revitalisingpolitics
have we lost the plot?
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REVITALISING POLITICS: HAVE WE LOST THE PLOT?

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Introduction

The UK is going through a period of constitutional innovation but we lack, as yet, the revitalised politics to go along with it. In this respect we agree whole-heartedly with Professor Vernon Bogdanor's comment at a recent British Academy event on the Constitutional Renewal Bill:

> *The constitutional reforms … do nothing to alter [the hermetic insulation of Parliament from the people] because they are dealing with the distribution of power between what one might call 'the officer class'. The reforms redistribute power between elites, not between elites and the people … (F)rankly much in the Constitutional Renewal Bill is merely a shifting of the institutional furniture. It will not have much effect on popular grievances.[4]*

As this suggests, constitutional modernisation is all well and good. But insofar as it is a solution, it is a solution to a different problem. If we are to bring to an end the 'hermetic insulation of Parliament from the people' in Professor Bogdanor's terms, we need proposals to revitalise our politics. An over-concentration on constitutional niceties suggests that we are in danger of losing the plot.

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[4]   The British Academy, *The Significance of the Government's Draft Constitutional Renewal Bill,* Transcript of a workshop held at the British Academy, Monday, 16 June 2008, p. 45.

Yet if we are to make progress here it is important that we build our discussion of politics and contemporary political disaffection from realistic premises. Politics and politicians have never attracted universal respect. We agree with the July 2008 discussion paper from the Ministry of Justice that the issue we confront today is not an entirely unprecedented loss of trust in politicians. As the paper notes, and we have ourselves argued before, even in periods supposedly characterised by deference to political authority, citizens have never really been that trusting of politicians:

> *Even towards the end of the Second World War when victory was in sight a majority of people surveyed by Gallup believed politicians were out for themselves or their party rather than the country, while surveys from 1970s consistently found only two in ten people trusted politicians to tell the truth, a figure that has changed little since* [5].

Nor for us is the core issue in revitalising politics finding new ways to boost flagging turnout in elections through cosmetics and gimmickry. Weekend elections, text voting and the exchange of votes for lottery tickets—as suggested in the July 2008 Communities in Control White Paper [6]—simply cannot be seen as part of the solution. Indeed, that they might be presented in such terms, seemingly without irony, might itself be seen as part of the problem. Electoral turnout, for us, is a surface expression of political engagement and political disengagement and, for what it's worth, we predict that in the next general election turnout will go back up to respectable levels in the context of a more contested ballot.

It cannot be relied upon that changes to the processes, mechanisms and behaviour of politicians at Westminster will make a difference to the bigger picture either. Numerous Hansard Society studies have concluded that, in many respects, the parliamentary process is actually more responsive and effective than in the recent past.[7] MPs are now much more likely to rebel against the Government and dissention from the House of Lords achieves changes to Government proposals. Yet none of this has had any impact outside Westminster.

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[5]   Ministry of Justice (2008), *A national framework for greater citizen engagement: A discussion paper* (London: HMSO).

[6]   Department for Communities and Local Government, *Communities in control (2008), Real people, real power* (London: HMSO).

[7]   A. Brazier, S. Kalitowski, G. Rosenblatt & M. Korris (2008), *Law in the Making: Influence and Change in the Legislative Process* (London: Hansard Society); and A. Brazier, M. Flinders & D. McHugh (2005), *New Politics, New Parliament* (London: Hansard Society).

It is commonplace to hear assertions that Parliament has never been more supine and irrelevant and that this situation is demonstrably and progressively getting worse, despite evidence to the contrary. Indeed, it is debatable whether the public would notice even if there were a more substantial rebalancing of power between Parliament and the executive; such is the extent of disconnection from politics.

The real issue is the prevalence, and inadvertent nurturing of, an anti-political culture. Contemporary political disaffection is not, we suggest, a story of the decline of civic virtue, nor is it a story of political apathy–it is one of disenchantment, even hatred, of politics and politicians. It is not that we have stopped caring–we remain impassioned and animated by politics–but our emotive and impassioned responses are increasingly negative in tone and character. This phenomenon, we feel, has not been adequately understood. But to show that this is indeed the case, we must first consider the understanding of the problem that informs Government thinking on such matters.

