal to the electorate.

Cameron links **all** Britain’s problems to a lack of responsibility – this being what has caused the country’s “breakdown”. But where does responsibility sit for this irresponsibility? The dilemma here for Cameron is that it is never a vote winner to call the electorate responsible for the country’s problems, nor to tell the general public that they are responsible for solving the problems which their own irresponsibility has caused. Telling the voters “it’s up to *you* to solve the problems *you* caused” is not a necessarily celebrated campaign strategy. As Cameron noted in 2009: **“We need to confront Britain’s culture of irresponsibility and that will be hard to take for many people”** (DC, 08/10/09). This is only made worse, of course, when the person acting in this judgemental manner is a millionaire Etonian “posh-boy”...

Rhetorically, therefore, Cameron has to play a difficult game: identifying Britain’s problems as a lack of responsibility amongst the populous, without losing potential voters by labelling they themselves as irresponsible louts/tykes/plebs. To do so, he has developed an altruistic appeal to the electorate, interpolating them as guilty-parties who simultaneously have a victim status but nevertheless a simultaneous self-capacity to redeem themselves and thus society. Put shorter still: Cameron fudges

the question of just how responsible the public *really* are for their own individual and collective irresponsibility, but emphasises their actions to overcome this. There are two aspects to this rhetorical strategy.

The Government and Opposition

The first element involves classic appeals to *ethos*, at two levels of the political argument – the government/parties and general population. In the first Cameron's rhetoric defines his (and his party's) own positive character in opposition to his opponent's negative character.

Here, **Labour** are defined as the party of irresponsibility – literally *everything* they do/did is/was irresponsible (e.g. DC, 20a/04/2011a; 20b/04/2011). This is **Brown's Broken Britain** because, in Cameron's argument, it was Labour's "Big State" agenda whilst in power which caused the breakdown of responsibility which itself broke Britain. This is articulated as a direct causal linkage. To quote Cameron's 2009 conference speech (DC, 08/10/2009): "Why is our society broken? Because government got too big, did too much and undermined responsibility", "the worst thing about big government" being "the steady erosion of responsibility" whereby "big government irresponsibility" eroded "social responsibility" causing the subsequent breakdown:

"... a breakdown of all the things that are meant to keep us safe ... a complete breakdown of responsibility. A breakdown of morality ... A breakdown in community ... And a breakdown of our criminal justice system".

Across the board, Cameron stated, social institutions were "failing under the weight of big government targets and bureaucracy" which amounted to "time-wasting, money-draining, responsibility-sapping nonsense."

Developing this theme in front of a very different audience, in his Hugo Young lecture later that year Cameron described "**human kindness, generosity and imagination**" as being "steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state" with the result that "there is less expectation to take responsibility to work, to stand by the mother of your child, to achieve..." *et cetera* (DC, 10/11/09). Simply put, **Labour created the Big State and subsequently the public became irresponsible** as, in Cameron's words, the former "drained the lifeblood of a strong society – personal and social responsibility" (27/04/2010).

This rhetoric was significant in several regards. First, because it provides a simple all encompassing attack on Labour's *ethos* – the charge of irresponsibility *in everything they did* being one of the most devastating possible – while correspondingly, it provided not only a *logos* for the Conservative case (the 'Big Society' agenda explaining everything it did) but emphasised their own *ethos*: As he himself justified his government's austerity agenda:

"We're doing this because we have to, because you [Labour] left our economy in a complete shambles and we will never, ever let the British people forget that. We are doing our duty to our country and generations to come who don't need to be saddled with Labour's debts. We are making the necessary cuts in public spending. And we are going about these unavoidable cuts in spending in a way that is fair and responsible." (DC, 20b/04/2011)

Everything the Tories would and have done in government is thus responsible – everyone opposed (be they feckless skivers on benefits or shameless socialist who refuse to apologise) irresponsible. Every day, in every way, the Tories are *responsibly* "cleaning up the mess" of the last Labour

government's irresponsible politics. This is, naturally, a line which occurs again and again in Cameron's speeches – the examples are too numerous to mention here.

Hang on, whose responsibility was it again?

