

## FROTH IS NOT BEER

### DECODING A CONFUSING VOCABULARY

Donald Trump is setting out to destroy, among many other things, the educational system of the USA. Its connection with communities was already severely damaged. Tony Blair, following Margaret Thatcher, disconnected schools from democratic communities, differentiated and commodified them and separated children according to religion; and as a declared disciple of Blair Michael Gove was an enthusiastic educational fracker. Ultimately, of course, it is society that is fracked.

One reason why we have Brexit and Trump and policies that damage society is what has been a deliberately induced poor level of political literacy. Beginning in 1971 a determined effort was made by the political education movement to improve political literacy. Once, however, Kenneth Baker introduced his National Curriculum and Kenneth Clarke launched Ofsted the curriculum narrowed to what politicians felt ought to be measured. Those of us who were part of the political education movement saw our efforts gradually marginalised and the return of Citizenship as an optional school subject. None of us in the UK is a citizen, as it would be understood in France for example: we are subjects of the Crown<sup>1</sup>. And now we have a Prime Minister, Theresa May, who does not hide her wish to make huge changes affecting our values and our livelihoods by means of the Royal Prerogative.

What follows is my attempt to re-examine some of our political vocabulary and to offer new terms that better describe what I believe really happens. I do not expect total agreement with what I have to say and it is hardly an exhaustive discursion on the subject. I do, however, wish to stimulate discussion.

### POLITICS

#### What is it?

My preferred definition is that politics is the inclusive discussion of and arrival at public values: a process that must precede the construction of policy. Policy making without politics is dictatorship even if there are grades of politics and grades of dictatorship.

In 1962, when Bernard Crick published *In Defence of Politics*, his intention was to restore the meaning of politics: to remind us that it is about public values. Fifty years after Crick's book went on sale Michael Flinders, a successor of Crick's at the University of Sheffield, published *Defending Politics* with a similar intention. Why, we should ask, is it necessary from time

to time for us to have to be reminded that politics is supposed to be an inclusive public activity and not one exclusively limited to a few people making policy?

### Do we practise politics?

No, we receive policy from those that hoard power and often make a very big mess of using it.

For an understanding of how governments often do not work efficiently and very often work extremely inefficiently, especially when they forget to do politics inclusively, it is useful to look at ***The Blunders of our Governments (2013)*** by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe. Although the majority of the blunders described and analysed took place in the UK their sections on Human Errors and System Failures are globally relevant. The recurring questions as you read the book are how on earth the devisers of disastrous policies managed **a)** to escape the blame and **b)** to give all the difficult jobs to others. Even putting Michael Barber, Tony Blair's Mr. Deliverology, in charge of implementing policy did not make things better. In many areas of government the deliverology and measureology approaches made things worse<sup>ii</sup>.

## ERSATZ POLITICS

### What is it?

Simply, it is pretend politics. It is artificial. The link below is to my review of a book by Tony Blair's focus group expert. I chose the title because the word 'ersatz' signifies an inferior substitute made to look like the real thing.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/ErsatzPolitics.pdf>

### Do we practise ersatz politics?

Yes, the result of the referendum on membership of the EU did not emerge from a genuine political process. Lots of expensive advertising accompanied by unverifiable claims countering other unverifiable claims may have looked like a political process but **froth is not beer**. Here is a link to my review of a book on Brexit. My title was chosen to signify the superficiality of what took place.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/UnleashingDemons.pdf>

## DEMOCRACY

### What is it?

There have always been lots of examples of democratic behaviour involving different customs and cultures. Democracy is not simply derived from Athens. Defining democracy usually involves translation of the Greek word, thereby inhibiting us from looking at other ways of making decisions collectively. Nomadic tribes, for example, often were and are democratic.

For a country to be called a democracy is today a desired label. It was not always. The framers of the constitution of the USA (a republic) took a great deal of trouble to prevent the country becoming a democracy. They did not completely succeed. By contrast there are numerous monarchies that wish to be regarded as democracies. It is a very disputable and variable concept. John Keane's *The Life and Death of Democracy (2009)* claims to be the first history of democracy to have been written for more than 100 years (not sure about that). If there is a single message from his very large book it is that, despite its desirability as a label, the concept of democracy is fragile.

### Do we practise democracy?

We do, sort of, sometimes, a bit. In 1911 when the Parliament Act was passed establishing the supremacy of the elected House of Commons over the hereditary House of Lords it looked like progress towards democracy. Three years after that Act we went to war. War suspends democracy. The two are incompatible. The consequences of war can mean that any restoration of democracy will be uncertain, transitory and weak. In 1945 Britain was lucky to experience a very strong assertion of democracy. It lasted, in the form of the 'post war consensus', until the accession of Margaret Thatcher. It did, however, take a body blow in 1950 when the USA pressured Britain to join in the Korean War. Our military spending doubled and our fragile welfare state suffered because of that war.

1951, incidentally, saw the Labour Party gain the majority of the votes in the general election but lose power to the Conservatives who obtained more seats. We also call that democracy.