How, then, has the Government come to diagnose the problem and to what extent does it understand the problem as the growth of an anti-political culture? Two documents published on 9 July 2008 give us a clue. The Ministry of Justice's National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement frames the problem in terms of significant new pressures on representative democracy. These include the decline in the capacity of political parties as institutions of mobilisation leading to less engagement in formal politics, the rise of civic activism dominated by the better-off and changes in the relationship between government and citizens, leading the latter to be less deferential and more demanding. Hazel Blear's white paper, Communities in Control, shares much of the same analysis.

The solution offered by both papers is to favour more structured access to decision-making by citizens at local and national level. In broad terms this chimes in with the approach of the Power Inquiry.[8] The drive in that direction is more cautiously framed for national government and the UK parliament, with tentative suggestions for greater use of referendums, petitions and deliberative events to inform decisions, matched by a re-emphasis of the role of Parliament as the hub for the making of final decisions and a focus for accountability. For local government there appears a greater willingness to let citizen control rip, with more opportunities for the direct election of local officials, asset transfers of public facilities to

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[8]   The Power Inquiry (2005), *Power to the people*, available at www.makeitanissue.org.uk/Power to the People.pdf.

community organisations, petitions that can command a response, and universal schemes for participatory budgeting by 2012 to ensure citizens can have a direct say over the allocation of local spending and investments.

In summary, the strategy appears to be premised on an analysis that sees citizens as less easy to channel and more 'bolshy'. We had better give them more of a say in a variety of ways if we are not to incur their wrath. Some of the particular prescriptions of the Labour government may, and indeed have already, attracted some ridicule from other mainstream parties and they may put forward their own pet solutions but we think that political elites share a fundamentally similar perspective. The goal appears to be to protect the existing core decision-making responsibilities of national and local representative institutions whilst allowing citizens controlled, but considerably enhanced, access through a variety of new engagement mechanisms. The question we want to address in this conference is whether this strategy and these mechanisms are capable of revitalising politics.

The answer of our position paper is quite brutal: 'we doubt it'. We think the Government and political elites more generally (and not just in the UK) fail fully to recognise the scale, depth and nature of the democratic political malaise we face.[9] A number of issues have been ducked thus far in public debate and our concern for the renewal of democratic politics in the UK means that we argue that they need to be tabled once more–and, in due course, addressed directly.

First and foremost we argue that the Government and political elites do not fully recognise how implicated they are in the crisis of democratic politics. On the one hand, they are prone to exploit rather than to challenge the anti-political culture within which their electoral fortunes are now largely determined. On the other, often inadvertently, they appear at least to us to buy into much of it themselves. As we shall explore in more detail presently, their own loss of faith in politics has contributed to the placing of many key decisions beyond their own powers of influence, let alone that of the citizens they ostensibly represent. A democratising of all of our collective institutions for decision-making is vital if citizens are not merely going to be empowered into a few narrow fields. Revitalising politics will mean challenging arenas which have effectively been depoliticised–arenas in which unelected managers, professionals and experts now dominate.

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[9]   Hansard Society (2008), *Audit of political engagement* (London: Hansard Society).

Second, constitutional reforms as enacted and proposed do not touch many of the institutions and actors vital to the practice of our politics. Political parties, single issue campaign organisations and the media all play a vital part in politics. As such, they too are part of the problem; they need also to be seen as part of the solution.

Third, revitalising politics needs to find better ways than at present to cope with the inherent multi-level nature of modern governance. Although national politicians talk a good game of devolution they have delivered so far only a rather haphazard and idiosyncratic system. Moreover, our politics has become increasingly trans-national in character but our political institutions and debates have remained stubbornly national in focus and content.

