

THE BIG ISSUE

& THE IDEOLOGY OF THE POSSIBLE

Images courtesy of The Big Issue



Front cover, Feb 7th 2022

Andrew McCallum explores how *The Big Issue* appeals to its ethically-minded readership while refusing to take political sides.

The *Big Issue* is a fascinating magazine to study in terms of ideology. It advocates strongly for social change – primarily around homelessness, the big issue it was set up to address – but it does so in ways that don't require massive change. Everything is framed in terms of what can be done through simple measures. What we might call 'the ideology of the possible'.

This article analyses a recent issue of the magazine (no. 1499, 7th February 2022) to see how this ideology is embodied in its cover page and editorial stance. Such an analysis also provides a useful comparison to issue 1227 (17th October, 2016), a set text for the Eduqas A Level.

Foregrounding NHS in big letters in the centre of the cover alerts readers to issue 1499's 'big issue'. The letters are crumbling, a visual representation to go along with the main cover line 'Under Pressure'. Image and text mirror a general narrative of a health service struggling to survive in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and reduced funding.

All is not lost, though. Three figures, identifiable as NHS medical and



Cameron felt his politics were a good match for the magazine's mantra 'a hand up, not a hand out'

The ideology of the possible underpins the philosophy of *The Big Issue* in general. It's sold by people who are 'homeless, long term unemployed or in need of extra cash to avoid falling into debt'.

support staff, are holding up the letters. Of different ethnicities, they represent the UK's multicultural health workforce. They also play into a narrative of the NHS surviving on the dedication and sacrifices of its workers, rather than on sustainable government investment. These workers are hurting, almost literally and figuratively crushed by their jobs. *The Big Issue*, though, has a solution: beneath the main cover line is written 'Saving the health service doesn't have to hurt'.

There it is: the ideology of the possible. Change can happen – and it doesn't have to hurt.

The ideology of the possible underpins the philosophy of *The Big Issue* in general. It's sold by people who are 'homeless, long term unemployed or in need of extra cash to avoid falling into debt'. Framed as 'micro-entrepreneurs', vendors buy magazines at £1.50 per copy and sell them at £3, keeping the profit for themselves. This is in keeping with the mission of *The Big Issue*, which is 'to dismantle poverty by creating opportunity, through self-help, social trading and business solutions'. Selling the magazine reduces an individual's dependency on the state for help, stops them begging, and gives them a sense of purpose. It's really simple, it's eminently possible and it works. Each issue features stories of vendors who have gone on to secure further jobs and turn around their lives. It's a strategy that *Issue 1499's* cover seems to be implying can be repurposed to save the NHS.

The philosophy of self-help is encapsulated in the strapline found on every edition's front cover: 'A hand up, not a hand out'.

This strapline has appeal to politicians keen to reduce money paid out in benefits (framed as 'handouts') by offering alternative incentives (a 'hand up'). David Cameron, for example, was guest editor (issue 949, in July 2011) when Prime Minister and called the magazine a 'natural fit' with his politics. He said it was 'a fantastic example of how we can reduce dependence on state handouts'.

Unfortunately, Cameron's and subsequent governments focused on the handout side of this equation

Both Bird and McNamee seem to be engaging with readers in conversation rather than offering fixed solutions. Meandering is part of this process, a sort of thinking out loud, weighing up different options. They are embodying an ideology of the possible, with all of the uncertainty that brings.

and not so much the hand-up. This is born out in statistics. Benefits for the homeless and unemployed since Cameron came to power have reduced considerably while homelessness figures have risen dramatically. Homelessness is not just about rough-sleeping, but figures for rough sleepers paint a stark picture of the wider reality. In 2010/11 under 4000 people were sleeping rough in London; by 2020/21 the figure had risen to over 11000.

With hindsight it seems remarkable that Cameron graced the front page at all in anything other than satirical guise. He hardly fits with *The Big Issue's* target demographic, identified by the magazine itself as being socially, ethically and environmentally aware, striving for equality and keen for companies to act ethically. In other words, much more likely to vote Labour or Liberal Democrat than Conservative.

