

Tackling Political Disengagement

Speech to the Hansard Society

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It is sometimes said that most politicians would rather win an election on a 20 per cent turnout than lose on an 80 per cent turn out.

I am not one of those. Of course I would rather win than lose! But I recognise that the condition of our democracy is a fundamental factor in our success as a society and a nation; and the trend towards disengagement, cynicism, and despair with modern politics is a serious ill that requires remedy.

But crucially, I believe that this is a trend that can be reversed.

That's why, despite my current focus on the economic crisis, and keeping people in their homes and in work, I was pleased to accept the Hansard Society's invitation to address this seminar, and to come here as a practical politician to meet with the country's leading political scientists.

I accept that our politics is in serious trouble, not only from falling levels of active participation in parties, in elections, and in voting, but also from the spreading corrosive cynicism which characterises political discourse: in the broadcast media, in the press, and in the rise of the political blog. In this I share much of the analysis in the paper by Gerry Stoker, Colin Hay and Andy Williamson.

But as you might expect from one described as ‘the most optimistic member of the Cabinet’ this is no counsel of despair: I believe that we have the solutions, if only we have the courage, determination and will to apply them. I am optimistic about the prospects for our politics.

Let’s look at the state of play.

You will know that the Electoral Reform Society called the 2005 general election the ‘worst election ever’, in terms of turnout and basis of support for the elected government.

What is most disturbing is the social class aspects of the 2005 results. The lowest turnouts were in Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Hull and Salford. None of the top twenty highest turnouts was in an inner-city area.

Poorer urban citizens are less likely to vote than affluent ones; if this trend continues, we will see a politics which increasingly speaks with a middle-class, middle England accent, and the people with the most to gain from democratic politics – the poorest and most vulnerable – being the ones least likely to be involved in it. My question is whether we are witnessing by stealth the reversal of the Reform Acts of the nineteenth century?

But today, we look across the Atlantic to an historic election victory for Barack Obama. And although it is too early for a proper analysis, it seems as though the Democrat campaign has energised new voters, young voters, and voters from ethnic minorities. And turnout was significantly higher than four years ago.

The Labour Party needs to look at this campaign, especially its use of the internet, its viral campaigning, its fundraising from small donors, its organisation on the ground to ‘get out the vote’ and its appeal to young people, and we need to learn the lessons. Hundreds of Labour Party members have been campaigning for Obama. Over 80 Young Fabians are there now, for example. We must harvest all these experience and good practice, and see what can be applied in our own campaigning.

Earlier I mentioned solutions. Let me suggest three areas of reforms.

1. Political culture

First, our political culture. I know that every generation of politicians complains about the state of political culture, about the media, about young people's lack of involvement, about radical fringe movements, and so on.

We must be careful not to eulogise some mythical political golden age, with Father coming home from the union meeting to discuss the Irish Question with the children over supper, whilst Mother prepares her talk on Free Trade for the Co-operative Women's Guild.

No such age of mass participation ever existed. The Chartist movement, the rise of the trade unions, the Suffragettes, the Liberal, Labour or Conservative Parties: these were only ever minority pursuits in Britain.

In preparing this talk, I came across this quote, and let me ask you if you can identify the author:

'In a British election it is generally agreed that most of the electors do not attend meetings at all, and, of those who do, the vast majority

attend meetings of the candidates they have already decided to support. Little election literature is valid that is either long or involved; it needs to be suspiciously general, full of wide promises, passionately critical of the other side, built on some tremendous slogan that will stay in the electoral memory at least until polling-day.'

It was Professor Harold Laski, writing in 1933. *Plus ca change!*

But with the caveat that politicians always complain about their own political culture, let me say that we are witnessing a dangerous corrosion in our political culture, on a scale much more profound than previous ages, and the role of the media must be examined in this context.

Famously, Tony Blair called the media a 'feral beast' in one of his last speeches as Prime Minister. But behind the eye-catching phrase was a serious and helpful analysis of a 24-hour broadcast media and shrinking and increasingly competitive newspaper market which demands more 'impact' from its reporting – not the reporting of facts to enable citizens to make sense of the world, but the translation of every political discussion into a row, every difficulty a crisis, every rocky patch for the Prime Minister the 'worst week ever.'

The changing structure of the media is what drives this desire for 'impact' and the retreat from dispassionate reporting.

And I would single out the rise of the commentariat as especially noteworthy. It is within living memory that journalists' names started to appear in newspapers; before then, no name was attached to articles. And in recent years commentary has taken over from investigation or news reporting, to the point where commentators are viewed by some as every bit as important as elected politicians, with views as valid as Cabinet Ministers. And if you can wield influence and even power, without ever standing for office or being held to account by an electorate, it further undermines our democracy.

The commentariat operates without scrutiny or redress. They cannot be held to account for their views, even when they perform the most athletic and acrobatic of flip-flops in the space of a few weeks. I can understand when commentators disagree with each other; it's when they disagree with themselves we should worry.

There will always be a role for political commentary, providing perspective, illumination and explanation. But editors need to do more to disentangle it from news reporting, and to allow elected politicians

the same kind of space and prominent for comment as people who have never stood for office.

This brings me to the role of political bloggers. Perhaps because of the nature of the technology, there is a tendency for political blogs to have a 'Samizdat' style. The most popular blogs are right-wing, ranging from the considered Tory views of Iain Dale, to the vicious nihilism of Guido Fawkes. Perhaps this is simply anti-establishment. Blogs have only existed under a Labour Government. Perhaps if there was a Tory Government, all the leading blogs would be left-of-centre?