Finally, despite the unprecedented contemporary interest in the sources of political disengagement and disaffection, we lack a real understanding of how citizens understand politics. Any strategy for revitalising politics needs to take seriously the issue of how politics is perceived by citizens. We know a fair amount about what kinds of political activity people engage in and what factors drive that activity. We can offer some reasonable evidence-informed insights into issues such as electoral turnout and election outcomes. What political science—and the social sciences in general—is less good at understanding and explaining is what politics means to citizens at the beginning of the 21st century.

The politics of anti-politics

Citizen-politics has become removed from the old party-led models. It is issue-led, not ideologically driven. Nor does this new politics map easily on to traditional democratic processes or institutions. Instead, citizen-led activism tends to be more viral and anarchic, leading to distributed models of political individualism that further reinforce the fracturing of the political landscape. All the main parties have embraced significant elements of an anti-politics position. They attack each other over sleaze, funding, expenses and, above all, trust. They make constant claims about the mendacity of their opponents. Politicians compete with one another to confirm to the public that they (or at least their opponents) can't be trusted and need to be bound, limited and constrained to act in the public interest.

Elected representatives seem both committed to, and enthusiastic about, sub-contracting collective decision-making to non-elected agencies and institutions. Judging by the actions of our political elites, we seem today to have such little faith in elected and representative

institutions that we are in a near constant process of creating new independent boards, agencies and appointed bodies charged with making decisions on our behalf about health, housing, social care, land use planning, economic development, interest rates and the minimum wage amongst numerous other things.

Of course, in one sense at least, there is nothing terribly new about this. The 1970s and 1980s saw a proliferation of so-called 'quangos'. Yet in almost all other respects, things are very different today–and the contrast is, itself, quite suggestive. For the growth of a technocratic 'quangocracy' was, at the time, both widely condemned [10] and entered into in a rather covert and apologetic fashion on the part of political elites–with governments seemingly rather reluctant to draw attention to what might be seen as the attempt to insulate themselves from critique by off-loading their political responsibilities to others. Yet today an ostensibly very similar process is openly celebrated for its depoliticising consequences by our political elites. Consider the following remarks of Lord Falconer, delivered–tellingly–in a public seminar on the merits of depoliticisation in 2003:

> *What governs our approach is a clear desire to place power where it should be: increasingly not with politicians, but with those best fitted in different ways to deploy it. Interest rates are not set by politicians in the Treasury, but by the Bank of England. Minimum wages are not determined by the Department of Trade and Industry, but by the Low Pay Commission. Membership of the House of Lords will be determined not in Downing Street but in an independent Appointments Commission. This depoliticising of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people.[11]*

As this suggests (and Lord Falconer is hardly the exception here), politicians themselves have increasingly come to conspire in the process of diminishing our expectations of politics. For they have quite self-consciously and explicitly engaged in the process of taking the politics out of politics. In effect they have sub-contracted decision-making to a series of unelected appointees, with clear consequences for the way such decisions are held publicly to account. Could politicians have done this precisely because they themselves hold such a negative view of politics?

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[10] See, P. Holland & M. Fallon (1978), *The Quango Explosion* (London: Conservative Political Centre); C. Hood (1973), 'The Rise and Rise of the Quango', *New Society*; A. King (1985), 'Government Responses to Budget Scarcity', *Journal of Policy Studies*, 13 (3), 476-93.

[11] www.dca.gov.uk/speeches/2003/lc031210.htm, p. 5.

This 'off-loading' or 'sub-contracting' of politics would not be as critical an issue if it at least delivered a sense of efficient, value-for-money government. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of the public have little interest in, and even less knowledge of, the architecture of government. The belief, often based on well-grounded experience, that public services are deficient gives ammunition with which to further attack the politicians in charge of those services, however nominal that control might be.

