

Care conscription as a progressive answer to the belonging question

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Informed debate for better governance

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*Keir Starmer's speech on immigration brought to the surface a question long ignored by the progressive side of politics: who belongs to the country? But instead of doubling down on nativist rhetoric, the Government should take this opportunity to create new ways of belonging that eschew nationalist tendencies, argues **Tarun Khaitan**. A mandatory conscription service, not for the military but for care work could not only promote social cohesion, but at the same time solve the care crisis the country faces.*

Labour has responded to Reform UK's impressive performance in the recent local polls by embracing its nativist rhetoric, with Keir Starmer's speech [likened to](#) that of Enoch Powell's by some MPs and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper [announcing](#) an end to foreign care worker visas.

Progressives should care about belonging not just for strategic, but also for moral reasons

Progressive politicians have either [denigrated](#) citizens who care about belonging, conceded ground to the internally exclusionary conception of belonging, sought to reduce the salience of the “who belongs?” question, or dodge it altogether by seeking to refocus public attention on other issues. Their failure to adequately answer the belonging question explains, at least in part, the rise of nativist [authoritarianism](#).

Progressives should care about belonging not just for strategic, but [also for moral](#) reasons. Belonging is more than mere residence: one may live a lifetime in a polity without feeling—or being accepted as—belonging to it. Social belonging is [critical to human well-being](#). The alarming rise in [loneliness is having devastating health consequences](#). Social cohesion and [political trust are plausibly related](#), and we can expect better civic consciousness and lower crime rates in more cohesive societies. I will argue below that a truly progressive account of belonging can be grounded in sacrificial behaviour in the form of a care conscription service.

Behaviour-based belonging?

A progressive conception of belonging needs to be:

1. **Internally inclusive**—it must encompass *all* members of a polity, whether native or migrant, majority or minority, professional or working class, and
2. **Externally distinctive**—it must meaningfully distinguish members of *our* polity from those of others.

Neither national identity nor ideology can give a satisfactory answer to the question of belonging, but there is a third option.

Nativist politicians ground belonging in majoritarian ethnocultural identities, and therefore fail the requirement of internal inclusion. Even Gustavsson & Miller's [liberal nationalism](#), which claims “that national identities can serve as a source of unity in culturally diverse liberal

societies’—only tempers the exclusionary implications of a majoritarian answer. Universalist ideological foundations such as [“constitutional patriotism”](#) fail the external distinction condition (because people from many other countries espouse these values). Neither national identity nor ideology can give a satisfactory answer to the question of belonging, but there is a third option.

Grounding belonging in certain types of *sacrificial behaviour* could satisfy the two conditions of belonging stipulated above. Unlike identity, behaviour is at least potentially internally inclusive. And, unlike a universalist ideology, behaviour could be externally distinctive if performed only by members of the polity. The type of behaviour that might generate a sense of inclusive political belonging would likely need to satisfy three conditions:

- *Sacrificial*: It must be sufficiently sacrificial on the part of individual members,
- *Egalitarian*: It must impose more or less equal burden on all members, so there are no undeserving free riders or undeservedly excluded, and
- *Beneficial*: It must visibly benefit the polity and its members.

Some progressive scholars have recognised the possibility of building cohesion through military or productive conscription. Very few, however, have advocated for a conscription service that requires care work.

Simply paying one’s taxes and obeying at least the reasonable laws of the polity are simply not sacrificial enough. Financial sacrifice in the form of investments-based citizenships is clearly inegalitarian. Historically, behaviour-based belonging has usually, albeit not necessarily, taken the form of military service (a relatively recent example is [the grant of British citizenship to Gurkha soldiers](#)). The grant of expedited French citizenships to [Mamoudou Gassama](#), who scaled the outside of a block of flats to rescue a child, and [Lassana Bathily](#), who hid supermarket shoppers from a gunman, are two recent non-military examples. Based on these, could we construct a general account of belonging which is internally inclusive, externally distinctive, and scalable to entire populations under contemporary conditions?

