

AT LAST SOME SANITY

Unspeakable The Autobiography of John Bercow

Bercow grinds few party political axes in his book; his personal axe grinding is to the point, especially when responding to attacks that have been made on him; he informs his readers; and he offers us a well-reasoned look into a possibly productive future.

Theresa May has said that she has no intention to write a memoir. That was very wise of her. Cameron has written one. I have read it. I even attempted to review it. What did it demonstrate? Despite his attempt to assert otherwise, it showed very clearly that the entire mess and danger in which we find ourselves today can only be attributed to an internal Tory Party struggle for power. Being 'Top Tory' is all that counts for some people. THAT referendum had only one purpose. Bercow pulls no punches as he describes the ever increasing dysfunctionality of the post coalition governments of Cameron and May.

Reviewers of books bring with them their personal opinions and judgments of, in this case, a group of politicians, so I admit that at times I may have evaluated this book on the extent to which it confirms what I already thought. At one point his description of Leadsom, for example, made me want to punch the air shouting "YES, that is what I always thought." As Leader of the House she totally ignored what impact leaving the EU would have upon its capacity to scrutinise legislation.

As it happens, I do not always agree with him. I believe that he lets Gove off far too lightly. Having a professional background in education I would say the same of his treatment of Ken Clarke, the father of Ofsted, and of Ed Balls who, when devising policy, ignored the masters and doctoral work of many thousands of schoolteachers as they made critical sense of both policy and practice.

The book is in part a story of Bercow's retreat from extreme rightwingery to a kind of conservatism that feels comfortable promoting equal rights; and yet he cannot quite bring himself to acknowledge the social damage inflicted by Thatcher or to admit that the advocacy by Theresa May, which he supported, of grammar schools ran counter to his desire for greater social mobility.

Nevertheless, wherever you place him at any given moment on an unsteady left/right spectrum, he has written a book that is not only believable but also valuable.

Particularly since Blair's administrations I have been thinking that all of those government and politics text books with chapters on accountability ought to be re-classified as ancient history. Blair stood the concept of accountability on its head and largely governed by means of setting targets to be hit or else: we became accountable to government. On the left/right spectrum this was a shift from democracy towards autocracy.

When Cameron announced that he would treat the result of a legally advisory referendum as though it were binding everything changed. Thirty seven percent of the electorate had advised Parliament that they wished to leave the EU. Suddenly, however, Parliament was to be mostly prevented from carrying out its role in scrutinising, questioning, disputing and possibly rejecting government proposals or the advice of voters.

In other words, Parliament was now expected not to exercise its power to hold government to account. Government, not Parliament, had decided that we must leave the EU and on what terms.

Bercow gives an excellent account of all of this and it is not simply from his book that we have been able to see the clash between Parliament, in his case the Commons, and government. The evidence of the clash and his role in it has been inescapable.

Unlike the USA our so-called 'separation of powers' is more a fusion of powers. The Executive, Legislature and Judiciary have learned to co-habit and not bump into each other too often or too disastrously. The written constitution of the USA is now proving to be an insufficient instrument to control an Executive with a tendency to go berserk. In the UK our long practised conventions are also looking fragile as they come under similar pressure.

In order to cope with an Executive that, while using the concept of Democracy as a bludgeon with which to beat anyone that disagrees with it, behaves as an Autocrat, it will help if we read, disseminate and discuss Bercow's book.

I have missed out his pen portraits of so many people; he provides a lot of detail on what it is like to chair meetings, including the values that chairs must keep in mind; his account of Brexit from the perspective of the Speaker cannot be ignored; and his writing style so much better than just about every politician that I did not skip around trying to find something interesting to read, it was all interesting.

Most of all, however, the book is timely. Brexit does not merely present us with a material crisis: it presents us with a constitutional crisis interwoven with a questioning of our values. In what kind of society do we wish to live?

I feel better for having read the book. I guarantee that Cameron, May and members of our present government shall not.

Cliff Jones 22nd. February 2020

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