

SOME IDEAS TO GET US THINKING ABOUT GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

It is not easy to work out where to begin. This is only a small fragment of what can be said on the subject but, hoping to stimulate critical conversation, I have suggested that we might go back to 1829 for guidance. It was an interesting time. The year before gave us the Catholic Emancipation Act and three years later during a time of relatively well-behaved revolution in a number of European countries Britain began to expand its franchise. That came from the so-called 'Great' Reform Act. A year later we got the first Factory Act. It was a time when a number of prominent Tories perceived a need to put on liberal clothing. I begin, however, in 1951.

In that year Attlee's Labour Party won the popular vote but, because of our electoral system, lost power. As Gordon Brown points out in his book, at the general election of 2010 fifteen million people voted against austerity and only ten million voted for it. We got austerity. There was a slight difference then because, having told the electorate that they were against austerity and, famously, tuition fees, the Liberal Democrats endorsed Tory policies when offered a role in the Coalition Government. The ability to rationalise away values for the possibility of power is, for so many politicians, an innate talent.

I believe that our parliamentary electoral system is anti democratic. In the run up to the 1997 election Tony Blair flirted outrageously with proponents of proportional representation, specifically with Roy Jenkins. His fear of only a tiny and insecure win drove him to consider the change. A thumping power-granting win changed his mind. Yes, it was almost certainly the case that newly elected Labour MPs had no wish for change but his own party was seldom allowed to impede Blair when he was set upon something that he wanted. It seems that he only wanted proportional representation if it led to power. The question is, how do we persuade politicians to give a higher value to representation than to power? 1964 was a very close run general election and 1974 provided two of them. They did not change the minds of power hungry politicians. What might?

Perhaps fantasising might help. Jeremy Corbyn has, I believe, gone some way to opening up political discourse to accept concepts such as 'fairness'. But is he perhaps a stick-in-the-mud party loyalist? How far might he go to make common purpose with the Greens, for example? They have only one MP but their political significance might be very widespread. The values for which they stand strike chords that can turn into votes. Those votes might be long lasting because so many young people appear to share those values. And not just young people: think of people campaigning against fracking. These are people frustrated when their voices are not heard by local government as it comes under pressure from central government, particularly a central government whose best friends are, too often, international

corporations. I suspect that the political land between Labour and the Greens is under explored.

If we had a government that reversed the simple minded mantra of 'Private Good, Public Bad' I believe that we could make some progress. Since 1979 the basic assumption of our governments has been that things are better when companies compete for contracts to carry out public work. Not only do those contracts go to the lowest bidder who, as a consequence, must cut corners to make a profit, but also the commercial confidentiality card is played: unlike a local government committee the public cannot attend a board meeting or obtain easy access to minutes. Despite the fact that it is public money keeping such companies afloat and often very profitable we have a democratic disconnect.

What might turn my fantasy into a nightmare are those people inside the Labour Party who still yearn for Blair and those that appear to be obsessed with constructing false allegations of racism against supporters of the indigenous people of Palestine. In other words, to support the point I have repeatedly made about the referendum on membership of the EU, too much of what we are often fooled into thinking are political processes are actually battles for the control of a party. And, too many politicians seek ignorance in order to comfort their prejudice.

It often occurs to me that we might have unknowingly come close to a written constitution (or at least a suggestion for one) in 1829 when the Conservative Home Secretary of the time, Robert Peel, endorsed the following **Principles of Law Enforcement**. Their theme is policing by consent and Principle 7, in particular, just needs the substitution of the word 'government' for the word 'police' for us to envisage what it might mean if the notion that **the government are the public and the public are the government** became a basis for government and politics. Here is the full set of principles.

[https://www.durham.police.uk/About-Us/Documents/Peels Principles Of Law Enforcement.pdf](https://www.durham.police.uk/About-Us/Documents/Peels_Principles_Of_Law_Enforcement.pdf)

Might they do service as the basis for discussion (very widespread discussion) about the construction of a British Constitution?

Cliff Jones, 8th. March 2018