Politics, in this understanding, is at best an unhelpful interference; at worst a malevolent force. It is prone to 'capture' by powerful interest groups; it can only prevent the adoption of the technically most proficient policy solution to any given challenge; it is aloof and distant from 'the people'; its responsiveness to societal demands leads it to inappropriate policy choices; it lacks the technical proficiency and specialist knowledge required to select the optimal policy choice; it is costly, inefficient, bureaucratic and self-referential to the point of becoming tiresome; and it has an inexorable tendency that needs to be curbed to expand into areas where it has no legitimate business. Politics is a pathogen; depoliticisation an antidote.

The consequence of holding and declaring publicly such assumptions is an inevitable sub-contracting by elected officials of many of their previous responsibilities to a bewildering array of independent and, above all, non-political, authorities and agencies. Such bodies are, of course, not accountable to the public in anything like as clear and direct a fashion as elected officials. The casualty in all of this, then, is the process of collective deliberation and public scrutiny–our collective capacity to hold the decision-making process to account for the character, quality and consequences of the decisions made.

This is all very well–and, one might suggest, all very alarming. But it begs a couple of crucial questions. How is it that our political elites have come to hold such a negative view of themselves? And what are the consequences for political disaffection and disengagement of their not only holding such a view, but of publicly proclaiming it?

Our answers to both of these questions are clear. Our political elites have come to share such a negative view of themselves and their actions more indirectly than directly. They have become convinced less of the innate untrustworthiness of political actors than they have been converted, perhaps inadvertently, to a particular view (a particular theory) of public sector reform which is predicated on precisely such an assumption. Indeed, it seems unlikely to us

that our political elites do genuinely conceive of their motivations and conduct, either individually or collectively, in narrowly self-interested terms. Indeed, if we think about it, there is plenty of evidence that they do not. For, rather ironically given the comments of those like Lord Falconer considered above, professional politicians seem to spend an increasing proportion of their time striving to reassure the public in response to growing cynicism that their motives and intentions are honest and genuine. Yet in this respect our political elites increasingly find themselves talking with forked tongues—on the one hand trying to convince us of their probity and trustworthiness yet, on the other, reinforcing precisely such assumptions by designing public institutions which limit the degree of 'political interference' in matters of collective concern.

This paradox, we suggest, is at least partly explained by the ascendancy amongst policy-makers (elected and unelected) of a highly distinctive set of academic theories. Our political elites, we suggest, (and whether familiar with the term or not) have bought into a public choice theory inspired view of the world in which democratic politics is always likely to be overwhelmed by rent-seeking behaviour, short-termism, the search for special advantage by powerful interests and the blind pursuit of electoral gain by political actors—in short, by the promotion of narrow self-interest over and above any sense of the public or collective interest. Perversely, public choice theory—and its new public management theory derivatives—explores the consequences of assuming political actors and public servants to be motivated by narrow self-interest alone. Unremarkably, if we adopt such assumptions, politics is a bad thing—something that we need as little of as we can get away with. Rather ironically, then, in embracing and following the logic of such theories, political elites have come to trust themselves less and less—off-loading their decision-making powers to others as an almost direct correlate.

Innumerable examples could be picked, but monetary policy and the decision to cede operational independence to the Bank of England is a particularly illuminating illustration of the more general point. If we assume that price stability is good, inflation bad, that political elites are knowledgeable and hence aware of this and that they are motivated by a benign sense of the collective good, then they are likely to prove effective guardians of the public interest—raising interest rates where necessary to fight off inflationary pressures. Yet if, as in public choice theory, we assume them to be knavish 'rational rogues', keen to use the powers incumbency bestows upon them to gain whatever electoral advantage they can, it doesn't take much to see that they will display what the theory calls 'time-inconsistent inflationary

preferences'.[12] In other words, they are likely to be more hawkish in raising interest rates to suppress inflationary pressures (with consequent implications for growth) between elections than they are in the immediate run up to an election–when they will be keen to maintain the 'feel good factor' associated with sustained economic growth. The result, as it is again relatively simple to see, is likely to be poor macroeconomic management and higher levels of inflation across the business cycle than would otherwise be the case. If we accept the premise–which is, of course, never defended as an accurate approximation of the preferences of elected officials–then the need for an independent monetary policy authority (such as the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England) follows logically. A very similar rationale, from an almost identical set of (similarly undefended) premises, can–and has–been used to derive the need for an independent Low Pay Commission and innumerable other independent authorities and quasi-public bodies.

