



AntiSocial Britain and the challenge of citizenship

Peter Bradley

Britain may look like a successful society but it does not feel like one. Driven by personal aspiration, preoccupied by privacy, isolated by modern lifestyles and demoralised by the pessimism of the media, we have lost the capacity for common cause and with it our confidence in the political process and our commitment to community.

AntiSocial Britain is critical of politicians of all parties for attempting – and failing – to appease consumerism instead of arguing for citizenship and for accepting a range of social responsibilities which they cannot fulfil. But, rejecting the conventional wisdom that politicians are chiefly to blame for the decline of social capital, it argues for a rebalancing of their relationship with the public so that responsibility for civil society shifts decisively from one to the other. It calls not for smaller government but for bigger citizenship.

It goes on to outline proposals for a more visionary and purposeful politics, a more honest public debate and, above all, a greater participation by citizens in their own governance, in their own community and ultimately in securing and enjoying their own wellbeing.

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PREFACE

I have two, parallel views of British society, one pessimistic, the other full of hope.

It's not that I veer from one to the other according to the political weather or the news headlines. I'm gloomy about the present and gloomier still about the future and have been for a long time.

But I do not believe that things are bound to get worse. On the contrary, I believe that we have it within us as a society to change the course we're on and head for a better place.

I believe too in the object and utility of politics – though, critically, also in its limitations. Politics may provide the chart and compass by which society steers, but it cannot get us where we want to be. It is the people themselves, through the collective energy of citizenship, who provide the driving force.

I entered electoral politics, as most do, full of idealism. Twenty years on, I have, like most, made less of a difference than I had hoped, but I am an idealist still.

I still have faith in the instinctive goodness of men and women. In almost everything I can claim as a political achievement, I have made my contribution not in isolation but in partnership with people who have come together without thought of personal gain to secure a common good.

For those who seek it, there is evidence everywhere of people's capacity for selflessness: in their personal relationships, in their commitment to their work, in the sacrifices they make for their

families, in their dedication to their community or their devotion to public service.

These are the people who make society viable. But bright though their beacon may burn, it struggles to penetrate the thickening fog of public indifference.

For over the last three decades, each of the many steps we have taken towards personal self-sufficiency has led us further from the sense of community which we cannot be doing with, even if we can't do without it. We are less deferential but also less trusting, less dependent but also less tolerant, more mobile but more insular, wealthier and healthier but not happier. We look like a successful society but we do not feel like one.

We need to plot a different course. We can do it but, as I seek to argue, it will require a new consensus about the relationship between social purpose and individual aspiration, a more visionary and courageous kind of political leadership, a more honest and imaginative public debate and, above all, a far greater participation by citizens in their own governance, in their own community and, ultimately, in securing their own personal well-being.

This is not an academic treatise. It is not based on analytical research or an exhaustive reading of the literature. It is neither pure political science nor pure sociology.

But it does represent a distillation of twenty years' experience in frontline British politics and some of it – perhaps even much of it – will resonate with many who struggle to represent an ever more demanding but increasingly disaffected public.

Its central thesis is more easily put by a politician who is out of office than one who has in due course to face the electorate. It is that if in a democracy citizens get the governance (and the government) they deserve, they cannot entirely blame the politicians for the fragile state we're in.

It argues that politicians should stop taking more than their fair share of blame for society's ills, stop trying to legislate to compensate for the failure of citizenship and start demanding a far greater contribution from their constituents, not just to the political process but also to the life of their community. It calls not for smaller government but for bigger citizenship.

This may be an unorthodox view (though perhaps it is becoming less so). It may even be wrong. What's more, the proposals I make for a new, more exacting approach to citizenship are not intended to be any more than indicative.

That is not least because I am anxious to prevent doubts or disagreement about the solutions I offer from entirely obscuring my analysis of the problems themselves. Of course we need detailed policies and programmes, but before we can arrive at the right answers we have to ask the right questions – about where we are, where we're going and where we'd rather be – and I do not believe that we are currently doing so with sufficient clarity or candour.

I hope that in seeking to raise some of these questions I have made a useful contribution to a debate we have not really had about the role which citizens should but do not play in shaping and sustaining their own society.

I. INTRODUCTION – BRITTLE BRITAIN

One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.

Attributed to Plato

Concern has been mounting in recent years about the public's progressive disengagement from the political process in Britain. Falling voter turnout, declining membership of political parties and the lack of candidates for local office are all offered as evidence of a troubling and still deepening disenchantment.¹

The blame has generally been placed squarely at the doors of out-of-touch politicians and a cynical media and certainly some of it belongs there.

But that is not the whole story. This detachment from political activity is not an isolated phenomenon. It is just one symptom of a much wider withdrawal from civil and community life.² People have not just been turned off politics; they have turned away from citizenship.

It has been a gradual but relentless process. Over the last thirty years, growing personal prosperity has made us less dependent on and therefore less engaged with either state or community. We have become more absorbed in our own aspirations and less involved with each other. The common purpose that a shared experience of hardship once sustained has given way to a preoccupation with independence and privacy. We are increasingly reluctant to commit time and energy to a greater good which could be dedicated to our own.

Certainly we regret the loss of community but we do little to restore it and, though we worry about the consequences, we believe it is the government's job to protect us from them. By and large politicians have accepted that it is.

But they are wrong to do so. A successful democracy is the responsibility of all its citizens, not just those they delegate to govern. If our political system is in disrepute, perhaps it is because our society is in decline – and for that we all share the blame as well as the duty to revive it.

It is important that we do. Contemporary Britain may seem robust and resilient. But the outer show of material wellbeing masks deep-seated grievances and divisions. Prolonged economic turbulence or some other perhaps unexpected challenge to our current stability could expose an altogether more brittle society.

These are difficult issues for politicians, the media and other opinion formers to tackle because they demand an uncomfortable honesty, not just about their own shortcomings but also about those of the people they serve. But if social life and citizenship are to be reanimated and trust and participation in politics restored, they will have to be frankly debated and resolutely addressed.

II. THE SUCCESSFUL SOCIETY

*Every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.*

John Donne, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII*

Democratic societies work best when two essential conditions are met. First, there must be a consensus that the way in which life is organised is generally benign, even if citizens differ about precisely how or by whom they should be governed. Second, citizens must be active participants in the administration of their own lives, both as individuals and as members of a community.

Consensus and Trust

Neither of these conditions can be met if we are not able to trust in the good faith of our fellow citizens and, in particular, in those with power over us.

We must trust that our leaders shape our laws in the public interest even when we disagree with them, that those who provide the information on which we base our judgements tell us the truth even if we do not share their opinions and that our justice system is administered impartially even if it is fallible.

We must trust that those who manage our national institutions and public services do so for the general good even when they are deficient and that the people who run the businesses from which we procure our goods and services do so honestly, if not by inclination then by regulation.

Finally, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we must trust that our neighbours mean us no harm, even if they do not actively contribute to our good.

This is not an uncritical trust. But it is fundamentally optimistic. It recognises that our leaders are, like us, corruptible but accepts that they are unlikely to be corrupted, that our institutions do periodically face conflicts and crises but can withstand them, that some people make bad neighbours but most do not. It is confident that when things go wrong they can be put right. In short, it believes that democracy works.

Participative Democracy and Active Citizenship

But this trust must be a common bond: if we are to look to others to subscribe to our wellbeing, we must do the same for them. Indeed, this mutual activism is the cornerstone of democratic society, underpinning not just informal social relations but also the arrangements we make for governance.

For democracies are by their nature both cooperative and participative. Our capacity for trust enables us to assign to others roles that have a powerful influence on our lives but are necessary if society is to be efficiently administered. But the need for others to trust us requires that we retain and fulfil responsibilities of our own.

For that reason, a democracy's vitality cannot be assumed simply because it confers rights on its citizens. It depends, first, on those rights being exercised so that they do not fall into abeyance or abuse and, second, on a common and active acknowledgement that rights can only properly be enjoyed when duties to others are discharged.

We cannot, for example, live in peace if others break the law. Our neighbours will not get the services they need if we evade our taxes.

If we want social security in its broadest sense, we must procure it for others as they procure it for us.

It follows that the strongest societies are likely to be those in which citizens participate most energetically in their own governance and public administration, in political or work-based organisation, in voluntary activity, in trade, professional or religious association or in some other expression of civil, cultural and community life.

But are these the characteristics of contemporary British citizenship – or are we too ‘bowling alone’?³

III. THE WAY WE ARE

There is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women and there are families.

Margaret Thatcher, *Women's Own*, 31 October 1987

British people have never enjoyed more prosperity, greater personal freedom or a wider range of opportunities. We have never been healthier or had better access to care when we are ill. Those in work have never had more free time. Families have never had more state support. Children have never been better educated. Pensioners have never been better off. Post-war Britain has rarely had a higher standing or more influence in the world.