There are some informative and entertaining political blogs, including those written by elected councillors. But mostly, political blogs are written by people with a disdain for the political system and politicians, who see their function as unearthing scandals, conspiracies and perceived hypocrisy.

Unless and until political blogging 'adds value' to our political culture, by allowing new and disparate voices, ideas and legitimate protest and challenge, and until the mainstream media reports politics in a calmer, more responsible manner, it will continue to fuel a culture of cynicism and despair.

2. Political People

Secondly, let me look at the people in politics.

Politicians must not live on 'Planet Politics' and behave in ways which are alien and strange to the electorate.

This happens partly because there is a trend towards politics being seen as a career move rather than call to public service. Increasingly we have seen a 'transmission belt' from university activist, MPs' researcher, think-tank staffer, Special Adviser, to Member of Parliament, and ultimately to the front bench.

Now, there's nothing wrong with any of those jobs, but it is deeply unhealthy for our political class to be drawn from narrowing social base and range of experience.

We need people from a range of backgrounds – business, the armed forces, scientists, teachers, the NHS, shopworkers – to make good laws. And we need more MPs in Parliament from a wider pool of backgrounds: people who know what it is to worry about the rent collector's knock, or the fear of lay-off, so that the decisions we take reflect the realities people face. In short, we need more Dennis Skinnners, more David Davises, more David Blunketts in the front line of

politics. Or if you prefer, more MPs who read the *Mirror* or *Sun*, and fewer who write for the *Guardian* or *Telegraph*.

The political parties, and the trade unions, need to actively recruit, mentor and support working class people into political life, and offer ways into the hermetically-sealed world of politics for people who have never been an MP's researcher or worked for a think-tank. Just as we have programmes to encourage women and people from ethnic minorities, so we need an 'Emily's List' style programme for people attracted from across the world of work. This would provide practical support for people wanting to get involved, who do not have the unfair advantages of the political elites.

3. Political Power

The third area, and the most significant, is the question of political power. My abiding passion is for the lasting redistribution of political power, from those with it, to those without it.

It's not just about social justice. It's the surest way to tackle disengagement in politics. That's because people make rational choices; they're not suffering from a surfeit of contentment, or a false consciousness; they're not stupid.

If they feel that by their involvement in politics, their time and effort will lead to little change or practical outcome, then they will choose not to bother, or to engage in some other way. This was the central theme of Pippa Norris's book *Democratic Phoenix*, which described the ways in which people were changing their political repertoires, targets and activities.

It accords with my own experience in Salford, where there are people who will come forward to serve on the board of a regeneration partnership or Sure Start, but would never consider standing for the council. They don't 'hate politics'. They define it as something done by politicians, not active citizens, social entrepreneurs or campaigners. Something done by 'them' not 'us'.

My white paper *Communities in Control* contains the central argument for a redistribution of power, and for a flowering of new ways of political participation, including on-line, but also through a revived local government and greater control over local services.

If you've read the white paper you'll know I make it clear that it is merely the staging post on a longer, further-reaching journey of democratisation of the British state.

I agree with the Prime Minister when he told the NCVO last year:

'I want to see a vibrant reformed local democracy, from neighbourhood level engagement, community calls to action, a renewed focus on the devolution of powers and responsibilities to local government, the accountability of our police, our healthcare services to their communities. In this way people can connect neighbourhood meetings, local ballots and elections and new forms of community action for decision making and the exercise of power over issues they care about in their daily lives.'

We need a devolved state, with democracy a daily activity, not a once every five years cross in a box.

The modern state must therefore be devolved, decentralised, and dedicated to giving people the power to take on an increasing share of the responsibility for their own lives, and authorship of their own destinies.

This creates challenges because people, groups and institutions with power are seldom pleased to relinquish it. You can hear echoes of the men who opposed the extension of the franchise, or votes for women, in

those voices who today argue that people cannot be trusted to use power wisely.

But we have our own echoes. We have Tom Paine, Robert Owen, William Morris and GDH Cole. Within the British socialist tradition is a rich vein of advocacy of self-government, bottom-up campaigning, workers' control and co-operation which stands in relief to the tendency of mid-twentieth century socialists who placed their faith in monolithic national institutions, administered by benign bureaucracies.

Increasingly, modern society, in all its variegation, granularity and complexity, is best served by a decentralised, democratic state, and public services best run from the bottom up. The days of the centralised state, even in this unlikely age of nationalised banks, are numbered!

We are experiencing an explosion of information, technology and communications. When Labour was first elected no-one had seen facebook, heard an i-pod, or used Google. A computer sat in an office, a phone on a desk.

Today, people expect to be in control. They expect choice as standard. They expect personalisation in every aspect of their lives, from the music they listen to, to the healthcare they receive.

So a state which can only supply one-size-fits-all products and services, which has no entry-points for the citizen is doomed to fail to meet the rising expectation of its population.

So to conclude, for all the problems our politics faces, we have the solutions if we address the three-Ps of political culture, people and power.

It will take some tough choices and strong leadership, especially when it comes to giving power away. But I remain confident in the capacity of the British people for self-determination and self-government, in our political culture to be rescued from cynicism, and therefore in the prospect of Britain to continue its journey towards popular democracy.

Thank you for listening.