The point about all of this is that our political elites tend to accept the theory (or at least the public policy prescriptions of the theory) without thinking too much about the assumptions upon which it is predicated and to which they are committing themselves when they embrace the theory. The result is a form of arms' length governance without government–a form of decision-making without full democratic accountability. And that, we contend, has serious implications for our democratic political culture. When our own politicians see politics as a disease to which depoliticisation is the antidote, is it any wonder that we become disaffected and disengaged? 'Bringing power closer to the people', in Lord Falconer's terms, sounds all well and good, but the more significant off-loading of political responsibility with which it is associated reduces electoral politics to the selection of mere functionaries. Their sole task is to assign policy-making duties to those they see as more qualified, more proficient, more competent and, above all, more trustworthy. But the link between the voter and the decision-making process is severed. When those we elect subcontract their duties to those we do not elect, disengagement from formal politics is a perfectly rational response.

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[12] A. Alesina (1989), 'Politics and Business Cycles in Industrial Democracies', *Economic Policy*, 8, 57-98 ; E. E. Kydland & E. C. Prescott (1977), 'Rules Rather Than Discretion: The Inconsistency of Optimal Plans', *Journal of Political Economy*, 85 (3), 473-92.

The failings of the informal institutions that bring politics to life

Most of us as citizens are judging politicians from afar and through a distorted lens. In most mature democracies most people have little if any direct involvement in politics.[13] Most people experience politics as spectators and through the eyes and ears of the media. The result of this alienated disengagement is that many citizens are able to combine a substantial level of cynicism about politics with occasional outbursts of moral indignation as to its failings and frustrations. Such public expressions of exasperation and powerlessness are often accompanied by a belief that they are inadequately informed despite the plethora of news reports discussing policy, many of which appear to the reader as just another attempt to persuade.

The political class in the UK stands apart from us in our increasingly specialised society. The cohesion brought by parties, the advocacy of special interests through lobbying and the challenge and dissent presented through various forms of protest, offer vital links in the democratic chain between governors and governed. But they all are failing to engage citizens-at-large in politics. As parties have lost membership, they have become reliant on professional campaigners and organisers and operate in a way that treats citizens as passive political observers who just need to be mobilised at election times to back the party.[14]

Party politics is not the only arena of specialisation. Citizen lobby organisations—such as Friends of the Earth—have large-scale passive memberships and they too rely on professional organisers and experts.[15] Members fund but the professional politicos in the lobby organisations select the campaign agenda themselves. Citizens are a passive audience to be talked to about particular campaigns through the media and occasionally galvanised to send in letters or cards of support or join a public demonstration based often on rather simplistic messages. They are offered little in terms of depth of analysis or understanding of the issues at stake by these organisations. Even the more radical of protest organisations tend to be professionalised in the style of behaviour and their use of the media. The occasional engagement by a wider group of citizens in a protest 'event' or rally is in danger of being more a lifestyle statement than a serious engagement with a political debate.[16] We

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[13]   See G. Stoker (2006), *Why Politics Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

[14]   P. Webb, D. Farrell & I. Holliday, eds (2002), *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[15]   G. Jordan & W. Maloney (1997), *The Protest Business? Mobilizing Campaign Groups* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

[16]   W. de Jong, M. Shaw & N. Stammers, eds (2005), *Global Activism, Global Media* (London: Pluto).

behave, and are encouraged to behave, as consumers of politics; we buy into those campaigns we support and boycott those goods and companies we don't. Our engagement as a consequence is ephemeral, thin, sporadic and if not perhaps ill-informed then certainly not informed by an engaged process of ongoing deliberation.