We ought to be a confident and optimistic society. We ought to be open-minded and open-hearted about each other. We should be eager to acknowledge that our system of governance if not the government of the day has contributed significantly to our well-being. We ought to be a society at peace with itself.

But we are not. Having more has not made us happier. Indeed, according to a growing body of research, it has had the opposite effect.⁴ Though our standard of living is rising, we believe that our quality of life is in decline. We are nostalgic for an age which enjoyed less material wealth but a richer community life, in which neighbours looked out for each other, the streets were safer and people were more trustworthy.⁵

But we are not the people our grandparents were. Values have changed. Our instincts as acquisitive, competitive individuals are stronger than our residual attachment to community spirit.⁶ If we are honest, we do not really want to return to a cooperative way of life that we also associate with economic disadvantage and social uniformity. We have made a choice – albeit a false one – between material and social wellbeing. We like the idea of community but do not actually want to live in one.⁷

Fear and Suspicion in the UK

The rejection of the interdependence between personal and public good which has gathered pace since the 1980s accounts for much of the isolation in which we now live, but undoubtedly modern lifestyles have entrenched it further.

Technology may make the world seem smaller but it also accentuates the distances between us. We can now gather the information we need, enjoy the entertainment we choose, access our services, order our goods and communicate with people we will never meet without ever leaving our own homes or encountering our own neighbours on our own streets.

The internet has opened a window on the world but shut the door on our fellow citizens.⁸ But though it makes us more self-sufficient, it does not make us more secure. In fact, it makes us more fearful.

For our ability to experience a virtual reality which we can moderate by the click of a mouse is bound to make the people outside our front doors and beyond our control seem more threatening than they are. Fear, no longer of poverty, disease or war, but of others, has become a defining feature of modern life.

The Evolution of Anti-Social Behaviour

Our current obsession with anti-social behaviour is one of the most obvious symptoms of this growing disquiet between neighbours.⁹

Perhaps it is inevitable that for those for whom the peaceful enjoyment of what they own is a central priority, fear of disorder and, worse still, of intrusion, will be a major preoccupation, often quite disproportionate to the risk they face.¹⁰

But is the anti-social behaviour which is so widely regarded as a modern phenomenon any more prevalent now than in previous generations? It may simply be that we have become more protective of our privacy and less forgiving of those who infringe it.

So, for example, though we venerate the sporting heroes who honed their skills on our grandparents' streets, we demand action against the children who play ball games in ours. But that we might now consider a child's instinct for play more of a problem than a householder's inability to tolerate it, suggests that our view of anti-social behaviour has changed radically over a relatively short time.

A generation ago we would have regarded an individual's withdrawal from neighbourly relations as the most literal kind of anti-social behaviour. People who neglected the basic social observances were regarded at least with suspicion and often worse. Today the reverse is the case: it is our neighbours' trespass on our personal space that we have come to codify as 'ASB'.

But it is perhaps because we now attach to self-containment the value we previously invested in cooperative living that we are not only more troubled by anti-social behaviour but also less able to cope with it. The fact that what was once either tolerated or regulated by the community

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now has to be controlled by legislation provides telling evidence that our society is not functioning as it should.

It is understandable that politicians should want to respond to their constituents' concerns and it is right that tackling genuinely and seriously anti-social behaviour should be high on their agenda. But doing so without attaching at least equal priority to promoting pro-social behaviour is unlikely to make communities more cohesive or people happier. ASB is a symptom not the cause of society's unease.

IV. THE MISINFORMED SOCIETY

Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.

AJ Liebing, *The New Yorker*, 14 May 1960

Even if modern materialism has led to a narrowing of public attitudes, the almost unlimited access to information we now enjoy ought to help broaden our horizons and enlighten our judgements.

Until relatively recently, Britain's rigid social hierarchy conveyed often repressive certainties about how life was ordered and about an individual's place in the system and the limited extent to which it could be challenged or changed.

But progressively since the Second World War, universal education, economic mobility and personal aspiration have displaced that old deference. They have made us freer to reach our own conclusions about how society should be run and, indeed, about how we conduct our own private lives. But if we are to make wise choices, they must be well informed.

As the influence of class, church and community has declined, so our reliance on the mass media for our view of the world has grown.¹¹ But having thrown off the hegemony of one elite, we may now be at risk from another. The fact that we live in an information age does not necessarily mean that we know the truth.

The Trouble with Truth

For those who can access it, there has never been a wider range of intelligence on which to base our judgements. But little is to be had

first hand and we have limited scope for testing what is presented to us as fact. Those who broker information have therefore become extraordinarily powerful and that power makes their duty to tell the truth all the more important.

That is why many Western democracies have legislated to ensure that if their press is not entirely truthful, it may not wholly mislead either.¹² British newspapers, however, have successfully resisted regulation, arguing that a ‘free’ press is the prerequisite of a healthy democracy and the ultimate guarantor of citizens’ rights.

But while proprietors and editors jealously guard their freedom of expression, they are not always so protective of their readers’ right to the truth. In fact, in the commercial war between rival news corporations, the truth is generally the first casualty. It is often too commonplace to sell papers, too unglamorous for TV, too insubstantial to staunch the appetite of rolling news channels, too unequivocal for outlets desperate to differentiate themselves and, not least, too difficult and too costly to pursue.

So for many in the modern media, the entertainment value of the news has supplanted accuracy as the most pressing priority. News ‘stories’ must tell a tale rather than simply report the facts and those that are not sensational or capable of being sensationalised, including most good news, rarely make the headlines.¹³

News analysis has succumbed to the same market forces. The correspondent’s role is now as much to dramatise events as to interpret them: conflict is almost always more newsworthy than consensus; debate is presented less as a contest of ideas than a clash of personalities; and the private affairs of politicians invariably command more column inches than their contribution to public life.¹⁴

Other pressures make it harder still for citizens to reach balanced judgements. Media corporations seek influence as well as profit. For many, the high stakes they invest in shaping public attitudes call too often for the deliberate misdirection of opinion or the reinforcement of prejudice.

So the cynical substitution of perceptions for facts and the subtle blending of report, analysis and editorial have become common practice, the opinions of the commentators increasingly subordinate those of the public figures whose words and deeds they interpret, and unreliable and often fabricated political intelligence frequently sets the week's news agenda.

Of course, the media are not the only guilty parties. Governments, political parties, businesses and well-funded lobbies devote huge resources to their attempts to define, deflect or defuse that agenda. Politicians offer spin and sound-bites either to meet the media's demands or to circumvent them. Pressure groups compete for their place in the headlines with ever more extreme pronouncements and attention-grabbing stunts.

But at the end of the process which brings the news to the public, what we know about the world is not so much what happens as what we read, and what we read is often factually unbalanced, adulterated by editorial bias and dramatised out of all proportion to its real significance. By the time we reach the sudoku, it is at least as likely that our judgements have been enfeebled as enlightened.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that, according to the market research, readers have less faith in tabloid journalists than in the politicians they do so much to undermine¹⁵ – and if tumbling circulation figures are a guide, they are clearly no better entertained than they are informed.¹⁶

But when, for example, voters enter their cross on the ballot paper, they are at least in part basing their verdicts about politicians they do not trust on what they read in newspapers they do not believe. That is not a healthy paradox.

The Problem with Passivity

But that is not where it ends.

While repressive regimes use the state media to make citizens feel happier with their lot, Britain's free press seems intent on making us miserable about ours.

Our view of the world is not only skewed by its distortion of events and personalities but also by a deep and corrosive pessimism which profoundly affects the terms on which our politics are conducted.

The world with which we are daily confronted is one riven by conflict, disfigured by injustice, doomed by impending natural disaster and presided over by leaders who are supposed to make our lives better but, through their indifference, incompetence or ill intentions, more often make them worse.

Of course these are all features of life and we need to know about them. But good things happen too which, were they reported, would provide a proper context for our judgements. The media, however, hold a fairground mirror up to the world and what it reflects is either unnaturally narrow and mean or overblown and monstrous. Small wonder we live in a constant state of shock and anxiety.¹⁷

But if the world is irredeemably bad and if nothing we can do will make a difference, what can be the purpose of politics or the point of citizenship?

That is the rhetorical question the tabloids pose every day. Their invariable answer is that there is very little: the citizen is abandoned, powerless and alone.

The Victim as Everyman

Indeed, the popular press's relentless simplification of complex issues through the prism of the 'human story' has made the 'victim' a central character in the national drama. For news and soap alike the narrative rarely strays from the twin themes of crisis and betrayal. In the soaps, both are personal. But on the news pages, the crises are institutional and the betrayal is invariably one of public trust.

