

**The
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**Thomas Cromwell on Jobs - a Message for Today
Left Margin
By Carl Bloice
BC Editorial Board**

Some good ideas endure for centuries. In her superb new historical novel, *Bring up the Bodies*, shortlisted last week for the Man Booker prize, Hilary Mantel has Thomas Cromwell musing about how "... England needs better roads, and bridges that don't collapse." The narrator says the aide to Henry VIII "is preparing a bill for Parliament to give employment to men without work, to get them waged and out mending the roads, making the harbors, building walls against the Emperor or any other opportunists. We could pay them, he calculated, if we levied an income tax on the rich; we could provide shelter, doctors if they need them, their subsistence; we would all have the fruits of their work, and their employment would keep them from becoming bawds or pickpockets or highway robbers, all of which men do if they see no other way to eat..."

The book, a follow-up to the highly acclaimed *Wolf Hall*, is set in the 1500s. Yet, the political and economic prescription Mantel has the wily Cromwell contemplating for England at the time could, indeed should, be in the minds of the people in power today as they confront what the *New York Times* last week called "the grim reality" of current unemployment.

As for the madams and thieves parts, it's as true today as it was back then. Aside from the mandatory rhetoric about law and order, after the riots in the Old Country last year, thoughtful observers at the time recognized the relationship between mass joblessness and social stability, something we in this country usually evade talking about in public.

Be that as it may, as Cromwell mused, the government can create jobs. The Kensayans amongst us are quick to point out that the U.S. economy is in crisis because people are not spending enough money on goods and services, either because they don't have much or they fear they could suddenly join the ranks of the already unemployed. Yet our economic pundits grow quite timid when it comes to the question of putting more money in peoples' pockets by putting more of them to work.

The standard, pretty much bipartisan, mantra these days is that jobs only come from the private sector, and the Republicans say these "job creators" should be rewarded for doing so, in advance, with tax breaks. The problem is they are not creating jobs, and show little inclination to do so. Corporate profits are up, the stock market is booming and unemployment and underemployment remain at disturbingly high levels.

I have only to walk out of my house at mid-day to encounter young people who would take jobs if they were available. And not just dropouts, but secondary and university graduates as well. Yet their immediate plight and the longer-term implications for society - particularly for young people in African American and Latino communities - go pretty much unexamined, sometimes even on the political Left.

It may be, as some of the assumed experts say, that increasing the number of workers with post-high school education and the importation of more foreign workers with advance training is the answer to unemployment. I have my doubts. But in any case that's going to take some time, and in the meantime there are over 20 million people in this county looking for work who can't get hired.

"They say the integrity of a nation's infrastructure is a direct reflection of its overall moral, social, economic, and political health," Ethan A. Huff, staff writer, for *NaturalNews*, wrote August 9. "If this is true, then the United States is in some very serious trouble, as the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), America's oldest national engineering society, has given a near-failing grade to almost every national infrastructure category in its most recent Report Card for America's Infrastructure."

"All those stories that have emerged in recent years about bridges collapsing, roads failing, and dams and levees beginning to crumble

are apparently not mere flukes," wrote Huff. "To the contrary, many of the nation's bridges, dams, water treatment plants, power generation facilities, roadways, levees, railways, parks, transit systems, and schools are in very serious disrepair -- and unless tax dollars are diverted from filling the pockets of fat cats to actually maintaining the means through which we all live, the entire nation will literally crumble into dust."

Huff writes that according to the ASCE's calculations:

"There are not enough roads, and too many of them are falling apart. America's decaying roadway systems are one of the most obvious infrastructure failures, as nearly every single American uses them on a daily basis.

And

"One in four American bridges is structurally deficient or functionally obsolete"

And

"many of them are on the brink of becoming structurally unsound, or of completely collapsing.

According to Huff, we need to spend about \$17 billion just to "adequately retrofit the nation's bridges and make them safe for travel and use."

What to do about it all?

Mantel's Cromwell had a good idea in 1535 but in today's political climate the idea that the government could go a long way toward solving two problems - joblessness and disintegrating infrastructure - at times seem to be the prescription that dare not speak its name. It wasn't mentioned at the Democratic National Convention and the message from the Republicans seems to be that the roads and bridges that allow workers to get their jobs, and products to get to market, somehow magically build themselves.

Much of the infrastructure repair and renovation can and must be undertaken by the government itself. The country would benefit greatly from a version of the Works Projects Administration (WPA) instituted by President Franklin Roosevelt that helped alleviate

unemployment during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Much of it can be accomplished through government programs that facilitate private sector development. What is needed is a policy and plan to do so.