Alienation and distance from the practice of politics provides a fertile ground for cynicism about politics. The actions and moves of politicians are constantly interpreted by the media through a lens that emphasises their instrumental, self-interested motivation.[17] The role of the media in promoting a culture of cynicism is worth examining. We are, in a sense, all now subservient to carefully managed discourses arranged in evenly distributed blocks of time. Once considered a bridge between the public (and public opinion) and government, today's news media offers little more than a poorly constructed compromise. Formal print, television and radio news is managed and, despite the recent fashion towards news media websites hosting 'discussions', real opportunities for citizens to express their views on equal footing with the media establishment remain limited. Political coverage, particularly around elections, often focuses on simplistic polling, with each new poll a headline in its own right and, in this context, political reporting is akin to 'the sports results, accompanied by spurious and often self-serving theories from commentators'.[18]

John Lloyd[19] puts some of the blame on the poor reporting standards of the media, itself triggered by commercial pressures and the rise of multinational media groupings. There are several aspects of the argument to consider. First, there has undoubtedly been some 'dumbing down' in news coverage. This means that people are simply less familiar with the complexities in respect of politics than perhaps once they were; and politics is invariably seen to fail when judged in such simplistic terms. Second, the fusing of news reporting and comment, which is a characteristic of modern media coverage of politics, probably feeds a culture where fact, opinion and speculation merge into one another and which lends itself to a cynical take on political life. A third argument is that the media have actively spread a culture of contempt; and a fourth argument is that we have seen the emergence of a style of journalism that presents itself as the champion of the people and takes a strongly adversarial position to politicians, asking all the time why is this politician lying to me and you, the viewers and listeners. Finally, our popular media reinforce a sense of politics as a market-place in which the voter-as-consumer is right to be indignant and disappointed if his or her

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[17]   C. Hay (2007), *Why We Hate Politics* (Oxford: Polity).

[18]   N. Hager (2007), *The hollow men: A study in the politics of deception* (NZ: Craig Potton) p. 262.

[19]   J. Lloyd (2004), *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics* (London: Constable).

preferences on any given issue are not satisfied absolutely and completely. There is very little sense in the coverage of contemporary politics of political decision-making as a necessary process of collective deliberation and compromise. In a sense, market-generated expectations of political goods are overly inflated and much of our contemporary disaffection with politics derives from unrealistic expectations about what we have a right to expect from it as consumers-cum-voters.

The mismatch between multi-level governance and the primacy of Parliament

Yet even were we able to put all of this to one side, we would still face significant problems. For, our political institutions and debates have remained stubbornly national in focus and content despite the emerging reality of multi-level governance. There are two elements to this. Devolved government in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and even the prominence of the role of the London mayor tells us that in some parts of our system, power no longer resides entirely at the centre. Yet in great swathes of England, a weak and underpowered local government system is made to dance to a centralised if now slightly more streamlined system of decision-making. A democratic system where all but 4 or 5 per cent of revenues are raised and allocated centrally through Whitehall is abnormal in comparative democratic terms. If five million people in Scotland are encouraged to do their own thing to the extent of making their own legislation why can't the five million citizens of the West Midlands enjoy similar freedoms? Are we missing a trick in the revitalising of politics in not spreading the devolution opportunities more widely in our governing system? By any reckoning we have an asymmetric system of devolved governance that seems unsustainable.

Our politics at the same time has become increasingly trans-national in character–both in the sense that the issues which animate us politically must increasingly be dealt with at a trans-national level if they are to be dealt with effectively and in the sense that domestic processes of political deliberation need to take account of the wider trans-national context in which they are situated–our political institutions and debates have remained stubbornly national in focus and content.

Whether we like it or not, our political processes are increasingly multi-level in character; and as they become more multi-level in character they inevitably become more complex. When political outcomes are the product of the often unintended interactions between strategies

pursued by political actors at different levels of a multi-level polity, it is immensely difficult to identify the key decision-makers, let alone to hold them to account democratically. An almost natural correlate of this is that ostensibly democratic domestic governance set in a multi-level context is almost bound to disappoint more than the far simpler process in which domestic level political actors are able to answer directly to their domestic constituents.

