

New Prime Minister, new Democracy?

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I was born in 1947, a year only notable for the fact that more people were born in Britain in that year than in any other in history. Now being born in 47 meant I came to political awareness sometime between the Lady Chatterley trial and the Beatles first LP as Phillip Larkin described that period of the late fifties and early sixties.

What this meant, for me and my generation, was that the first 25 years of our political lives were dominated by the Cold War. We took it as given. It had always been there and

we assumed it always would be. And then, suddenly, much to our surprise it was gone. The Berlin Wall came down and the whole political framework I had been brought up in, had studied at university, and, like many on the left, had half heartedly tried to justify, had collapsed.

Now I tell this story only because the argument I am making today is that I believe we all see today's democratic structures and the current party political system in Britain in much the same way as my generation saw the cold war;

we believe that because it has been there for all of our lifetimes it will be with us forever.

Just as we were not aware in the eighties how fragile the Soviet Union had become – although it seems obvious now - I believe the same can be said today about our current system of democracy. The evidence that our democracy is failing is overwhelming and yet those with the biggest interest in sustaining the current system – the Westminster village, the media and particularly the political parties – are the groups most in denial about what is really happening to our democracy.

What those who recognise the problem don't yet know is what will be British democracy's Berlin Wall moment, the moment which clearly shows that the old world is finished and a new one is about to begin, but it will come and probably in the not too distant future.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start by examining the problem.

Tony Blair has been canonised by those still in the Labour Party for winning three successive General Elections. They are kidding themselves. In truth his electoral record is pretty dismal. The numbers turning out to vote went into freefall in 2001 and always remember fewer people voted Labour in 2005 than voted for John Major when he lost by a landslide in 1997.

Blair only won three times because we have an electoral system in this country which doesn't reflect the way we actually vote. Fewer than 200,000 votes cast in a limited number of marginal constituencies decide the result of general elections in Britain today, which means that for most of us our votes are irrelevant. This is arguably one of the reasons why people have stopped voting in their droves.

In 1951 82.6% of those who could, voted; by 2005 that was down to 61.4%.

The fall amongst young people voting is even greater. In 1964 88.6% of under 25's eligible to vote actually voted; by 2005 the figure was halved, down to 44.3%.

People no longer feel that it is their duty to vote. In the late 50's, in the MacMillan era, polls showed 79% of the electorate agreed with the statement that "it was a serious neglect of duty not to vote". That figure is now down to 41% and even lower among younger age groups.

The decline in the numbers voting over 50 years has also been accompanied by a decline in loyalty to a particular party. In 1951 97% of those who voted supported either Labour or Conservative. By 2005 that was down to 68%; Only 1% of the population are, today, members of a political party.

And yet because of our electoral system only Labour or Conservative still has any chance of winning an election and forming a Government.

What all this culminated in was a remarkable result in 2005 when Labour had a 64 seat majority despite the fact that only 21.6% of the electorate voted Labour and of those who actually voted only 36% supported the Labour Party. Both the 21% and the 36% are record low figures for a Government winning an election.

So while Labour officially won the 2005 election it is difficult to see how any Government could claim legitimacy on that basis. But of course politicians don't care so long as they win. When I was trying, unsuccessfully, to reform the BBC's political coverage in 2002 to reflect these changes – unsuccessful because I was stopped by those involved in party politics on the Board of Governors – my Chairman Gavyn Davies summed it up best when he said "look as long as they're bums are still on the back seat of the Jaguar after the election, government ministers don't care how many voted".

What is clear from all the figures is that there is more distrust in the country about politicians, the political process and political parties than at any time in our history and this distrust is getting greater year by year. Only one per cent of the electorate now say they trust politicians "a great deal" and 75% say they don't trust politicians to tell the truth at all.

Let me read you a quote:

"In any democracy, the public should have a healthy scepticism about the claims and practices of politicians. But there can come a point where the cynicism goes so deep that it corrodes the foundations of our political system, leading to a wholesale lack of confidence in the system, and to a detachment between the governed, and what is perceived to be the governing class – in which I include MP's of all parties. I believe we are dangerously close to that position today."

That was Jack Straw speaking to the Royal Statistical Society in April 1995 – two years before New Labour came to power in May 1997; two years before Tony Blair told us that "a new dawn had broken" for democracy in Britain; two years before all our hopes were raised that the old system could throw up new beginnings.

And of course it was also seven years before New Labour took us into an illegal war on the basis of information they knew, or ought to have known, was factually wrong; An act which in itself showed us how wrong we had

been to believe that these were a new sort of politician; an act which confirmed for millions that they were right not to trust politicians and political parties; an act which, I suspect, will in time be shown to have been the tipping point in the collapse in public confidence in our current democratic system.