Every day we meet the ordinary people whose experiences confirm the tabloids' worst expectations of politicians, bureaucrats and all the other powerful people who let us down. Their bleak faces tell the story of lives devastated by cancelled operations, red tape, heartless conmen, rampant criminals, failed pension schemes, political correctness, spiralling Council Tax, stress at work, neighbours from hell, next door's hedge and nightmare holidays...¹⁸

Critically, these victims are rarely presented as the architects of or even contributors to their own misfortunes. On the contrary, they are helpless either to prevent or to resolve the difficulties they face: someone else, and ultimately the government, should accept responsibility for them. They paid their taxes, placed their trust and have been betrayed. Now they are entitled to place the blame.

Though for entertainment's sake we allow ourselves to be seduced by the realism of the TV soap, ultimately we know it is fiction. But even if we discount much of what we read or hear in the news,¹⁹ its endless recycling of calamity, conspiracy and incompetence inevitably leaves an imprint on our view of the world.²⁰ Day by day it moulds a perception of

chaos and a sense of hopelessness which seriously compromise the basis for rational politics.

For how can we have faith in the system's capacity to improve our lives when so much is in turmoil or decline that it is surprising that the world has not already ended? If the NHS, immigration control, transport, policing, pensions, schools are all in a permanent state of collapse, what hope is there?

If we are so badly betrayed by our leaders, how can we trust again? If we are powerless to help ourselves and if nothing can change for the better, why contribute, why participate, why vote?

The Culture Of Disappointment

A burgeoning new media industry is helping to ingrain the same pessimism and passivity deep into our popular culture.

We have come to distrust the excellent and the exceptional perhaps because we fear that they too will betray us, and the tabloid press does its best to ensure that they do. Sooner or later our heroes are revealed to have feet of clay. Political leaders enjoy honeymoon periods but they are notoriously short-lived. The higher the media propels the stars of sports and showbiz, the more newsworthy (and gratifying) their inevitable fall to earth. It is as if, as in Greek tragedy, they must be punished for their presumption.

If genuine achievers are bound to disappoint us, it is not surprising that an explosion of TV shows and glossy magazines has made icons of those who have no real talent to abuse. We feel safe with the likes of Jordan, Jade and Jodie because, as they often very publicly demonstrate, they are no better than they should be and certainly no better than us.

They do not challenge our values. They have moved effortlessly from the mundanity of everyday life to the banality of celebrity. They are so much like everyone else, yet they are different, and rich, because they are famous. And they are famous simply because they have chosen to be. They give us hope.

Reality TV insinuates that in a world divided between voyeurs and exhibitionists, we can only truly exist if we are noticed.²¹ So, thousands queue around the block to audition for *Big Brother*, desperate to risk public humiliation for the promise of a fleeting celebrity and the chance to open a couple of supermarkets.²² For them, it seems, self-exposure has become an acceptable substitute for self-esteem.²³

Likewise, a myriad of make-over programmes hold out the prospect that the personal fulfilment which eludes us can be grafted on by cosmetic surgery or that we can somehow be transfigured by a diet or a change of clothes or by calling in the decorators, the landscape gardeners or the estate agents.

These are the preoccupations of people who are deeply disappointed by what they are as well as with what they have. Home-owning, share-owning, 4x4 democracy is not enough. We want our lives to be magically transformed and popular culture reassures us that they can be.

But this is not the belief system of secure or happy people. It is more a collective cry for help.

V. THE IMPROBABILITY OF POLITICS

*To tax and to please, no more than to love
and to be wise, is not given to men*

Edmund Burke, House of Commons, 19 April 1774

Perhaps for a large majority, sufficiency is not enough²⁴ and that paradox creates a real problem for politicians: they are simply not going to get the credit for rising standards of living if their constituents feel that their quality of life is in decline.

Indeed, that conflict between objective and subjective experience makes politics a minefield. We have never known greater or more universal well-being but feel hard done-by and resentful, never had more freedom but feel vulnerable and threatened. We have never been more concerned about anti-social behaviour but seldom behaved less sociably ourselves, never had better access to information nor been so badly misled. Our country is enjoying considerable success but we are fixated on what we perceive as its failures.

But if those contradictions make rational politics difficult, our increasingly consumerist view of the scope and purpose of government makes it harder still.

At the very time when our dependence on the state is diminishing,²⁵ our growing familiarity with the responsiveness of the market has raised expectations not just about how governments perform but also of what they can and should do for us.²⁶ And the more time and energy we commit to consumption, the more we look to government to assume our responsibilities as citizens.²⁷

So, for example, we demand more and better public services than we are prepared to procure as taxpayers. We want priorities about how they are delivered determined locally but standards maintained nationally. We want solutions to environmental problems without necessarily adapting our own lifestyles.²⁸ We want regulation to constrain others but not to restrict ourselves. We expect governments to balance competing demands in the general public interest so long as they do not compromise ours.

We want government to be at the same time unobtrusive and omnipresent. We do not want it to interfere in our lives but nonetheless to be there as the insurer of last resort when our private pension scheme collapses, when our shares lose value, when our home is flooded, when something goes wrong. When the market fails us as consumers, we expect the government to compensate us as citizens.

Inevitably, as public expectations become more difficult to fulfil, the scope for disillusion grows. We want government to eliminate life's risks and uncertainties and it cannot do that. So citizens expect governments to fail.²⁹ They do not believe that they can make a positive difference in their lives.³⁰

It would take a special courage for politicians to challenge that unreasonableness. But instead of seeking to lead public opinion, they have allowed themselves to be driven by what passes for it in the popular press. Instead of arguing for citizenship, they have sought to appease consumerism. Instead of upholding politics' social purpose, they have striven to make government look more like the market.³¹

But the strategy has backfired. By investing public services with features of the private sector and offering targets, league tables and other market-based measures of success, politicians had hoped to earn the public's approval. But all they have created are indices of failure.³²

For whether Governments deliver improved services, better value or wider choice, they can never fully satisfy the consumer's demand for more. The market may have made them more efficient, but it has not raised their stock.³³

Politics for Fifteen Minutes

Ceding the agenda to the market has had other serious consequences for consensual politics, not least because it has helped accelerate the migration from a more or less coherent 'big picture' of society to an increasingly chaotic pick-and-mix of unrelated issues and transitory causes.

Single issue campaigning has always been a feature of vibrant political cultures, but it has traditionally been conducted within the mainstream political process. Today, however, it is often presented as an alternative, even an antidote to it.

Well organised pressure groups have become adept at muscling their way into the public consciousness and onto the political agenda not so much by the force of their argument as through an eye for the photo opportunity, an ear for striking rhetoric and a sometimes troubling appeal to popular intuition.

But it is precisely the lack of proportionality in campaigns such as the People's Fuel Lobby, Fathers for Justice and the Countryside Alliance that has proved so attractive to broad coalitions of sympathisers. They appeal not just to those who share their aims but also to a legion of fellow travellers who adopt them as a vehicle for their protest against the government of the day or conventional politics in general.

Even if these campaigns have legitimacy as albeit transient expressions of popular opinion, they are deeply subversive. They encourage a belief that formal politics is redundant, that single issues can be

disaggregated from the complex challenges which communities and governments face, that they can be self-contained and disposable rather than related to some broader, longer-term view of society and that results can be achieved not over time by persuasion but instantly on demand. They are attractive precisely because they are unrealistic.³⁴

Politics as Accessory

Of course by no means all single issue politics are negative or cynical. But even the most idealistic, by rejecting the idea of participation, process and compromise, can undermine the basis for real political progress.

At the height of the American engagement in Vietnam, a group of Yippies³⁵ descended on Washington in the belief that by joining hands in an unbroken chain around the Pentagon, they could levitate the building and end the war.

They failed spectacularly in both endeavours but their delusion that wishful thinking alone can change the world foreshadowed a modern phenomenon.

Today's technology enables millions of affluent Westerners to express their solidarity with the world's downtrodden by tuning in to an intercontinental rock concert from the comfort of their own living rooms. They can register their protest against global injustice by text message and make poverty history by flourishing synthetic white bracelets on their wrists. And while they are doing all these things, they can look down from the moral high ground on the cynical and ineffectual politicians grubbing about below. Then they can go out and buy the DVD.

Of course phenomena such as Live8 have important aims and influential outcomes. But they also help detach young people in

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particular still further from the political process through which real reform can be achieved. They spurn the opportunity to enlist them to a lasting engagement with the political agenda.³⁶ Instead, they offer an instant, dispensable form of public display which demands little thought and less commitment. They make protest a substitute for politics rather than a feature of it.

That kind of compassion does not require a worldview, just a conscience and a credit card. As John Sebastian said of the Woodstock generation, ‘they drove to the revolution in their fathers’ cars’.³⁷ Now as then idealism makes a difference. But on its own, it does not really change the world.