The second reason it is significant, is of a less simple, binary nature: This is how it positions the general public by identifying a semi-external agent as the “one to blame” for their own irresponsibility: “Labour tried to boss people around and undermined responsibility” (DC, 06/10/2010): i.e. It was the Big State created by Labour which led the public to become irresponsible. Hence, we have such statements from Cameron as the following from 2009:

“in Britain today a growing culture of rule-following, box-ticking and central prescription **robs** people of the chance to use their judgement or to take responsibility for making the right decision.”

And from the same speech:

“The rise in top-down cultural authoritarianism, combined with the steady growth in the size and scope of the state has **created** an entitlement culture where self-reliance and social responsibility are gradually **eroded** – to the point where **good people routinely do bad things.**” (DC, 26/05/2009)

Here it is the state which ‘robs’, ‘creates’ and ‘erodes’ and the public’s actions – against their *true* nature – the effect of state actions. Then, after the riots in 2011, we heard of how:

“For years we’ve had a [welfare] system that **encourages the worst in people** – that **incites** laziness, that **excuses** bad behaviour, that **erodes** self-discipline, that **discourages** hard work – above all that **drains** responsibility away from people.” (DC, 15/08/11)

Here it is the state which has agency over the public as it ‘encourages’, ‘incites’ and ‘drains’ from them. The same narrative was expressed by Cameron when speaking to health workers whose “responsibility has been **undermined**” because they have “had decisions taken away from [them], bureaucrats second-guessing [their] judgements, targets to nanny [their] every move.” (DC, 11/05/2009). Once again, their loss of professional responsibility was something **done** to them by Labour’s Big State.

Thus, while there may be bad in the public, it is the state which through its nannying draws, even *forces* it to come out. This is Cameron’s own ‘nannying’ message. His rather altruistic rhetoric articulates something of a structuralist position whereby the actors being addressed are excused as not *really* responsible for the injuries they caused, but instead themselves the injured party. Never mind “hugging hoodies”, rhetorically, Cameron is nanny to the national psyche.

Taking Responsibility for creating the Responsible Society

There is, however, a twist, related to the second aspect of this rhetorical strategy. If a structural explanation is presented as the reason for individual irresponsibility, when discussing how the latter is to be overcome the rhetoric shifts towards an agent-driven line of argument: the answer to overcoming irresponsibility is people *taking responsibility*. To quote Cameron: “The good society – the strong society – is built when people **choose**: as parents, as neighbours, as businesses – to act

responsibly” (DC, 29/03/2009). This active choosing necessitates a moment of **understanding** on the part of the public, as “a more responsible society, where people behave in a decent and civilised way” is one where those people “understand their obligations to others, to their neighbours, to their country” (DC, 29/03/2009). It is, in a phrase Cameron repeats across a number of speeches, about “doing the right thing” (DC, 11/01/2010; 22/02/2010; 28/02/2010; 25/06/2012).

In a way the Big Society – wherein people now ask not what the state can do for them, but what they can do on their own (DC, 08/10/2009) – is a way of forcing the people to be free, or at least responsible. As Cameron says, “The big society demands mass engagement: a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation. But how do we bring this about?” (DC, 10/11/09) The answer: “We should remember the basic rule: that when you give people responsibility, they behave responsibly.” (DC, 13/04/2010) **Here we segue back into the Big Society (i.e. the responsible society).** This is what it means for us to be “all in this together” – we *all* take responsibility for overcoming our current irresponsibility. As Cameron declared on the eve of election day, 2010: “The principle of responsibility; that we’re all in this together and we’ll never have a stronger society unless we live up to our own responsibilities” (04/05/2010); in power he declared: “We’ve got to do this in a way that is responsible and fair – that demonstrates we’re all in this together” (DC, 08/07/2010).

The British public will not have to do this alone, however, because the need to take responsibility is as true for the Government as agent as it is the people – and hence why all the government’s actions are responsible, being as they are aimed at ending irresponsibility – and part of this is about alleviating the aforementioned Big State structures. It is, thus, about ending such things what Cameron calls the “moral hazard in our welfare system – people **thinking** they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out” (DC, 15/08/2011), whereby government irresponsibility is nevertheless linked to the active taking of responsibility by the public also, their needing to “think” differently also. Solving the problem of societal irresponsibility thus cannot be solved by the state alone – but how much is it “*in this*” with “*all of us*”?