While a long time ago, though, Cameron's guest editorship is a useful reminder that the magazine has never aligned itself directly with any political party. This too fits with an ideology of the possible. You buy this magazine because you believe in the possibility of a better world, and if occasionally siding with a party you don't generally agree with is part of this process, then so be it.

This non-partisan pragmatism fits with the magazine's editorial line. It's best embodied in the figure of the magazine's co-founder and Editor-in-Chief, John Bird, who is also a crossbench member of the House of Lords. This means that he is independent of political parties and votes according to his own conscience. He is on record as saying that he has 'been hurt by the left, and helped by the left. Just like I've been helped by the right and hurt by the right.' Rhetorically, he is all about the possible rather than the political: fighting against poverty and social injustice with a can-do attitude.

Bird's independence is obvious in his own full-page column, titled 'Strong voices should not take priority over strong arguments' in Issue 1499. In it Bird urges readers to look beyond the performance of how politicians say things and instead to interrogate the

Images courtesy of The Big Issue



The front cover, October 17th 2016



Homelessness is not just about rough-sleeping, but figures for rough sleepers paint a stark picture of the wider reality.

In 2010/11 under 4000 people were sleeping rough in London; by 2020/21 the figure had risen to over 11000.

substance of what they say. From this starting point, he moves on to what at first seems to be a partisan attack on the Conservative government, calling for a thorough investigation into 'the Covid gravy train of government contracts'. He uses this, though, as a springboard to question the value of 'representational democracy' as a whole; in other words, to question the value of two-party parliamentary democracy. Instead, he calls for a more 'participatory democracy', one where the mass of people have genuine involvement in decision making.

Bird's column in many ways is meandering in tone. I suspect this is deliberate. It's certainly mirrored in the 'Editor's Letter' column in which editor, Paul McNamee, muses on how to fund performers in the digital age, coming to no firm conclusion: 'I don't know how to fix inequities that our digital consumption society has built. But I know we can look for ways to help those who lift us all. Deeds, not words.'

Both Bird and McNamee seem to be engaging with readers in conversation rather than offering fixed solutions. Meandering is part of this process, a sort of thinking out loud, weighing up different options. They are embodying an ideology of the possible, with all of the uncertainty that brings.

This, I think, is where the appeal to readers lies. In buying and reading the magazine, they are entering into a conversation about big issues. And they are helping at the same time – helping the vendors with a hand up, not a handout.

The magazine has done remarkably well to keep a decent-sized readership



in the digital age, selling about 80,000 copies each week (though at its peak it sold about 300,000). While there is an online version, for obvious reasons it needs to maintain sales of paper copies if vendors are to have something to sell.

I said at the beginning of this article that issue 1499 offers a useful comparison to issue 1227, the Eduqas set text. Such a comparison might at first seem superficial, amounting to little more than the big lettering on each one. The lettering is not even the same in tone: on issue 1227 '25 years of a publishing revolution' is presented in glitzy lights, mirroring fairground signage. However, I'd argue that this sign is a rebuke to everyone who sees it, just like the crumbling NHS lettering. In the same way that 'saving the NHS doesn't have to hurt', so solving homelessness should be relatively straightforward. In drawing attention to its longevity, the magazine is pointing out society's failure to offer support where it should. 25 years on and still the problem of homelessness persists as a national disgrace.

And as the NHS letters are underpinned by valiant health workers, so the anniversary issue's signage is underpinned by a multicultural cast of significant individuals featured inside.

From Sir Alex Ferguson to Benjamin Zephaniah; from Theresa May to the Dalai Lama; and from Mel C to the Arctic Monkeys, the names cover the full cultural and political spectrum and indicate to the reader that we are all part of the same conversation. If only we'd set aside our ideological differences, as *The Big Issue* suggests, and engage instead in an ideology of the possible.

Andrew McCallum is the Director of The English and Media Centre

References

<https://www.bigissue.com/advertise/>

from the MM vaults

Interview with John Bird – Olivia Richwald, MM2

The Big Issue: Industry Focus – students at St Mary's School, MM70

Selling *The Big Issue* – Helen Williams, MM70