VI. TOWARDS A DEMOCRATICAL REVIVAL

*Ask not what your country can do for you
– ask what you can do for your country.*

John F Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961

Confucius taught 2,500 years ago that in the good society men and women regulate themselves so far as possible through self-control and mutual respect. The proliferation of law-making, he warned, is the hallmark of a decadent state.

But in modern Britain, successive governments have felt compelled to introduce a whole raft of legislation specifically designed to compensate for the lack of those civic virtues. Now we have laws to control all manner of anti-social behaviour, from verbal abuse to noise pollution, from begging to binge drinking, from littering to loitering, from fly tipping to the letting off of fireworks and even the cultivation of high hedges.

Whether or not it works, the apparent necessity for this regulation – and the pressure for still more – illustrate the extent to which citizens not only feel they need protection from each other but also look to the law rather than their own social resources to secure it.

But does it matter that we live in an increasingly fragmented society so long as we are relatively wealthy and healthy and the trains run more or less on time?

It does, because it is the underlying disintegration of fellowship and

trust which provokes the disorder we fear, which in turn prompts laws which limit our freedoms and themselves give rise to fresh concern and dismay. And, as the vicious circle revolves, both the problem and the apparent solution still further undermine the public's confidence in our systems and processes.

It matters too because in times of relative prosperity and security, suspicions and resentments between citizens remain largely dormant. But we have seen enough in our society and in others to know that under pressure, perhaps from economic downturn or sustained terrorist attack or even natural disaster, far more dangerous grievances and divisions can emerge.

If we are to be able to resist them, we need to restore the social cohesion and resilience we have lost. But, as Confucius cautioned, we should not look to governments to do the job for us. While politicians can point the way to a better citizenship, they cannot make us better citizens.

From Bad Faith to the Good Society

But what must be done and who should do it?

If the fundamental problem is that citizens have lost their sense of common purpose, given up on the political process and detached themselves from their civil responsibilities – and if these are the causes as well as the symptoms of a failing society – then that is where the start should be made.

But if we are to address these issues with any hope of success, all of us – decision takers, opinion formers and citizens alike – must challenge the assumptions we know to be false but nevertheless allow to shape our attitudes to civil society.

They include the wilful misconceptions that society is everything outside our front door but nothing behind it, that paying tax and keeping the law make us good citizens, that being good citizens confers rights on us and duties on others, that our participation in the economy doubles as our contribution to the community, that governments have created and must solve the world's problems, that 'others', from our neighbours to our politicians, are our problem (but we are not theirs), that cooperation diverts us from personal fulfilment, that we are too busy to be happy, much less to make each other happy.

We need three radical renewals: a reformed political contract, a revitalised public discourse and, above all, a reactivated citizenship.

Relocating Government

First, we must rebalance the relationship between politicians and the public so that the burden of responsibility for society shifts decisively from governments to citizens.

Politicians are often accused of centralising decision-making at the expense of genuinely responsive, localised democracy. But if Britain suffers from a democratic deficit, it is not so much that governments have taken more power to themselves, as that citizens have been so eager to cede it to them. The politicians' mistake has been to accept a range of social responsibilities which they cannot hope to fulfil.

In doing so, and in fostering the delusion that government's duties and powers are limitless, politicians have created huge problems for themselves. They know that much of what they set out to do with the best intentions will miss its mark. But so long as they maintain the pretence that everything is under control when clearly it cannot be, they feed the public's disenchantment with both the process and the point – and certainly the integrity – of politics.

Smaller government
demands bigger
citizenship. Or
put another way,
big citizenship
makes government
proportionately
smaller.

If that destructive cycle of impossible demands, unmeetable expectations and spiralling public disillusion is to be broken, politicians will have to be honest, first with themselves, about what they can and cannot do. Above all, they must stop trying to compensate for the decline of citizenship and taking the blame when they fail. Instead, they should have the courage to start demanding more from the constituents who demand too much of them.³⁸

Of course they must accept their share of responsibility for diminishing confidence in public affairs. Certainly they should do more to reconnect with their constituents. But the new realism we need also requires that politicians draw more clearly the line at which government ends and citizenship begins.³⁹

Citizens too must face up to uncomfortable truths. We must accept that the quality of our society is determined by neither fate nor politics. We fashion it ourselves according to the values we adopt and the choices we make. If we are to overcome its weaknesses, we should acknowledge that the blame we heap on politicians is at least in part a displacement of the guilt we ought to feel ourselves.

Smaller government demands bigger citizenship. Or put another way, big citizenship makes government proportionately smaller. That does not mean that politicians should do less, simply that citizens should do more.⁴⁰

Governments, for example, have a duty to develop strategies, reach international agreements and set targets to overcome the threat of climate change. Regulation has a key role to play and so does the market. But does anyone really believe that we can meet the challenge unless citizens accept and play their part?

Enabling Debate

So, second, we need a national debate which ranges far beyond the confines of Westminster, Whitehall and Canary Wharf and is capable of generating genuinely fresh thinking, innovative ideas and, above all, the basis for a new consensus.

The exchange and development of ideas among citizens has been at the heart of vigorous civil life from the time of the first classical experiments in democracy. The agora of ancient Athens and the Roman forum were market places not just for goods but also for the public debate which provided the focus for civil society then and has influenced western culture ever since.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, long before the introduction of either the universal franchise or digital communications, those who could read devoured and debated the thousands of political, philosophical, scientific and religious tracts that rolled off the presses each year.⁴¹

Both traditions acknowledged not just the potency of ideas but also the role of citizens in making them a decisive influence on public policy. Today, however, citizens have largely abandoned that vital feature of civil life to the professional policy makers.⁴²

But public debate should never be the exclusive preserve of politicians, pundits and pressure groups.

What kind of society do we want to be? How do we better balance the interests of the individual and the community? How do we maintain an ethical control over the development of the new biosciences? How should Britain adapt to the emerging economies of China and India and what do they mean for our relations with our European and American partners?

How should we frame and fulfil our obligations to the world's impoverished and oppressed? What is the proper role for the international community and for Britain within it? How do we confront terrorism while preserving our liberties and those of others? What changes should we make in our personal lives to secure the future of our planet?

These are the debates we should be having not just in the political arena, in the press or on the net but wherever people can be brought together to exchange ideas and opinions, in our civic spaces and market squares, in our community centres and village halls, in our schools and our places of work and worship.

Renewing debate among and between citizens is not only a key to revitalising social and political relationships, it also provides the opportunity for politicians and other community leaders at all levels to lead and learn from a proper dialogue with those they represent.

Local government, for example, could play a central role as the facilitator of debate on any issue and in every part of an authority's administrative area. Trade unions, employers, voluntary bodies, interest groups, the professions, priests, teachers, journalists, artists and simple enthusiasts all have a contribution to make in promoting the kind of dialogue we need on the issues which matter most.

There can be few projects more urgent or necessary than that of reconnecting citizens to the conviction that ideas are important, that theirs count and that engagement in civil life can and does make a difference.

The Truth About Politics

But politicians and the media must accept that they cannot expect to

engage the public in debate so long as they continue to suppress it amongst themselves.

Political parties are terrified of disunity. They believe, justifiably, that divided parties lose elections. But their obsession with orthodoxy has made the party line a trip wire. Apart from stifling innovative thought and alienating free thinkers, it invites political opponents and the media to characterise every internal debate, no matter how thoughtful or constructive, as evidence of chaos rather than creativity and weakness instead of strength.

What do citizens infer from this and from the desperation of the parties never to be seen to be agreeing with each other? That politicians are highly principled, intellectually rigorous and supremely qualified to lead the opinion of others? Or that they are clones and apparatchiks; that conformity is more important than honest, independent thinking; that party advantage takes precedence over common sense; that consensus is unachievable; that politics is not a serious means of interpreting and securing the public interest but a game of British bulldog?

If citizens are to be involved in meaningful and purposeful debate, the terms on which party politics are conducted must undergo a radical overhaul.

Of course internal discipline is important if parties are to function coherently. But discipline ought not to be synonymous with uniformity. Parties which seek to represent the country as a whole should surely expect to reflect a broad cross section of public opinion on issues as controversial as whether to go to war or increase taxes. They should be concerned if they do not.

Party managers must be able to accept that reasoned, constructive

dissent is not by definition an act of disloyalty but essential to vibrant, honest and attractive policy making. We need more free thinking, not less.

We need too to change the rules of combat between the parties. Economic mobility has undermined old class-based allegiances and with them the public's appetite for and, indeed, tolerance of adversarial politics. But despite their periodic pledges, the parties have found it impossible to abandon the comfort of confrontation.

