KEYWORD “Aspirational”

“Aspirational” has become a significant word used in political discourse since the 1980s, often used to bolster the view that Left policies are not supported by people characterised as “aspirational”. In many ways, it is a word that has been captured by the Right, partly suggesting that those who seek a better life will find it through hard work, in employment and education, and not through collective action.

Confusions lie with the general use of the term aspirational, whether applied to individuals or groups, in relation to their hopes and desires. Ayto’s *The Longman Register of New Words* (1990) lists aspirational among “new meanings of old words”, although, both are derived from aspiration, and as an adjective, the word aspirational was used long before this, as early as the nineteenth century.

The OED defines aspirational as “belonging to, or characterized by, aspiration”. One view is that to have aspirations, to be aspirational, is to be human. This may be linked to the Latin phrase, attributed to the Greek writers Theocritus and Cicero, *Dum spiro spero,* which means "While I breathe, I hope". This is related to two aspects of the definition of aspiration, of hope or ambition, and the act of drawing breath. The latter survived in Dickens’ unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870): "I am as well," said Mrs. Billickin, becoming aspirational with excess of faintness, "as I hever ham."

Most early references in literature refer to religious aspirations. H R Haweis’ history of *Christ and Christianity* (1887) made reference to Confucianism’s “sense of mystery feeble, and consequently its lift and aspirational power almost nil.” The US theologian A M Ribhany’s study of *Syrian Christ* (1916) referred to the “Oriental” (see NK ORIENTIALISM), whose “infatuation is known as….pure, or aspirational love.” The popular British fantasy writer George MacDonald stated in 1880: “If any one judge it hard that men should be made with ambitions to whose objects they can never attain, I answer, ambition is but the evil shadow of aspiration; and no man ever followed the truth, which is the one path of aspiration, and in the end complained that he had been made this way or that.” This view seems to view aspirations as generally unattainable but morally valid.

More modern usages seem to have developed around the notion of the aspirational target consumer, who seeks association, through consumption, with an exalted lifestyle. Thus the *Wall Street Journal* (14 January 1981) referred to Harrah’s, a gaming and hotel company, “offering free parking and trying what it calls ‘aspirational’ TV advertising that forgoes views of casino and hotel interiors and furnishings in favor of a stylish male customer who, while dressing, daydreams of showgirls, gourmet dinners and gaming tables.” Notably, this referred to male consumers, those, perhaps, deemed to have disposable income. In Britain, the idea of aspirational consumption seems to have developed in the early 1980s. *The Times* (25 September 1984) asserted that the retailer Next “is the role model for the high street. “Aspirational, affordable, collectible” are the buzz words.” This extended to magazines that promoted “healthy living and aspirational life-style” (*The Times*, 2 June 1986).

By 1987 (3 February) *The Times* was reporting that “The big bosses of Britain’s department stores have a new buzz word. “Aspirational” is the name they apply to their target customers and to the new mood that is sweeping through the once-staid shops… “Aspirational” captures perfectly the spirit of our times in which the shopper is increasingly demanding, discerning and disloyal.”

A key emphasis is disloyalty – the loosening of bonds with particular retailers, with a tendency to be a discerning consumer who “shops around.” This would correspond to a consumerist view of politics, in the changing of support as the perceived appeal for particular parties or programmes vary.

“Aspirational” can be applied to formal education and to employment. In both cases there may be hierarchies, graded, assessed and rising, and both feature hopes, and very limited real possibilities for individuals, that the highest attainments will be achieved. Formal education hierarchies influence employees as well as student (and parent) consumers. Importantly, there are variations in the levels to which individuals aspire, and the attainments which they anticipate. These correspond to lifestyles sought through consumption (and indeed education and employment), whereby improved outcomes are anticipated and sometimes achieved, but hopes and dreams for much higher attainments are developed.

This shares with religious or consumer aspirations the characteristic that while many may share the possibility of attainment, for most this proves to be a vain hope.

New Keywords (2005), reflecting on DESIRE, suggests a common root in the drive in capitalism towards the generally unattainable: "Desire is both ineffable and at the heart of how we understand ourselves. "Anything your heart desires": from remodelled bodies to the perfect partner and designer child, the advertising industry promises that every desire can be satisfied. Of course, the satiation of desire is not quite that simple. The fulfilment of one set of desires often only brings on more desire. As many have argued…capitalism is premised on a cycle of satisfying desire and creating new desires. Paradoxically, this aspirational economy runs on the implicit knowledge that human desire outstrips the range of commodities on offer." Aspirations in late capitalism may be shaped round celebrity status or the acquisition of "positional goods", which are inherently limited to small numbers of consumers; or around commodities and lifestyles that appear within reach to many. These have an economic component, in the encouragement of growing and insatiable consumption, but also an ideological component, in securing support for economic and social relations that (just) might yield the almost unattainable.

"Aspirational", relating to work, consumption and neighbourhood, has been deemed to have direct political salience. *Keywords in Australian Politics* (2006) asserted that "Aspirational voters, sometimes just called 'aspirationals', thus describe an apparent value shift among some Australians, associated with a change in voting behaviour. Ideas of class, equality and welfare are bound up in most explanations of the aspirational phenomenon. Aspirational voters want to move from unskilled jobs and older working class suburbs to middle class occupations and new suburbs." It should be stressed that there is only limited evidence for an apparent shift by skilled workers to support the Right, and perceived economic competence may be a more important electoral factor.

