

We need to choose the right big idea

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Former Conservative MP Matthew Parris was interesting on the [BBC's Moral Maze last night](#). He argued that we are not living in an era when politics lacks ideology (as some had suggested to be the case) but that we were instead living in an era where one ideology had completely won the debate. This was, he said, an era when free markets and market capitalism were the prevailing ideology for all in the political classes and that socialism and all ideas linked to it had been firmly discounted by all.

It was good to note that Giles Fraser had no truck with this argument, suggesting that we needed people with big ideas and ideological commitment to tackle the problems he sees on his South London doorstep everyday, whether they be poverty, poor or no housing, joblessness and more besides. He clearly implied that he did not think Parris's free market capitalism had any solution for such problems.

Fraser is right of course. But so too is Parris. The ideology of neoliberalism, that choice, competition and markets can solve all problems, dominates our politics from the right to much of the supposed left. But it is that precise hegemony that is the problem.

First of all, time and again evidence has been provided that people neither want choice when offered it, and nor does it necessarily improve lives when they have it. Power supply is the obvious example of that. I would be amazed if there was anyone who thought breaking up gas and electricity companies had provided any real benefit to the lives of people in the UK.

Second, there are also many studies showing people can be overwhelmed by choice. It can actually be detrimental to them. Power supply tariffs are an example of that.

And then there is the fact that all too obviously choice is not working. People who have to go into the market place to get a home and cannot access anything it has to offer do not have a choice at all. They are left with nothing. The politics of choice assume a predisposition of income and wealth that empowers people to decide. We have not got that predisposition in the UK.

So we do very definitely need a clash of ideologies in this country. That's because

the hegemony of the market is failing us as people. And it is because the hegemony of the market is failing our politics and so our democracy.

We need the choices that I decribed in The Courageous State.

We need politicians who will tell Mathhew Parris he is wrong.

We need politicians who swill stand up for those to whom the markets deny choice.

We need to say that markets sometimes fail.

We need to say that markets do not always deliver efficiently to all, but that of course they do sometimes.

We need to say that when markets cannot deliver as well as a state owned alternative the choice the market provides is the wrong choice altogether, as the NHS is proving day in and day out.

We need to say that there is a case for delivering the best possible outcomes to everyone.

We have to say that this is only possible in some situations when we turn our backs on the market.

And we have to accept as a result that some people have to be empowered to make choices for us all - which is in reality what happens now when it is impossible to tell the difference in the electricity supplied by one company or another but it is very possible to tell the difference in health care between regions, over which we have no choice but move.

We need to believe in the big idea of community.

We need to believe in each other.

We need to believe that we are better off together.

And we need to act on that belief. Not just to prove Matthew Parris and all those politicians like him wrong. But to prove that we are right.

We can choose to do that. And that's one choice no one can take away from us.