Building and upgrading highways, bridges, tunnels, levees, waterways and the like are essential elements of a country's infrastructure just as they were in 1530 England. In 2012, energy efficiency, internet communication, and high speed transportation are equally important. I was reminded of this the other day when a report appeared that the area right around where I live - one of the most prosperous and populous areas, with tens of thousands of people and many businesses, lacks wired broadband services. The number of people in the nation without such access is said to be nearly 19 million. As the year began the US ranked 23rd in the world in access, with less than third of our population on broadband

Appearing on the *Real News Network* August 24, Robert Pollin, professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute and author of *Back to Full Employment* (MIT Press) said, "the reason why the green economy is such an outstanding model in terms of moving forward is that, in my view, it combines two things. Number one, obviously, it addresses the problem of climate change. It addresses the issue of having to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions over the next 20 years. The other thing is that in the process of transforming the economy it relies much more heavily on efficiency and renewable energy, you also will create millions of jobs."

"The reason you create millions of jobs is that investing in the green economy is about three times more efficient in terms of creating jobs," continued Pollin. "It creates three times more jobs per dollar of expenditure than retaining our existing fossil fuel economy structure. Again, that is in the book. The green economy will create about 17 jobs per \$1 million of expenditure, the fossil fuel economy about five - in my view it's the combination of the two things that it'll help us solve the climate change crisis, and as a result will also be a major engine of job creation."

"Millions of American workers badly need jobs, and the owners of many thousands of commercial buildings badly need 'green retrofitting' to improve their energy efficiency and thus cut operational costs while simultaneously helping clean up the environment" writes commentator Dick Meister. "The conclusion should be obvious: Let the retrofitting

begin, for the benefit of everyone - those who need the work, the employers who want it done, and the rest of us, who would benefit greatly from it."

Meister, a San Francisco-based columnist who has covered labor and politics for more than a half-century, took notice of a recent report from the National Employment Law Project (NELP) that called green retrofitting "a powerful job creation tool."

"As the NELP report said, 'Estimates show that a mix of tax credits, new building code requirements and loans for commercial energy efficiency upgrades would create upwards of 160,000 new jobs,' possibly hundreds of thousands more, over the next year," Meister writes. "That certainly would significantly lower the high unemployment rate that has plagued the country for far too long, encourage investment and otherwise jolt the lagging economy."

Construction workers have been hit particularly hard by unemployment, and it is they who have the skills and knowledge "that could be put to work cutting greenhouse gas omissions and making our cities cleaner and more efficient places to live," noted Christine Owens, NELP's executive director.

Simply providing jobs would not be enough. NELP argues that government policy makers supporting green retrofitting and the jobs it creates should make certain they are "good jobs with strong workplace standards and fair pay and job security." That's an absolute necessity if jobs in the retrofit industry are to be truly sustainable. At a minimum, that would call for providing workers increased pay and better chances of being promoted to higher-paying jobs.

Meister calls particular attention to what can be done at the municipal level. Noting that Los Angeles, Seattle and Milwaukee " have developed programs which have won the support of workers, environmentalists and commercial building owners, in large part by backing retrofitting projects that, while creating jobs, also help owners cut their costs and increase their income.

"It's now time for other cities nationwide to take action," writes Meister. "There's no legitimate reason for inaction. We have a great need to modernize and expand our infrastructure, diminish environmental pollution and provide work for the jobless. We have shown it can be done. So let's do it!"

Former President Bill Clinton is promising that President Obama has big, bold plans for dealing with the infrastructure and joblessness. And, in his convention nominating acceptance speech, the President referred to "the kind of bold, persistent experimentation that Franklin Roosevelt pursued during the only crisis worse than this one." A moderate step in that direction is contained in the Administration's proposed American Jobs Act, but Congress has never taken it up seriously and we've heard little about it since it was introduced a year ago.

"We cannot afford to fall behind the rest of the world in terms of our infrastructure development, but that's exactly what we are doing," economist Mark Thoma, a columnist at *The Fiscal Times* writes. "At a time when interest rates are as low as we are likely to see, when labor and other costs are minimal due to lack of demand during the downturn, and when the need is so high, why aren't we making a massive investment in infrastructure, which is ultimately an investment in our future? There are many, many public investments we could make where the benefits surely exceed the costs - these are things the private sector won't do on its own even though they are highly valuable to society - so what are we waiting for?"

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