Appeals to a Public Ethos

Cameron faces a double bind here, as expressed in a speech in May 2011 (DC, 23/05/2011). First the problem is reiterated:

“The problem today is that a culture of responsibility is too often absent in our country. And we need to restore it.”

Then the agency of the public:

“Of course, this has to come from people.”

Then the state:

“But the government has a vital role to play – and we’re playing it.”

Then the ‘how’:

“To begin with, government has to send out the right signals.”

This is important, because what it points to is the centrality in **Cameron’s rhetoric of appeal to the public’s ethos as people Cameron “knows” want to be good.** It may have been lost, but people *do want it back*: “yes [responsibility] is a “burden” in that it requires commitment, but it is one that we

should actively want to undertake” (DC, 23/05/2011). This was stated at its clearest in January 2010 when the Tory leader declared:

“Responsibility is not a value that simply exists in the ether, or can be injected there by government – it is a value that can only find life and expression in the decisions and actions of individuals. To build a responsible society, we need responsible individuals. Now you might think that whether people are responsible or not is a matter of chance. **You might be a believer in good apples and bad apples. I am not.** With a pretty good canon of evidence behind me I would argue that while our innate personalities are part-shaped by genetic inheritance, our character can be learned. **There are things we can do to help build responsible character in people**” (DC, 11/01/2010)

So here is the government’s role – one steeped in the type of social engineering Conservatives famously dislike, but done without the heavy hand of the Big State and instead with an indirect form of hands-off **encouragement**. This is well expressed in the following quote:

“Government cannot legislate to change behaviour, but it is wrong to think the State is a bystander. Because people’s behaviour does not happen in a vacuum: it is affected by the rules government sets and how they are enforced, by the services governments provide and how they are delivered, and perhaps above all by the **signals** government sends about the kinds of behaviour that are **encouraged and rewarded...**” (DC, 15/08/11)

This message of a non-legislation, non-bystander engagement is as follows:

“We will use the state to help remake society by **encouraging** people to take responsibility for themselves and for one another.... A Conservative Government will send the clearest possible **signal** to everyone in Britain ... if you take responsibility, we will **back you**; if you aspire to a better life for you and your family, we will **support you**; if you play your part in building the big society, we will **reward you**.” (DC, 02/01/2010)

These rewards and encouragements – such that they are – will have the power to end our individual childish irresponsibility:

“to reverse our society’s **infantilisation** by **inviting** people to look to themselves, their communities and wider society for answers, instead of just the state. And above all to **encourage** people to behave responsibly, because they know that doing the right thing and taking responsibility will be recognised and will make a difference.” (DC, 26/05/2009)

To conclude, the guiding mantra of this indirect Samaritan is this:

“We need to put everything we do through a simple test. If it encourages irresponsibility, we shouldn’t do it. If it **encourages** responsibility, we should. (DC, 13/04/2010)

These ‘invitations’, ‘encouragements’, these ‘signals’ all link back nicely to the Government’s interest in **“nudge”** theory which was briefly so popular – and emphasises the small-state philosophy of his party. Cameron does provide a few more direct, tangible routes, however, which can be achieved without state-bureaucracy:

“the post-bureaucratic politics is ... about understanding that you can make doing the right thing more appealing through incentives like money. You can make it easier for people to do the right

thing by removing obstacles or hassles from their path. And you can apply gentle social pressure by making it clear to people that others – their friends and neighbours – are already doing the right thing.” (DC, 22/02/2010)

This ‘doing the right thing’, as noted already, is the basis of ‘responsibility’ for Cameron (see below also).