Common ground on public policy is no disgrace. On the contrary, it throws into sharper relief the issues on which the argument should be keenest. The trading of slogans for the sake of appearances where there is agreement and in place of genuine, principled debate where there is not, does nothing but drive the wedge deeper between politicians and the public.

Though the parties know that change is necessary, it has become an article of faith – and perhaps an evasion of tougher choices – that salvation lies in ever more sophisticated techniques for identifying 'real people' and 'local communities' and harnessing new technologies for communicating the same old message to them.

But if politicians believe that they can blog their way into the hearts and minds of their constituents, they are in for an electronic shock. It is not new means of purveying old politics we need, but a new politics altogether.

All the major parties are currently agonising over their deteriorating relationships with the electorate and all are publicly committed to mending their ways. Is it entirely fanciful to suggest that they could start by coming together in what would be an historic if not epoch-making initiative to modify their own terms of engagement?

They could start by liberating Parliament from a stultifying reverence to tradition that not only inhibits efficient administration and originality of thought but also promotes the kind of adversarialism which makes debate at Westminster so sterile and so alienating.

It is not that politicians are incapable of constructive, non-partisan engagement. Members of select committees, for example, frequently overcome party differences in a common quest for the truth and the public interest. Why is the same spirit of critical cooperation so difficult to find in any other part of the House of Commons? It is not least because, unlike the seated semicircle in which select committees deliberate, in standing committees, in Westminster Hall and in the Chamber, MPs are physically ranged against each other in open confrontation, separated in the Chamber only by the historical convention of two rapiers' lengths.

The aptly named 'cockpit' of our democracy is a forum expressly designed for discord not discourse. But it was also built for a bygone age. Perhaps, with the reform of the House of Lords now at last in prospect, it is time to turn our attention to the arguably still more important task of reforming the Commons.

Perhaps we need a new Chamber in which genuine, constructive debate can take place in language familiar to the public as well as the politicians – and in a Parliament in which citizens as well as their representatives are welcomed as partners and participants.⁴³

For example, why not make use of the Chamber when, at the close of the Parliamentary day, it would otherwise remain idle? Why not hold the kind of debate we seldom see – one without votes, without whips, without loyalty or dissent – one not about policies but about ideas!

Why not invite people in from the colleges and the constituencies, from

the shop floor and the boardroom, from the voluntary sector and the public services, from the professions and the press – people who have insights and experience to contribute to a genuine exchange of views and a genuine search for truths?⁴⁴

The main parties accept, publicly at least, that they need to change the way in which politics is conducted. But do they understand the extent to which, if the difference is to matter, the new politics must break with the old?

The Truth About The Press

Governments and political parties cannot introduce this new seriousness on their own. If we are genuinely to rehabilitate political thought and public debate, the media must play its part. We need not only imaginative ideas but also the confidence that they will be sensibly discussed and not summarily denounced before the words are formed or the ink is dry.

But our papers have consistently failed to provide such a forum and there is little reason to believe that in pursuit of their own commercial and political agendas they will not continue to subvert the kind of debate they should be supporting.

There is nothing unique about the way the modern press operates and, like any other market, it should be subject to controls that encourage the best practice, contain the worst and, so far as possible, protect the public interest.⁴⁵

Of course newspapers should never be subject to government interference but that does not mean that their freedoms ought to be unlimited. They are already constrained, for example, by laws on incitement and libel. But they do enjoy a right to which they ought not to be entitled, the right deliberately to mislead.

The press should at last be subject to the kind of statutory but independent regulation that could apply appropriate and proportionate sanctions when a paper has seriously misinformed the public – by, for example, requiring it promptly and prominently to set the record straight. Nothing is more likely to drive up standards than the threat not of government censorship but of public censure.⁴⁶

That kind of light-touch regulation would in no way increase state powers. Nor would it diminish legitimate press freedoms. But it would strengthen the right of citizens to the truth, and that is a right which ought to be strenuously promoted.

This is not a proposition that will be widely supported in the media, for which reason politicians are unlikely, publicly at least, to be eager to adopt it.⁴⁷ But if citizens are to be encouraged to take seriously the kind of national debate we talk about but never have, not only must politicians be more open and imaginative but the media must also forego their right to suppress the free flow of ideas.

VII. A NEW CITIZENSHIP

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Attributed to Margaret Mead

Creating and sustaining a national debate which genuinely involves the public in establishing national values and priorities is a vital part of the transformation we need. But it is not enough.

Citizens should be doers as well as debaters. They should themselves be the agents of change, not simply by placing demands on politicians, but through their own individual and collective activity.

But this new citizenship will not emerge of its own accord. So, third, government must create the conditions in which citizens, working together, can play a greater part in mapping out their own futures, solving their own problems and improving the quality of their own communities.

The Limits of Localism

A greater commitment to localism is not on its own the answer. Opportunities to contribute to public administration already exist at community level but many, including for example membership of town and parish councils, school governing bodies and tenants' forums, are not taken up.⁴⁸

So while the further devolution of decision-making may usefully transfer functions from one tier of government to another or from the

public to the voluntary sector, it is also likely to concentrate power in the hands of those who already wield it. Some new recruits may well be attracted to active citizenship, but the majority will remain disengaged and just as disenfranchised, albeit in future by pressure groups and decision takers closer to home.⁴⁹

But the limitations of localism as a means of empowerment or a spur to citizenship do not justify diluting the power of elected representatives by other means.⁵⁰ Public administration at all levels must certainly find better ways to consult and involve citizens, but, having done so, it is for politicians to weigh issues, opinions and competing priorities and make the decisions for which they are elected and accountable. Otherwise, what is the point of representative democracy?

A new, stronger citizenship should seek not to supplant the role of politicians but to inform and augment it, not to recycle administrative functions but to do things which currently remain undone.

This is not a new idea nor does it need to be tested. There is practical evidence in every corner of the country that whenever people come together to pool their energies, ideas and abilities for some common good, whether outside or alongside the structures of government, they are capable of transforming the quality of their community.

Government's task should be to unlock that massive potential and find new ways of harnessing the power of people to improve their own lives and those of their neighbours.

The Scope for Citizenship

In every community a huge amount is achieved through voluntary effort. But so much is left undone simply because the available human and financial resources do not match the commitment of the small minority of active citizens.⁵¹

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Every local service could do more and better for its community with greater voluntary support, not as a cover for inadequate public funding, but because that is the proper role of citizenship.

How much better for patients, practitioners and the health service if the voluntary groups which support the victims of chronic and debilitating conditions were not almost entirely made up of the patients themselves and their relatives?

How much better for students, teachers and parents if every school had a circle of friends who could help children with their studies or to develop their interests and hobbies outside school hours? Some do, but too few.

How much better for elderly or disabled people living alone were someone other than the home help or the Meals on Wheels volunteer to provide regular human contact and support? How much better if citizens took care of their neighbours? They do in many communities. Why not everywhere?

How much better for young people consigned to the street corner – and for those who rightly or wrongly feel intimidated by them – if there were enough volunteers among their parents to run a local youth club?

Where such networks exist they are often highly successful. But they are too few and far between and in many cases struggling to recruit and retain the activists on whom they rely.

It is not just voluntary and charitable organisations that could achieve so much more if they had access to the human resources they lack. Every community can be made a better place if citizens make their time and talents available to each other.

Local initiatives to create open spaces, wildlife habitats and public gardens can transform neighbourhoods and the daily experience of the people who live in them. Good neighbour and voluntary car schemes can make a life-altering difference to people isolated from goods, services and companionship.

Children's education can be galvanised by the involvement of parents and others in the life of local schools. The initiative and effort of local volunteers can and do create new or better services that revitalise whole communities.⁵²

Moreover, there are pioneering examples of successful social enterprise to be seen in all manner of cooperative ventures, in food and housing co-ops, in credit unions, time banks and community development trusts for example. But, inspirational though many of these initiatives are, they are also exceptional.

Activating Citizens

There is almost no limit to the value which active citizenship could add to the quality of British society. But while it is easy to make the argument for participation, finding the trigger is less straightforward.

We need a citizenship capable of engaging every individual member of society, irrespective of age, status or background. But it cannot be achieved by exhortation alone. Those who need little encouragement are probably already making their contribution; appealing to the cooperative instinct of those who do not have one is unlikely to convert many more.⁵³ The fact is that a large majority of British people will have to be incentivised into active citizenship.

Why should taxation not support citizenship? Tax is already one of the key determinants of our personal and social behaviour. Levies help persuade us to reduce our energy consumption, curb our drinking and

give up smoking. Credits, allowances and reliefs encourage us to work, save and give to charity. For those for whom active citizenship currently has no intrinsic value, the alternative of a new tax credit or a new tax supplement may provide the appropriate inducement.

