

ANOTHER LOOK AT LEFT AND RIGHT

That word SOCIETY has stimulated countless books, articles, policies, lectures, theories and arguments. The question is: if we wish to live together on what basis shall we do it? Other questions are: how shall we set about making such decisions, who shall take part in discussion? If the emphasis is upon our being subjects rather than being citizens then most key decisions about the shape and values of society shall be received from the already powerful.

Our task will then be to implement decisions taken not on an inclusive basis but upon an exclusive one. A society in which the reactive majority responds to a proactive minority is intended to be tidy, especially when the majority is persuaded to behave within the rules and boundaries set for it.. As I have asserted, a right wing absolutist government has only one card to play: the card of competence. Move to the left and you risk untidiness. Would that be worse? Would that automatically mean a loss of competence?

In 2019 it shall be forty years since the accession of Thatcher. How has our society fared since? I do not believe that it has had the benefit of competent governance; especially if competence is to be measured on the widespread nature of social benefit. We have massive evidence of the reverse. Social stratification is embedded and the gaps between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, are now huge. My point has been that if the rich and powerful perceive this to be to their advantage they are making a big mistake: a society that has been fracked benefits no one. Mostly, however, they shall be the last to suffer from their actions: their socially destructive actions.

Perhaps I could try harder to be optimistic but first it is necessary to re-state my understanding of those terms LEFT and RIGHT. For me they are crucial for an understanding of societal change or lack of change.

I believe that everyone recognises the 1789 French origin of the terms: right wing meaning support for absolute government and left wing support for more and wider participation in governmental decision making. It seems, however, to be the contemporary view that a simple spectrum like this is nostalgically obsolete. Apart from the point that someone can be, always could be, described as right wing on somethings and leftwing on others there is the often unresisted urge to classify and sub-classify till the cows come home. That process, in my mind, concentrates far too much on issues and policies. 'Where do you stand on X? On Y?' And so on. It means that we spend too much time using variants of 'left' and 'right' to make sense of an ever changing kaleidoscope. Instead we should be discussing values.

In *Left or Right-The Bogus Dilemma, a Demolition Of The Conventional Map of Politics* (1968) Samuel Brittan warns that thinking left-right results in a battle for the 'centre'. He also reminds us of a tendency to settle for a few years of 'left' followed by a few years of 'right'. Since 1979 it has been difficult to spot any 'left'. He is, I think, arguing for recognition that on many issues the arguments lose something by being too quickly labelled as being owned by one side or another and that this diminishes discussion and the effectiveness of government.

My attachment to the original definition is, however, based upon my experience of coping with governments since 1979; directly this concentrated upon education. As Thatcher administrations seized control of both the school curriculum and assessment the attendance of 'minders' was noticeable when decisions were to be taken about what should be taught and how it should be assessed. I remember once we were admonished for using the term 'learning experience' instead of 'lessons'. And Thatcher much preferred tests to tasks.

Under Blair it was impermissible to ask fundamental questions. If you did you would be told that you could not discuss the merits of a 'government given'. The consultation event that you were attending was only ever about how to implement policy you had taken no part in devising. Your experience and expertise only mattered in terms of how to do what you were told.

One reason for my attachment to a simple and original definition of the terms 'left' and 'right' is my belief that any trust we have placed in the ability of absolutist governments such as those of Thatcher and Blair and now, heaven help us, Theresa May to deliver competent government has proven to have been totally misplaced.

If to be left wing involves widening participation then it almost certainly multiplies the chances of misunderstanding and there are bound to be cock ups. It will be untidy but it will be politics and, I believe, those cock ups shall be more public, more open to examination and that we shall learn from them far more quickly than we learn from the hidden cock ups of absolute governments.

Cliff Jones 20th. April 2018