Conscription not for the army, but for care

Some progressive scholars have [recognised](#) the possibility of building cohesion through military or productive conscription. [Very few](#), however, [have advocated](#) for a conscription service that requires care work. If it imposes comparable caring burdens on immigrant and native citizens, a care conscription could ground an internally inclusive and externally distinctive form of political belonging which is sufficiently sacrificial, egalitarian, and beneficial. Here is a tentative outline of a proposal for what a UK-wide care conscription could look like:

- Every citizen between the ages of (say) 18 and 25 would be required to serve as a carer for a period sufficiently long to count as sacrificial (anything between 12 and 24 months should do).
- Performing one's (suitably age-discounted) care conscription would be a precondition of naturalisation for new adult citizens or permanent residents (below the age of retirement).
- Since caring requires training and skills, the first 2-3 months of the conscripted time may need to be spent on training. Some aspects of the training may be incorporated into the high school curriculum.
- The service should probably include care not only for the elderly but also the sick, the disabled, children, animals, and the environment.
- Exemptions would be minimal, and only available to those genuinely unable to provide care (because of a severe disability or pre-existing significant and irreplaceable care burdens).
- The service must be generously rewarded. Apart from a decent wage, free university education or a subsidy for house purchase could be considered.

Besides allowing progressives to answer the belonging question head-on, such a scheme could have several additional benefits. Citizen carers could form direct interpersonal bonds with compatriots (both fellow carers and those cared for) with very different life experiences —bonds which a suitably designed scheme could help sustain after the service is over (through, say, reunions). At the same time, the service could address the unprecedented and largely unmet need for quality care that preoccupies our steadily aging society. It could also [promote gender equality](#) because the supply of care remains highly gendered. It could, in addition, feature an in-built redistributive dimension if the reward for the conscription service is generous, and generated from taxing the wealth of the super-rich. Finally, care-giving nurtures desirable virtues of good citizenship and aids human flourishing.

Here is a chance for the Labour government to be bold and ambitious, to build a National Care Service akin to the creation of the National Health Service after World War II, an institution that could come to define Britishness and last for generations.

Could we really create a new sense of belonging?

Can belonging be based on coerced behaviour?

Whether one belongs to a group or not is connected with how one feels, what one believes, and what one does. It is true that conscription can only take care of the behavioural dimension of belonging – affecting what a community does. If resented by a critical mass, coerced service can admittedly have counter-productive affective and cognitive implications for belonging. Thus, adequate political justification and motivation of the care service, coupled perhaps with an incremental approach that starts with a generously rewarded and gradually expanded voluntary scheme, could be important.

Wouldn't people who provide care at home—usually women—end up doing double their fair share?

The scheme should increase the total volume of care provision available in our society exponentially, and so the overall burden of caring on women should decline. Of course, some caring is not fungible; its quality and viability may well depend on familial or romantic bonds between the carer and the cared-for. There may be a case for full or partial exemptions in such cases. Note that a well-designed care conscription scheme would [benefit both the carer and the cared for](#), so any exempted carer would be worse off in some regard.

Wouldn't the scheme be expensive and difficult to administer?

Undoubtedly. But the current care system is unsustainable in our aging society. We have been muddling through by relying on unpaid care provided by women at home, and underpaid care provided by precarious migrant professionals. Even this sub-optimal system [cost](#) the UK £32.0 billion on adult social care in 2023/24. Once the costs of sub-optimal care on the cared-for and their loved ones are accounted for, the question is not so much whether to pay for care but who pays for it. The scheme would require considerable political will, wide consultation, pilot projects, public debate, infrastructure upgrade, synergies with the NHS, and significant investment. Incremental steps might yet again be more feasible.

Acknowledging the huge gap between the demand and supply for decent quality care, the Labour government has proposed a National Care Service, supposed to come into effect in 2028. Its contours are anybody's guess. Here is a chance for the Labour government to be bold and ambitious, to build a National Care Service akin to the creation of the National Health Service after World War II, an institution that could come to define Britishness and last for generations.

Labour has the chance to build an inclusive collective sense of Britishness based on mutual care and altruistic service. It could demonstrate that progressives could take the belonging question head-on, and (at least sometimes) win, with their ideological convictions still intact. A politically astute government would also notice that, besides being concerned about belonging, voters are clearly in a mood to reward ambition. Alternatively, it could continue with its "island of strangers" rhetoric to encourage strife and create second class citizens in an irreversibly pluralist UK. Even if it manages to convince voters in the next general elections to prefer its calculated and half-hearted nativism over the genuine article available in Reform's shop, Farage would have won the discursive battle of redefining Britishness.

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