The impact of globalisation, the role of the European Union, the fragmentation and complexity of policy environments and the technological sophistication of key sectors of our economy and society mean that talk of anyone or anything exercising control may be misplaced. We live in a world where no body is 'in charge' in the simple sense required by some traditional versions of constitutional theory. As this suggests, especially when it comes to issues like climate change which are irredeemably trans-national in their character and impact, we suffer from a considerable 'governance deficit'. Yet such a deficit is unlikely to be filled any time soon.

Where traditional politics appears moribund, citizen politics has been empowered by the new networked technologies of the internet–blogging and social networking tools allow low-cost ways to publish news and alternative perspectives, aggregation tools collate and give equal prominence to citizen journalists and established media pundits, offering a limited challenge to the established media hegemonies. Social networking sites allow civil society groups to form and quickly grow around a single issue, act and then disperse. While MPs are starting to adopt the internet in their work,[20] citizen use happens at a pace Parliament and government cannot maintain and in a place that they are largely unfamiliar, even uncomfortable, with. The internet is no respecter of boundaries, including national borders; it is not only inherently counter-hegemonic and non-hierarchical but also trans-national. Yet, for so long as our political identities are forged primarily at the national level–as all the evidence suggest they continue to be[21]–and as long as we continue to hold our national political elites in cynical disdain, we are most unlikely to respond positively to their periodic suggestions that we transfer (further) powers from national to trans-national jurisdictions. Whether the Lisbon Treaty was ultimately about such a transfer of powers or not, the recent failure of the Irish people to ratify the Treaty by referendum at the instigation of all the major political parties is a perfect example. What makes it all the more telling is that it occurred in Ireland–the country

[20]   A. Williamson, (In press). *MPs online: Connecting with constituents.* London: Hansard Society.
[21]   C. Pattie, P. Seyd, & P. Whiteley (2004), *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

most staunchly and consistently pro-European in its attitudes according to Eurobarometer data.

Yet if we inhabit a world which is more closely integrated today than ever before–politically, culturally and economically–it is important that we don't get this out of all proportion.[22] Globalisation is by no means a new phenomenon and the extent to which domestic political dynamics were insulated from trans-national pressures in the past is often exaggerated. Moreover, in Europe at least, whether gauged politically or economically, it is regionalisation rather than globalisation that is the predominant form that trans-national integration has taken in recent decades. Finally, and relatedly, it is important that we do not provide our political elites with too ready and convenient a political alibi in our appeal to the trans-national character of contemporary political dynamics.

As British politics in recent years shows all too well, our political elites (perhaps more than most) are very capable of appealing to globalising dynamics as a way of dampening expectations about what we can and should legitimately expect from them. In the process, globalisation has become almost synonymous with political incapacity–another source, if you like, of a rising tide of depoliticisation. As this suggests, by invoking external constraints even when they enjoy considerable policy autonomy, our politicians too often conspire in a sense of their own powerlessness.

Modern governance is about steering in the context of complexity. Our traditional models of democratic thinking sit uncomfortably with this reality; but in designing institutions for the future we need to take this on board.

Misunderstanding politics?

Even if the empowerment mechanisms favoured by the Government did find ways of drawing more citizens into decision-making, the bulk of citizens would still remain observers rather than practitioners of political practice. The big unknown is how these observers come to understand politics and whether they could develop a complex and nuanced understanding of its practices. As Colin Hay argues in terms of the silent majority we 'know very little …about the cognitive process in and through which (they) come to attribute motivations to

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[22]   C. Hay (2006), 'What's Globalisation Got to Do With It? Economic Interdependence and the Future of the European Welfare States', *Government and Opposition*, 41 (1), 1-22.

the behaviour (they) witness, or how (they) come to develop and revise assumptions about human nature (they) project on to others. If politics depends ultimately on our capacity to trust one another…then there can be no more important questions for political analysts than these.' [23]

Knowing little about how politics is done we are left to judge it by its results. We constantly trip into moral consequentialism when judging politics; just as our political elites do when judging those who choose not to participate in formal politics.[24] Fair enough, you might say, since that is all the politicians ask of us. 'Judge me on my performance' they demand. But the difficulty is that we have, with their encouragement, created a blame game that offers a thin and inadequate diet of politics. Aspiring politicians convince themselves they can deliver what people want and citizens wonder if, this time, they are going to get the real thing: a politician who keeps to such promises. But we now also seem to know that this time, like the last time, the cycle will inevitably end in further disappointment.