The issue here, once again, however, is that this leaves the Government open to taking the blame for continuing irresponsibility: i.e. if people aren’t taking responsibility, it’s because the Government isn’t encouraging them to do so enough! There’s an element where Cameron is still too scared to go all the way in rhetoric – or if he *does*, it isn’t for everyone. Arguably this is a message for the middle classes. For the ‘lower’ classes, there is a different one: for these people – the shirkers, the scroungers, those with the curtains drawn, etc. – **the Tory ‘invitation’ to government is a little like the Mafia’s, one that can’t be refused (or if it is, you’ll suffer deeply with the loss of benefits and security)**. This is a line of argument I want to develop further outside of this paper. Sticking now to the analysis set out above, what we have is rhetoric which soothes and calls upon the *ethos* of the public: it may not be *really* their fault they became irresponsible – the blame for that lies mainly with Labour’s Big State – but regaining their responsibility is their responsible (“doing the right thing”), that only the public can do, the government’s role being one of encouragement (all threats of punishment aside).

This hinders the Prime Minister, as the failure of the Big Society to be embraced can be seen as his government’s failure and a personal rebuke (last year I claimed that as a rhetoric, the Big Society was dead – the very next day Cameron announced a “Big Society Bank”. He’s been quiet recently, but I’ll risk nothing this time). Yet, this rhetoric of responsibility, in all its twists and turns, also works well for Cameron, whether or not the public rise to the occasion.

Conclusion: The Rhetoric of David Cameron, Prophet

To draw to a conclusion: The rhetoric of responsibility is everything for how the Prime Minister presents himself. Rhetorically, it includes an appeal to *pathos* – as when he declares his “great passion is building the Big Society” (DC, 19/07/2010; see also DC, 06/03/2011). The invocation of responsibility is also an appeal to *logos*, being the explanation, the method and the end-point of the politics Britain needs.

But at heart is all about his *ethos*. The repetitive rhetoric of responsibility emphasises is self-referential: by speaking of the need for responsibility, Cameron presents himself as responsible – a man of character – unlike those who oppose him (e.g. Labour). He is doing the right thing, doing the responsible thing – even the hard thing in telling the people hard truths about their own lack of responsibility. As he himself says: “what people ... need to know is that I will stand up for responsibility and thrift” (DC, 26/04/2009).

But it goes even further: through his rhetoric of responsibility Cameron presents himself as something of a prophet: Cameron has solved the riddle and found the cause of everything (as Douglas Adams of course must have realised, following the rule of three, the number of letters in a call for “responsibility, responsibility, responsibility” is **42**). Cameron has identified the irresponsibility in all of us which has broken Britain, he then promises to help lift this – much as he

has lifted the fog of irresponsibility from the people's eyes – through his encouragement and rewards bestowed. Having shown us the truth – repeatedly! – we can all see our irresponsibility and now accept his “invitation to [self-]government”, becoming responsible once more and thus repairing broken Britain. As he appealed to the general public before becoming Prime Minister:

“if we pull together, come together, work together - we will get through this together.
And when we look back we will say not that the government made it happen...
...not that the minister made it happen...
...but the businesswoman made it happen...
...the police officer made it happen...
...the father made it happen...
...the teacher made it happen.
You made it happen.” (DC, 08/10/2009)

This, Cameron promises will give us “the liberating and invigorating feeling of social responsibility” (DC, 22/02/2010). (But just in case this isn't enough of course – in case the chains are still too cosy – Cameron will kindly help by removing them also, as he cuts back the big state.)

Thus, David Cameron's appeal to his *ethos* becomes an appeal to the people's own *ethos*. Will they match up to him? This is a kind of emotional blackmail – if you do not support the government's plans, then you are irresponsible and you let down your neighbours (you're “not in this together” with everyone else). Cameron shows us our irresponsible ways and asks that, through our support for him, we recant. The irony here is, of course, that he himself has lived a life of pure irresponsibility: the wealthy “posh boy” and Bullingdon Club member. This may well explain the simplicity of his world view, where the answer to every problem is people just acting responsibly – and what the latter means “isn't complicated” (cf. DC, 10/10/2012). In one of the most telling of his quotes about the concept of responsibility, Cameron tells his audience:

“Some say it sounds too much like a theoretical concept that's hard to define and others complain that it just sounds like a burden on people: an obligatory thing we have to do. To me, the idea is simple. Responsibility is people doing the right thing – by themselves and each other. It is the essential quality of the good society – of a strong society. That's not theory – it's fact.” (DC, 23/05/2012)

So speaks David Cameron, Prime Minister and leader of the Underpants Gnomes: *Simples!*

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