The significance of work is indicated by the (then) shadow Chancellor George Osborne's reference to "…middle England, the aspirational classes who want to get on in life, who are out working for their families". These "aspirational classes" (however ill-defined) do not always support "welfare" provision for other working-class people. Ironically, writing in *The Future of Social Democracy* (2010), New Labour politician Jon Cruddas criticised the British Labour Party, which "talked quite rightly about the need for the party to broaden its appeal to win the support of `aspirational' voters, but equated aspiration with nothing more than crude acquisitiveness. This sucked out its optimism and its radicalism…" However, Cruddas also attributed the failure of Labour to regain electoral ground in 2015 to "a tsunami of aspirant voters".

Chuka Umunna MP, in the *Guardian* (9 May 2015) demonstrated a limited vision of aspiration: "Our vision as a party must start with the aspirations of voters: to get on and up in the world, to see their children and grandchildren do better than they did, to get that better job, to move from renting to owning, to take the family on holiday, to move from that flat to that house with a garden." This mixes up the hopes of many ("to see their children and grandchildren do better than they did") with those that only a minority can achieve ("to get on and up in the world"), presumably leaving behind and below those who do not succeed.

Cruddas, Umunna and others have seen "aspirational" as a laudable set of attributes that simply needs to be reorientated towards support for social democracy. Against this, Tyler and Bennett (2015) have denounced "aspiration" as "a rhetorical device that seeks to whitewash a neoliberal economic and political project and the staggering inequalities it produces." Possibly, the more hopeless it looks in reality, the greater is the wish for a better life. This is, however, an individualised vision of the good life, available only to a small proportion of a class. It is closely linked, morally and ideologically, to the idea of commitment to hard work, in what in reality is a subservient commitment that is wholly compatible with capitalism.

For politics in the 2010s, "aspirational" has thus come to define a particular group of people who are vital to politicians whose ideology is neo-liberal. In terms of neo-liberal politics they are contested in two separate ways.

To Conservatives, the term is often interchangeable with other rhetorical devices such as "hard working families" or binaries such as "strivers versus skivers". The purpose of this language is a classic divide and rule tactic which requires the creation of scapegoats, such as benefit claimants or immigrants. To New

Labour, which accepted neo-liberal hegemony, the “aspirational” are a narrow constituency whose votes are vital to capturing the swing seats needed to win a general election under the current electoral system and thus are a highly significant voting bloc.

In political terms, this has meant that the contested ground of the past, social provision, housing, education and a whole range of other issues have been given over (or are being given over) to market forces. This acceptance of neo-liberal hegemony, and the subsequent jettisoning of its social democratic principles, suggests that New Labour had no choice but to appeal to this group of voters. The core difference in the political discourse between Conservatives and New Labour is that the Conservatives use it as a narrative produced for mass consumption - for the general public - as a way of bolstering its power through divide and rule strategies and of masking the reality of the upward shift of wealth in the last 35 years or so. That it might be their policies and the requirements of neo-liberalism that could block fulfilment of those aspirations is never considered. It is assumed that social democratic policies must hold back those who are “aspirational”.

New Labour on the other hand, discussed this in its internal dialogue as a party. An early incarnation was when leader Tony Blair talked about the need of Labour to appeal to ‘Mondeo man’, citing a middle-range popular family car. By continuing in this vein, Labour not only accepted ideological defeat, it also narrowed its own imagination, range of thinking and the intellectual space to develop strategies with which to contend the excesses of capital. This also reflects New Labour’s centralising, authoritarian tendency and its unwillingness to develop as a grass roots, participatory and democratic organisation.

The “aspirational” person, family or group may merely seek to out-compete, with varying levels of legitimacy, others in education or the labour market. This may be in full acceptance, and reinforcement, of the laws and mores of capitalism, or it can be seen as a personal means of survival which aims to secure a tolerable life. Alternatively, personal aspirations can be part of wider or universal social aspirations, so that moves towards a better world are supported and sought. To be “aspirational” in this perspective is to consider the best that could be attainable should the capitalist social order be superseded, and to support steps that bring such a possibility closer, although it may not be attained for a long time, if at all. This may be characterised as seeking “the highway”, that all can travel, rather than “the ladder”, that only individuals can climb.

If the source of aspiration is within capitalism (rather than with the religious aspirations of an earlier source), this may reflect hopes for consumption and development that cannot be sustained globally within ecological limits. The restrictions on what can be generally attainable need to be stressed – less through human frailties than through natural ecological limits – which present a “green ceiling” to development.

“Aspirational” people may seem to represent a limited section of society, seeking upward social mobility in class, employment and neighbourhood, partly through formal education and partly through individual betterment. That this is incompatible with the requirements of capitalism, especially within the neoliberal project, for inequalities between classes and individuals, in employment, education, housing, wealth and income, does not cancel the hopes and realities that some can attain a greatly improved social position and increased consumption.

In summary, problems in the use of this term lie partly with the imprecision with which it is applied – originally to religious hopes, then to forms of consumption with analogous unattainability. This seems to have developed to define the motives of certain voters, to faith and hope placed in the acquisition of lifestyle commodities, to particular housing neighbourhoods, to education and employment. It is linked, ideologically, to the notion that “aspiration” is always a virtue, although individualised “aspirational” attitudes could be less virtuous than common aspirations for general social advancement.

It is necessary to reclaim the idea of aspiration, seeking and developing other forms beyond the narrow focus on consumption and lifestyle, perhaps through the development of co-operative working, alternative forms of imagination and creativity, and living satisfactorily within environmental limits. The potential for the contestation of lifestyle narratives epitomised by phrases such as “aspirational” is lost when the energising and vital nature of collective debate and discussion are stifled. It is on this fertile

ground that the potential to disseminate questions of what constitutes a good society, and to elevate discussion in the wider public, has genuine political potential.