A national Citizens' Service⁵⁴ scheme, supported by a Citizens Tax Credit, could provide a key role for government at all levels in reactivating citizenship and in forging vital new partnerships between the public, voluntary and private sectors. More importantly, it could not only stimulate and support initiatives capable of making a positive difference in every local neighbourhood but, in doing so, restate in the most practical terms the case for community, cooperation and citizenship.

Citizens' Service would be universal in scope: everyone in or able to work would be required to participate in it; everyone else would have an opportunity to do so.

The Citizens Tax Credit would reward those in employment for the time they contribute to accredited voluntary, charitable or community projects. Those who choose to opt out would make their contribution through an additional tax levy which would itself help fund Citizens' Service projects.

The scheme would provide pensioners and those on benefits with the chance so often denied them to make a continuing contribution to their community and in so doing enhance their income and entitlements.

The unemployed would be given the opportunity to learn skills and gain qualifications for work as well as receiving an income supplement for their Citizens' Service. For all these categories, the current 16 hour limit on voluntary activity would be lifted.

School leavers could be required, as an essential part of their educational development, to devote a period, say six months, to Citizens' Service either at home or overseas. Those choosing to remain in education or going straight into employment could spread the same commitment over three years, receiving a basic allowance, a work-related qualification where appropriate and a credit either redeemable through the taxation system or offset against their university tuition fees.

This is not citizenship by compulsion. While every individual qualified for work would play their part, each could choose whether to do so through their own activity or by supporting that of others. But it is recognition that in an age in which personal advantage is the key determinant of the choices we make, carrots and sticks are more likely than piety or persuasion to clear a path to citizenship.

Galvanising Communities

Such a scheme could do more than simply influence the behaviour of individuals, important though that is. Its administration would provide new opportunities for social partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors and, in particular, for local authorities to redefine their relevance to and relationship with their communities.

There is, for example, considerable scope to localise both the administration of Citizens' Service and the activities for which it would be the catalyst. Local authorities could take the lead in developing and managing – or delegating to voluntary bodies or local groups – those district-wide or neighbourhood projects that emerge through consultation with their communities. Indeed, the centrality of the public's engagement in determining priorities could provide the basis for a revitalised local democracy and a renewed legitimacy for local government.

The scheme also offers opportunities to the most local tier of public administration. The best Town and Parish Councils already achieve a great deal despite their lack of resources and authority. Citizens' Service could help fulfil their potential for community leadership and consensus building by giving them a key role in developing with local people a vision for their community and a plan to realise it.⁵⁵

Large employers or groups of employers could also be encouraged to manage schemes, perhaps in conjunction with a local Council, voluntary body or community organisation. National charities, faith groups, trade unions or membership organisations such as the Rotary Club or the Townswomen's Guild could undertake their own local, regional or national initiatives.

Citizens' Service could make a profound difference to the quality of life of communities throughout the country. It could stimulate the kind of voluntary action we need but lack – the support groups for the vulnerable, the isolated and those with special needs, the youth clubs and drop-in centres for the elderly, the mentoring networks for the young and the under-skilled, the community car schemes, the cooperatives and social enterprises, the conservation projects, the environmental protection and waste reduction initiatives, the public art and oral history projects, the neighbourhood regeneration schemes and even major public works such as the provision of community buildings.

Rebuilding a sense of individual responsibility and common purpose is an important end in itself. But through the radical transformation of local amenities and services it could deliver, such a scheme would also demonstrate in the most tangible terms that for active citizens the democratic system works.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.

Jeremy Bentham, The Commonplace Book, Works Vol. X

It is universally acknowledged that politicians must find new and better ways to engage their constituents and restore public confidence in the political system.

But if it is true that in democracies citizens get the kind of government they deserve, they too have a major role to play in making it better. Politics can change people. But people can also change politics.

It is not simply a question of electors taking a closer and less cynical interest in current affairs or resolving to vote more regularly. Citizens need to reconnect not just to the political process but also with their own sense of personal and social responsibility.

Politicians are no small part of the reason why that process has not yet begun. If we are to build a stronger society, they must at last concede the limits of their powers, not as an admission of failure or a counsel of despair, but in order to start mapping out the territory which citizens themselves should reoccupy.

Certainly we need to give citizens a greater say in the decisions politicians make at both local and national level. But that should not be the sole nor perhaps even the central purpose of a revitalised citizenship.

If we genuinely want to bring about the change we say we need, if we want a vibrant civil society, if we are to repair social relations, if we are to overcome the global challenges we face, if we simply want a better quality of life, citizens must become active beyond the confines of the political process, making and implementing their own decisions with their own neighbours and in their own communities.

It means becoming reacquainted with the principle that our own well-being is, after all, linked to that of others. It means rebuilding the consensus, participation and trust that are features of a better society than the one in which we currently live.

The proposals set out in this paper for a rebalanced relationship between the politicians and the people, an inclusive and well-informed public debate and a new and active citizenship may require detail and development. But even in outline they may make a worthwhile contribution to the honest argument we must have about the state of our inadequate society and the steps we should take to restore it.

That debate is important. But action is needed too – because we simply cannot afford to go on like this.

NOTES

- 1 The Electoral Commission's report *Election 2005: Turnout* records that a smaller proportion of the electorate voted in 2001 (59.4%) and 2005 (61.4%) than in any of the preceding 22 general elections since 1918. Throughout those 87 years, turnout never fell below 70% and peaked in 1950 at 83.9%. With 17 million failing to vote in 2005, turnout was fully 10% lower than in 1997.

The decline in voter turnout is reflected in the near collapse of political activism. The combined membership of Britain's main parties has fallen from over three million in the 1960s to less than 600,000 today and all three are struggling to field local election candidates. The Electoral Reform Society has reported that the number of uncontested seats in the 2003 district elections rose to 9.4%, while in Powys in 2004 a majority of councillors were 'elected' unopposed. *The Times* (14 April 2007) reported news from the ERS that scores of results had been determined three weeks in advance of the May local elections, quoting the reflection of the chair of the Local Government Association, Lord Bruce-Lockhart, that 'it shows a worrying lack of belief in local democracy'.

- 2 Political parties are not the only membership organisations in decline. The Women's Institute has lost half its members since the 1970s and the Scouts a third since the early 1990s.

A poll by YouGov for the Royal Society of Arts found in February 2007 that 70% of those it questioned had no ties with any local community group (80% among 18-24 year-olds), with 45% citing lack of time as the reason. Tellingly perhaps, Neighbourhood Watch was the most popular organisation, although the *Sunday Telegraph* speculated ('The rise of can't-be-bothered Britain', 1 April 2007) that 'participation... usually requires minimal effort, and involvement may be little more than a response to fear about rising crime'. The paper also quoted the view of the RSA's chief executive Matthew Taylor that 'people are saying that... they are only willing [to join community organisations] if they can do something that they can see the immediate value of'.

- 3 In his 1995 essay *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital* (expanded in 2000 into the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*), Robert D. Putnam charts what he regards as the progressive disengagement of Americans from social relations, civic activism and trust

in the political process since the 1950s. A number of commentators have identified similar trends in British society, though they offer differing analyses of their character, causes and consequences.

For example, David Halpern, the Cambridge academic until recently seconded to the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, writing in *Prospect Magazine* ('A matter of respect', July 2005), suggests that 'Britain's 'social capital' – our networks and norms of trust and reciprocity – is undergoing transformation rather than change'. He warns that three characteristics in particular – the migration from political parties with wide views of the world to interest groups with narrow ones, the loss of social trust between citizens and the disproportionate concentration of residual social capital among the affluent and powerful – should be causes for serious concern.

- 4 According to a poll carried out by GfK NOP for the BBC in 2006, while Britain is three times richer than it was 50 years ago, the proportion of those describing themselves as 'really happy' has declined from 52% in 1957 to 36% today.

- 5 In his lecture *What would make society happier?* (LSE, 3 March 2003), the economist Richard Layard noted the correlation between the capacities for trust and happiness and cited evidence that those who believe that most people in Britain can be trusted has declined from 56% in 1959 to 31% in 1995.

These findings are born out by the *World Values Survey* of Great Britain which reported in 1999 that while only 28.5% of respondents agreed that 'most people can be trusted', as many as 67.4% believed that 'you can't be too careful'.

More recently, Cambridge University's Faculty of Economics ranked the UK ninth happiest and tenth in terms of 'life satisfaction' of the 15 European Union countries it surveyed in 2004. Quoted on the BBC News website (17 April 2007), the project's leader, Dr Luisa Corrado, suggested that 'trust in society is very, very important. The countries that scored highest for happiness (Denmark, Finland and Ireland) also reported the highest levels of trust in their governments, laws and each other. The UK shows falling trust in government, the police and other institutions and higher social distrust, which might explain why the level of happiness among British people has also fallen.'

