

## The Courageous State: a review

Published: January 13, 2026, 4:18 am

---

The following review of The Courageous State was written by Martin Cloake, a journalist who I have spoken to often but never met. It [features on his web site, which I recommend](#):

*Over the years, I've seen plenty of 'where we stand' lists from left-leaning organisations. Many of which amount to little more than a list of slogans, and few seem to have much idea of how the objectives set out might realistically be achieved. And as times have changed, many of those wish lists have stayed uninspiringly familiar, often standing as little more than articles of faith to be hoped for with little confidence that they will ever be achieved. What's been needed for some time is a well-argued, rounded attempt to provide a complete view not only of what is needed to achieve a more progressive society, but why it is needed and how we might achieve it. Richard Murphy's new book *The Courageous State* more than adequately fills that gap.*

*I first came across Murphy's work on his [Tax Research UK](#) blog while I was covering financial news for [AOL Money](#). He writes clearly, argues directly and has a prodigious work rate. When he announced he'd been asked to draw his thoughts together in a book, I knew it would be a must read, and I haven't been disappointed. It is a vital book for our troubled times.*

Where Murphy immediately achieves more substance than such vacuous notions as The Third Way is by clearly setting out what the state should do. My entire adult life has been lived against a backdrop of attacks on the role of the state, with even the left buying in to them — something only in part caused by a lack of confidence sparked by the overly statist models of the former Eastern Bloc. Murphy does not just set out what a state should do, but what only a state can do. In doing so he turns many of the arguments of the last 30 years on their head. Instead of looking at what the state does badly, he looks at the nature of various sectors of the economy and asks if they can really be left to markets. And in the case of sectors such as education and health, he articulates an extremely clear argument about why markets in fact make those sectors worse.

His argument is for a Courageous State “populated by politicians who believe in the power of the office they hold” and who “believe that office exists for the state of the public good”. And he says, those politicians need to “believe they can commend the resources to fulfil this task”. Currently, he argues, we live under a cowardly state, one in which politicians — and this includes the last government as well the current one — do not believe the state can or even should have a role in providing for its people.

Having established the need for a Courageous State as something which can help people and societies fulfil their potential, he then sets out clearly why you need to back the proper operation of a taxation system in order to support it. In doing so, he demolishes the modern concept of “taxpayers’ money” — one that has been used to erode the role of the state in favour of supposed individual freedom. This “freedom”, he shows, is nothing of the sort — merely a concession to the growing power of corporations and finance capital.

Once the basis of the Courageous State has been established, and the reasons why it is needed have been established, Murphy sets out a new way of economic thinking. In it, he attempts to construct a framework in which the unpredictability of human behaviour, the need for personal as well as material development, and concepts such as greater benefit to society as a whole play a part. This is an attempt to counter those economic theories which attempt to present themselves as science, and which assume that all human behaviour is utterly predictable.

In the final third of the book, Murphy sets out the measures a Courageous State might take in order to achieve a better way of living. What’s striking about these measures, certainly to any veteran of the tortuous theoretical routes followed by much of the left over the years, is how straightforward and achievable they are. What’s more worrying is that what are essentially a set of radical social democratic suggestions are already being portrayed as extremist by the sirens of neoliberalism this book firmly sets itself against.

I found this a refreshing, uplifting read. One of many things that stands out is how neatly interwoven green economics is to the whole approach. The green approach is too often presented as an ‘other’ or a bolt-on to a set of progressive policies. Murphy’s view places concepts such as sustainability right at the heart of the progressive approach.

There’s little in here that any progressive should find difficult to agree with. And the strength and clarity of argument should also help to convince doubters of the wisdom of the progressive approach.

This is a timely book. While there’s plenty of opposition to our current direction of travel, there’s less agreement on how we construct an alternative. If I were to be charitable, I would say that the official opposition is not exactly living up to its billing. There are plenty of people in a number of organisations who have good ideas, and

there are plenty of encouraging signs such as the emergence of UK Uncut and the Occupy actions. But what's needed is something more solid to coalesce around. Murphy's *Courageous State* provides the opportunity to do just that. It's not a wish list, it's not prescriptive, it's an open, living vision of how we can put practical measures in place to secure a better world. Those who find it too radical will prove they are as incapable of providing any answers as those who decide it is insufficiently radical on certain points — picking it apart in order to open up yet more splits in a movement which sometimes seems to take the Pythons' Judean People's Front sketch as more of a guide to action than an observation.

The *Courageous State* does a vital job in challenging an enforced consensus, and it does it so calmly, in a reasoned manner which nonetheless recognises the urgency of the task at hand. It is a key read.

[Order The Courageous State](#)