I remind myself that since 1945 the USA has been almost continuously at war. Currently the USA is waving its sabre at both Iran and China. When it does not have a proper good old-fashioned war to fight it declares war on an abstract noun. Today that abstract noun is **terrorism**. How do you sign a peace treaty with an abstract noun? And what has all this done for democracy?

It has, however, done a lot for the arms industry.

## SHAMOCRACY

### What is it?

It is the systemic partner of Ersatz Politics. Israel, for example, has been referred to (by Israelis) as an **ethnocracy**. If there is democracy in Israel it is racially ring fenced. Palestinian schools (labelled 'Arab' in Israel) have less funding. If you are labelled as belonging to the wrong race obtaining a permit to build or renovate a house is extremely difficult. The benefits of citizenship are quite deliberately unequally distributed. People are given racial labels to wear. And yet, despite all the evidence to the contrary, our politicians repeat the lie that Israel is *The Only Democracy in the Middle East*. Just up the road Lebanon really does make the effort to be democratic.

The government of the UK talks a lot about British Values. The values promoted by our governments tolerate a widening of the gap between rich and poor. They disparage the different and the foreign and they commodify people. We learned from our school history books that we became more and more enfranchised. In fact all we got was an occasional vote. That vote came with restricted participation. If you restrict participation while announcing that you are a democracy then you have shamocracy. The voters are deceived.

### Do we practise shamocracy?

I think that I have answered my own question above. Yes we do. And shrugging our shoulders while telling our mates that there is no point in voting because 'they are all the same' will do nothing to change this.

## LEFT WING

### What is it?

The French Revolution gave us the terms Left and Right, derived from where you sat in the Assembly. The further left you sat the more likely you were to consistently support the notion that power should not only lie with the citizenry but that the values of government should be liberty, equality and fraternity. The Committee of Public Safety was not, however, anything remotely left wing.

### Do we have it?

We don't even understand it. Somehow we have drawn the conclusion that the left is characterised by advocates of enforced change, albeit in the direction of equality. Enforcement is not, I suggest, a characteristic of the left. My first hand experience of working for a local government council run by Militant Tendency demonstrated clearly to me that such people belonged in the next category. Discussion? Permitted dissent? Friendly disagreement? Forget it! Suppression is not, I believe, left wing.

## RIGHT WING

### What is it?

Back in 1789 if you sat on the far right you were in favour of absolute government in the form of Louis XVI. Tony Blair was a fully paid up member of the Labour Party and yet we have to classify him as a practitioner of absolute government. Possibly Margaret Thatcher's most famous absolutist episode was the Poll Tax. For Blair it was Iraq. They are, however, merely prominent examples from among many. In the case of Thatcher her downfall followed relatively quickly. Blair somehow managed to survive in power despite a ruined reputation. Today his personal hot air balloon has many holes and tears but is kept aloft because he desperately blows into it.

### Do we have it?

We very definitely do. It will actually get worse because of Brexit. We simply do not have enough civil servants at present so we hire G4S, Capita, Atos and other companies to replace them. This will increase. And the House of Commons does not have the capacity to scrutinise proposed legislation. Although Select Committees have much of the necessary knowledge and expertise they are kept away from bills in case they might inhibit the government's desire to have its own way. Consequently, the House of Lords plays a scrutinising role. Not one of its members was elected.

The volume of legislation following Brexit will be so great that the monarchical powers in our system will have to be used more and more. My point about us being subjects not citizens has been reinforced by Theresa May simply assuming that she could start the Brexit process by use of the Royal Prerogative and I wonder how many British voters are even aware of its existence. Many of us moan about having a Royal Family. They are not the problem. It is the monarchical powers used by politicians that is the problem.

## Conclusion

In my view we are now subject to two forces. The long term one is what I have been writing about for some years: the fracturing of society. Below is a link to some of what I have been saying about social fracturing.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/Frak7.pdf>

The short-term force was described rather well by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*. She is not the only one writing on this theme but the link below gives a useful insight to what she has been saying.

<http://www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine>

Brexit and Trump emerge from long-term social fracturing but today the shock that they have given us also provides opportunity for some very nasty people

to destroy much that has held us together in relative, though insufficiently humane, cohesion. How we talk about our social values, how we manage disagreement, how we make law, how we engage with each other are now in question. Vocabulary is part of this. Words, concepts, notions and labels can make things worse. They can also make things better if we are prepared to try.

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**In order to stimulate criticism of my writing the following link may be useful.**

**<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.pdf>**

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<sup>i</sup> **<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/Frak8.pdf>**

<sup>ii</sup> In 1916 Lloyd George and Maurice Hankey ensured that government worked more efficiently. The Cabinet Office was established and the business like approach that was adopted then saw us through a severe depression and two world wars. It also gave us the Welfare State and nationalised industries. Tony Blair threw that away. His absolutism was not to be held back by boring and painstaking attention to detail. Nor was it ever going to allow discussion, dissent, dispute and difference of opinion to get in the way of or thwart his determination.