Our disaffection with politics and with the performance of politicians in particular is often accompanied by a general sense that if we cared to we could do better. People often find it difficult to think beyond their own experiences and therefore tend to judge political decisions according to their own interests and circumstances. Naïve aspirations and assumptions about politics often flow from these preconceptions. People can assume that most other people agree with them (or would do if only the issue were explained to them properly) and that the ideal outcome is one that suits them in every detail.

If you don't like something you see in a shop you can go elsewhere but in politics the only way to get something is to use your voice–to express your concerns in concert with others– and that carries far more costs than the exit mechanism available to us in market transactions.[25] People generally don't like making a lot of effort for little reward. Accordingly, off-loading responsibility on to others as we have seen is a very common coping mechanism in political exchanges. But expressing your interest or opinion is only the start of a more general challenge in politics. You have not only to make your views known, you also have to listen. Politics is not about individual choice; it is about collective decision. Politics often

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[23] C. Hay (2008), *Why We Hate Politics* (London: Polity Press) p. 162.

[24] For a discussion of this point see M. Canovan (1992), *Hannah Arendt: A reinterpretation of her political thought* (Cambridge: CUP) p. 188.

[25] The discussion in this section of the chapter draws extensively on material from G. Stoker (2006), *Why Politics Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

involves a stumbling search to find a collective response to particular problems. It is not the most edifying human experience. It's rarely an experience of self-actualisation and more often an experience of accepting second-best. The results tend to be messy, contingent and inevitably create a mix of winners and losers.

The negative response to politics that many of us share is, we think, a very human reaction to the way politics works. As an intricate mechanism in our multi-faceted and complex societies, politics exists because we don't agree with one another. Politics is about choosing between competing interests, values and views. It often demands incompatible allocations of limited resources. Crucially, because it is a collective form of decision-making, once a choice has been made that choice has to be imposed on us all. There is no point having a rule that vehicles on a road must stop when a traffic light turns red unless it is universally observed and enforced. Politics at the level of today's large-scale, inter-connected and diverse societies is on a tough beat. Our collective will–which is what politics is supposed to express–is not easy to fathom or always comfortable to accept once it is decided upon

Conclusion: who's failing whom?

Many people seem to be of the opinion that we now face a fairly profound and deep-seated malaise in a previously reasonably healthy democratic political culture. But here, it seems, opinions diverge. By and large, citizens blame politicians (whom they see as untrustworthy, unreliable, duplicitous and as motivated by narrow self or partisan interest). Conversely, when not inadvertently blaming themselves by sub-contracting decision-making to others on the basis that those others are more competent, independent and reliable, politicians tend to blame citizens. In a way, politicians tend to see the problem as arising from a change in citizens' demand for the political goods they offer; citizens, by contrast, see it as a problem of political supply–the goods on offer are not what they once were.

There is, of course, the possibility–unwelcome and anathema to political reformers and democratic advocates–that the sullen public hostility towards politicians and politics in general is in fact a choice with which many people are entirely comfortable. This does not mean that such a position should be accepted; far from it. Although it is very tempting to work from the assumption that such beliefs must be intrinsically wrong and mistaken, efforts should be made to find out why they are in many quarters a popular choice and strategies devised to take account of where we are, not where we would like to be.

This paper and the conference it heralds suggest that, above all, we need to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the problem at hand–in which we are capable of seeing the problem from both side simultaneously. Only then, we contend, will viable solutions emerge.

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