- 6 Avner Offer's *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950* (2006) argues that the single-minded pursuit of affluence, and more recently choice, has undermined rather than underpinned the quality of life we seek. Offer implies that although wealth can contribute to welfare, our obsessive consumption keeps us from what will actually make us happy, namely relationships with family, friends and neighbours.
- 7 *The Sunday Times* (4 February 2007) reported findings by HeadlightVision, part of the Henley Centre, that while in 1997 70% believed that the quality of life is best improved through a commitment to community, 52% now think that 'looking after ourselves' is a better stratagem.
- 8 Being connected has become the most effective means of keeping the world at arm's length. According to Ofcom, we now spend 49.01 hours a week watching TV, listening to the radio or on the internet or 'phone. The National Office for Statistics' *Social Trends* (no. 37) reported that in 2005/6, 79% of households owned a mobile phone (up from 17% in 1996/7), with 49% of 8-11 and 65% of 8-15 year-olds owning one.
- Interestingly, Avner Offer draws attention to the evolution in trends in consumption from labour-saving devices which free our time for leisure and social relations (like washing machines, microwaves and vacuum cleaners) to devices which consume our time and distract us from them (such as PCs, DVDs and MP3s).
- 9 According to the *British Crime Survey* for 2005/6, 17% believe that anti social behaviour is a 'very or fairly big problem' in their area, with 32% concerned about 'teenagers hanging around on the streets', up from 20% in 1992.
- 10 While, as the *BCS* records, the overall level of crime has fallen by 44% since 1995, 63% believe that it had increased in the previous two years (though it fell by 6%). Similarly, though the risk of falling victim to a crime has fallen from 40% in 1995 to a record low of 23% in 2004/5, 36% said that fear of crime had a 'great or moderate' impact on their quality of life.
- 11 The Committee for Standards in Public Life's *Survey of Public Attitudes towards Conduct in Public Life*, conducted by BMRB in 2004, found that when asked about the greatest influences on their opinions, 82% identified TV news, 63% newspapers and magazines and 45% radio, compared to just 45% who cited personal experience and 44% discussion with families and friends.
- Similarly, the *World Values Survey* (1999) found that 50.3% of its Great Britain sample never discussed politics with friends, compared to just 9.5% who did so frequently and 37.9% occasionally.
- 12 At least ten European democracies have corrective right of reply legislation. France adopted it in 1881 and Finland in 1919.
- 13 This is by no means a new phenomenon, though it has certainly intensified in recent years. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* argued in 1985 that, particularly in television, including TV news, 'form excludes the content'. He went further, suggesting that viewers are persuaded to give up their rights to information and rational argument in exchange for entertainment, almost as the citizens of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* surrendered theirs for a drug-induced state of blissful unawareness.
- 14 John Lloyd, the journalist and author of *What The Media Are Doing To Our Politics* (2004), believes that falling standards in journalism have serious consequences for democratic systems. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* ('Shoot an Arrogant Messenger' 13 January 2007), he warns that 'if we deprive politicians of their legitimacy – either by saying all politics is corrupt or by undercutting them by making them part of the entertainment industry – then essentially we deprive democratic institutions of their legitimacy. It is difficult to know what would then take their place.'
- 15 The Committee for Standards in Public Life found that while only 27% of respondents trust MPs in general (though 47% trust their own local MP), even fewer, 7%, trust tabloid journalists.
- The *World Values Survey's* findings suggest that a significant majority are simply not interested in politics: while 23.3% followed political news in the press every day and 18.7% several times a week, 15.6% did so only once or twice a week, 23.1% less often and 17.6% not at all.
- 16 The Audit Bureau of Circulation has recorded an accelerating decline in national newspaper circulation of a third since 1980. It fell 7.3% in 1980-90, 12.5% in 1990-2000 and 17% in the seven years to 2007. Circulation in April 2007 was a further 5% down on the preceding year.

- 17 Research conducted in my Parliamentary office in 2002 revealed that on the single but fairly typical day of Thursday 24 October, the word 'crisis' appeared in no fewer than 92 separate reports in UK national newspapers. It was applied across the news, politics, foreign, business, entertainment and sports sections to issues as disparate as terrorism in Chechnya and the future of apple orchards, standards in education and snack bar inspection, the threat to MG Rover and Arsenal's dropped points, concern about Japanese banking and pressure on Scottish cod fishing, the fortunes of English cricket and the construction of the British Museum, tensions over Iraq and the career of the TV presenter John Leslie, voter apathy and the financial difficulties of British newspapers.
- Interestingly, the broadsheets led the way in 'crisis management' with 59 mentions compared to 33 in the tabloids.
- 18 According to the 2005/6 *British Crime Survey*, readers of tabloid newspapers are twice as likely as readers of broadsheets to believe that crime levels have risen 'a lot' during the previous two years (though in fact they have declined) and are twice as likely to be 'very worried' about crime.
- 19 The Committee for Standards in Public Life survey found that only 7% trust tabloid journalists and that while 38% said that they trusted broadsheet journalists, 56% said that they did not.
- The *World Values Survey* (1999) found that only 1.3% of its Great Britain respondents had 'a great deal' and 14.4% 'quite a lot' of confidence in the press, with 48.1% having 'not very much' and 35% 'none' at all.
- 20 46% of respondents told the Committee for Standards in Public Life that they formed their opinions from 'things picked up over time' but were unable to be more specific as to what had influenced them.
- 21 The UK's first 'live' internet suicide, in March 2007, is perhaps the most disturbing and perversely ironic example of this phenomenon to date. But it is unlikely to be the last or even the most shocking. For while the competition to devise ever more attention-grabbing TV formats is ultimately subject to tests of public harm and offence, the internet remains largely unregulated.
- 22 In a survey of 2,000 5-10 year-olds in 2004, Luton First found that 'being famous' was the best thing in the world, with 'my family' in second place and God in sixth. In 2005, 'money and getting rich' had pushed 'being famous' into second, with families at six and God at ten.
- 23 In its pursuit of the bizarre, the abnormal and the extreme, reality TV bears intriguing similarities to the freak shows of old. But in the past people came to view – and be repulsed by – the exhibits; now they want to be them.
- 24 As Richard Layard and other economists argue, being relatively well-off does not make people happier except, understandably, among those escaping poverty and, less justifiably, those who believe that they are doing better than their peers.
- Perhaps highlighting the tension between material and personal wellbeing, the *World Values Survey* found in 1999 that while 63.1% believed that less emphasis on money and material possessions would be 'a good thing', for more respondents (37%) than any other category, improving the standard of living was the top priority.
- 25 Through the privatisation of municipal housing, public utilities, transport infrastructure and nationalised industries, we have in effect consumed much of the post-war state.
- 26 The Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe has observed that 'we now expect more of government than we do of God'.
- 27 A militant but not entirely atypical view of this kind of anti-political consumerism was succinctly expressed in an email (2 April 2007) from E Diggins to the *Sunday Telegraph* in response to its report the previous day on 'The rise of can't-be-bothered Britain' (op. cit): 'Why should anyone voluntarily do a job when the government extracts an increasing amount of tax from them to pay for the work to be done? For instance, why voluntarily work in a hospital when the government substantially increases your tax bill to pay more for the NHS? It makes more sense to engage in more paid employment so that you have enough money to pay the tax that pays for the NHS.'
- 28 *The Sunday Times* (4 February 2007) cites claims by Friends of the Earth that only 10% take action voluntarily on environmental issues. According to FoE director Tony Juniper, 'the rest won't: they don't see the point, they don't understand it or they don't care.'
- 29 MORI reported in November 2006 that more people expected the Government's policies to damage the economy and every public

- service (other than education) than improve them. In its *Britain in 2006* summary, it reported that the number saying that public services fall short of their expectations had increased from 44% in 1998 to 52% in 2004 despite the intervening programme of investment and reform.
- 30 The Labour MP Tom Levitt tells of a chastening experience familiar to canvassers of all parties. He thought that he had prevailed on a reluctant constituent to vote for him in the 2001 election when, despite her belief that 'all the parties are the same and none of them do anything for us', she acknowledged that the Working Families Tax Credit, introduced by Labour in the face of Conservative opposition, had actually made her and her family better off. But as he was congratulating himself on his persuasive skills, she issued the chilling retort that the Government could take no credit for improving her quality of life because 'it would have happened anyway'.
- 31 David Marquand, in *Decline of the Public* (2004), indicts what he calls the 'Kulturkampf against the public domain' of the last twenty years, during which 'incessant marketisation has done even more damage than low taxation and resource starvation. It has generated a culture of distrust that is corroding the values of professionalism, citizenship, equity and service... There is no point in appealing to the values of common citizenship. There are no citizens; there are only customers.' In consequence, Marquand believes, 'a crushing majority of the British people distrusts the political class, and has lost faith in the system through which it is governed.'
- 32 This managerial approach to politics may have other unintended consequences. Meg Russell, in her 2005 Fabian pamphlet *Must Politics Disappoint?*, observes that a Government that claims to be 'driven by "delivery" and "what works"', rather than by a distinct vision of the better society... threatens to leave many voters disorientated and confused'. She goes on to cite evidence that those who perceive major ideological differences between the parties are in fact more likely to vote and significantly more likely to be satisfied with the democratic system. This proposition gained further support from turnouts of just under 85% in both rounds of the French Presidential elections of April/May 2007 when voters faced a clear choice between candidates of left and right.
- 33 According to the European Commission's annual opinion survey Standard Eurobarometer (no. 63) for 2005, only 36% of Britons trust their Parliament, down from 51% in 1996, while only 34% trust the Government and only 22% trust political parties.
- 34 This unwillingness to accept compromise is not limited to supporters of populist campaigns. In his *In Defence of Politics* (1962, but reprinted as recently as 2006), Sir Bernard Crick describes as one of democracy's false friends the liberal who rejects the moral complexities and imperfections of government but 'wishes to enjoy all the fruits of politics without paying the price or noticing the pain. He likes to honour the fruit but not the tree; he wishes to pluck each fruit – liberty, representative government, honesty in government, economic prosperity, and free or general education, etc. – and then preserve them from further contact with politics.'
- 35 The Yippies were followers of the countercultural and flamboyantly theatrical Youth International Party, founded in 1966 by, among others, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, two of the 'Chicago Seven' who were tried on charges of conspiring to incite riot at the Democratic National Convention in 1968. In the same year they proposed a pig as their Presidential candidate.
- 36 The *World Values Survey* (1999) found that despite the commitment of the large majority to the democratic system, only 5.3% thought politics 'very' and 28.9% 'rather' important, compared to 36.5% who considered it 'not very' and 29.4% 'not at all'. Interest in politics mirrored these findings (7.5% very interested, 29.3% somewhat, 27% not very, 34.8% not at all).
- 37 The sometime lead singer of The Lovin' Spoonful was speaking at the Isle of Wight pop festival in 1970.
- 38 This is not the analysis favoured by the Power Commission's report *Power to the People* (February 2006). It concluded that 'the level of alienation felt towards politicians, the main political parties and the key institutions of the political system is extremely high and widespread'. But while it found fault with the democratic process, the parties and the electoral system, it rejects the possibility that disengagement could be the consequence of 'an apathetic and disinterested public with a weak sense of civic duty' or, for that matter, 'an overly negative news media'.
- 39 Politicians of all parties have laid considerable emphasis on the need to balance access to rights with the fulfilment of responsibilities. But they have rarely dared to challenge citizens to do more than keep the peace. Rather, they have focused attention,

- and enforcement, on those at the lowest end of the economic scale and with least to contribute – for example immigrants and benefit claimants – as a means of appeasing those with the most.
- 40 As Anthony Giddens put it in *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), 'social cohesion can't be guaranteed by the top-down action of the state or by appeal to tradition. We have to make our lives in a more active way than was true of previous generations, and we need more actively to accept responsibilities for the consequences of what we do and the lifestyle habits we adopt. The theme of responsibility, or mutual obligation, was there in old-style social democracy, but was largely dormant, since it was submerged within the concept of collective provision. We have to find a new balance between individual and collective responsibilities today.'
- 41 In late eighteenth century France, as the *ancien régime* neared its end, 10,000 pamphlets a year were being printed for or against the monarchy or the revolution. Estimates of the print run of *Common Sense*, Tom Paine's 1776 argument for American independence, vary from 150,000 to 600,000, but even the lower figure is astonishing given prevailing literacy rates.
- 42 Declan McHugh and Philip Parvin in *Neglecting Democracy* (Hansard Society, 2005) cite research by MORI which suggests that 'the majority of public policy debates and political activity in Britain is driven by around 6% of the population'.
- 43 The question arises as to whether Britain actually needs a new Parliament building, designed for a new kind of politics and a new style of government. Interestingly, the Government Minister Lord Adonis, writing in *Prospect* magazine ('Go north, upper house', 29 March 2007), speculates as to whether reform of the House of Lords presents the opportunity to relocate the second chamber to 'one of England's regional cities' and transform the abandoned chamber into a visitors' centre, thus 'opening the Palace of Westminster properly to the public for the first time'.
- 44 I originally set out these arguments in an article in *The Times* ('This is the Commons: now, what century is it?', 12 May 2003) in which I posed the rhetorical question: 'Would not such a letting in of light and air send out an important message: that Parliament is after all a public place, a forum for ideas, the cornerstone of a truly participative democracy?'
- 45 As Onora O'Neill, the philosopher and former Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, put it in her lecture to the Royal Irish Academy (4 December 2003) on *Rethinking Freedom of the Press*, 'the fourth estate has no good claim to be exempt from generally required standards of conduct – whose imposition on others they commonly support with some warmth' and cites the seven Nolan principles on conduct in public life (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership), to which politicians are subject while journalists are not.
- 46 It is worth noting that it is now some fifteen years since David Mellor, then National Heritage Secretary, issued the warning that 'the popular press is drinking in the last chance saloon', since when the bingeing has continued unabated.
- 47 My own Right of Reply & Press Standards Bill 2005, though it enjoyed the support of a number of distinguished journalists as well as the NUJ, the Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom and MediaWise, was roundly condemned by the papers and failed to win Government support.
- 48 The National Association of Local Councils estimates, in the absence of definitive data from the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG), that of approximately 85,000 town and parish councillors, some 20%, or 17,000, are co-opted. However, though she did not cite her source, the Conservative Shadow Communities & Local Government Secretary Caroline Spelman told the House of Commons in a debate on the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Bill (Hansard col 1160, 22 January 2007) that 'last year only 10% of parish council seats were contested'.
- 49 Interestingly the DCLG's 2005 *Citizenship Survey* found that people who undertake civic participation activities (described as contacting officials or elected representatives, signing a petition or attending a public meeting or demonstration) are less likely to trust Parliament or their local Council than those who do not.
- 50 Distinguished commentators such as Gerry Stoker, author of *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*, have, for example, argued for wider use of referenda as a means of extending local democracy. But it is by no means clear that such strategies would not disproportionately benefit the self interested and well organised at the expense of the majority.

There is graphic recent evidence of the difficulties thrown up by what Tom Steinberg, creator of the Downing Street website's petition page, has called 'structured engagement' between politicians and the public. Between November 2006 and February 2007, over 1.8 million people signed an e-petition calling on the Prime Minister to scrap 'the planned... road pricing policy'. But while the PM's official spokesman referred to the petition as a feature of a 'lively debate', it is doubtful whether many had carefully considered the arguments for and against road pricing as a means of reducing congestion and pollution before clicking their opposition to what the campaign organiser simply cast as 'an unfair tax'. The Government, however, now faces an impossible dilemma: it must either abandon a policy before it has been properly aired or press ahead with it in the face of apparently overwhelming public opposition. As a Government source told *The Guardian* (14 February 2007), 'we cannot be seen to bend, but we have to listen'.

- 51 The DCLG's 2005 *Citizenship Survey* found that only 37% of people had undertaken informal voluntary activity on a monthly basis over the previous year and that the most common form of informal voluntary activity (at 52%) was as unstructured as 'giving advice'.
- 52 The DCLG's 2005 *Citizenship Survey* reported that those involved in voluntary activity have more positive views of their neighbours and neighbourhood than those who are not. However, it is not clear whether these attitudes are the stimulus for or the consequence of volunteering.
- 53 The Home Office *Citizenship Survey* found that in 2003 only 3% had taken part in civil activity at least once a month over the preceding year and even in those cases the simple act of signing a petition, at 68%, was identified as the most common form of participation. The survey also found that 62% had undertaken no civil activity at all.
- 54 There are precedents, for example in the Roosevelt administration's New Deal in the United States of the 1930s, in the German 'community service' opt-out from compulsory military service which attracts 90,000 young conscientious objectors a year, in the similar 'national service' scheme which operated in Italy prior to the end of conscription in 2005 (and survives in modified form) and in post-war National Service in the UK.
- 55 Such a role already exists, at least to a limited extent, and has been successfully promoted by the Government through the Vital Villages and Quality Parish Council schemes.

For Jörg Zilian, mentor and friend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Bradley was MP for The Wrekin between 1997 and 2005, chairing the Rural Group of Labour MPs and serving on the Public Administration Select Committee and subsequently as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. From 1986 to 1996 he was a member of Westminster City Council.

He is currently director of the newly formed Speakers' Corner Trust, which seeks to promote public debate and active citizenship through its programmes both in the UK and in emerging democracies overseas.

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