As an aside, there are now people going around saying Jack Straw and some other members of the Cabinet didn't really support the war, it was Tony's war. Now if that is the case – and I don't know if what is being said is true – then shame on them for not doing what Robin Cook did ; shame on them for not examining the evidence, cross examining the players and resigning in protest.

Back to my central theme. What is clear today is that if that quote from Jack Straw was really what he believed in 1997, and was not just another sound bite aimed at embarrassing the Conservative Government of the day, then he ought now to be close to despair. If Straw believed the relationship between government and the governed was in trouble in 1995 he must now believe that that breakdown is near complete.

And of course he and his colleagues in successive Blair cabinets must take their share of the responsibility for that. Rather than counter the cynicism about our democratic system, which is what they promised to do, they have encouraged it with their dealings over Iraq, allowing the destruction of Cabinet Government, the cash for peerages scandal, and of course giving unprecedented power to the masters of spin employed by Downing Street.

After ten years of New Labour public cynicism about politics has never been greater and public support for our political system never lower. Never have so many been disappointed and disillusioned by so few.

Now one argument put forward to explain what has happened goes something like this. In an advanced capitalist society where most people – certainly not all but most – have done pretty well materially, people are likely to be less interested in politics and political issues. They have less to fight for or less reason to fight to protect what they have. They are more or less satisfied with what is.

The trouble with that argument is that it doesn't stack up against the facts. Why did one and a half million people march against the war in Iraq? Why did three quarters of a million people descend on London from the countryside to protest against the Government's treatment of rural communities? Why are people flocking to join pressure groups like Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace? Why have they participated in their millions in Live Aid, Live 8 and Live Earth?

Why has the number participating in consumer boycotts increased from 5 per cent in 1974 to almost 20 per cent in 2000? Why has membership of the National Trust or the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds grown ten fold over 30 years while membership of political parties have collapsed?

Research for the Rowntree funded "Power Commission" found that people in their millions were still interested in local and national issues. What they were disillusioned with was the political system and in particular our current political parties.

There is a second argument to explain what is happening which is particularly popular amongst politicians, and this says that the media is to blame for the current state of politics in Britain. The argument goes that because the media is so cynical about politics and politicians it has soured the public's view. In particular they blame the likes of John Humphries and Jeremy Paxman for this. Well it's true that the relationship between media and politicians is at an all time low but then that is hardly surprising after a decade of the most media manipulative government in British history.

It ill behoves Labour MP's to blame the media for creating cynicism about politics in Britain when it was their Government that handed total control of media relations to Alistair Campbell, the man who brought Nixonian politics into Britain with the view that if you aren't on our side you are the enemy. In these circumstances there was little room for intelligent political debate.

The Power Commission investigated this theory and came to the conclusion that however convenient it is for politicians to blame the media for their plight it really doesn't hold water. Personally I wouldn't dismiss the concept totally, I do think there is a problem in that it is too easy for the media to blame politicians for almost any ill in our society – just look at the recent floodings in the North - but of course if politicians stand for election claiming that they and their party alone can solve all the ills they can't complain when they are held to account for not doing so.

So why is there such disenchantment with politics?

Compared with 50 years ago we are a better educated nation, we are less deferential, people have a higher sense of self esteem and they want more influence over their own lives. In that same 50 years, when the world has changed beyond recognition, our political system, our political institutions and our political parties haven't changed at any where near the same pace. In short our society no longer fits a democratic model designed in the 18th century.

Just look at parliament. We still have men in tights banging on doors; we still have grown up men – and they are largely men - haranguing each other cheered on by those on one side and barracked by those on the other and of course the televising of parliament has only shown the nation how outdated the whole thing is. To the world out there adversarial politics looks childish and pathetic. And yet talk to the average MP and they are still surprised by this reaction. Time after time people who got into parliament talking about modernisation and change are, within a few years, eulogising about the sanctity of parliament and all that guff. Quite simply they've gone native.

Of course the public also know instinctively that all this is a charade – that power has moved away from parliament where MPs play their boys' games pretending that they still matter. What Tony Blair showed us is that in our current democracy you don't need parliament. What he demonstrated was that with a decent majority and a small coterie around you, a Prime Minister can, if that is his intent, gather all the power he or she needs to rule without much reference to the democratic processes other than a General Election ever four or five years. With the ruthless use of spin, patronage and the whipping system the Prime Minister under our democratic system can be all powerful.

For instance what was remarkable about the way the decision to go to war in Iraq was made was not so much that the Prime Minister tried to suppress information and subsequent debate at cabinet but that his cabinet colleagues allowed him to get away with it. Described by historian Peter Hennessy as the most supine cabinet in history they allowed Tony Blair to rule the roost without challenge. In doing so this particular cabinet failed to fulfil one of their central roles in the British democratic system – to hold the Prime Minister in check.

So let me try and sum up the problem as I, and others, see it before turning to the crucial question of what's to be done? To make it a bit more lively I thought I'd outline the problems with democracy in Twenty First century Britain in a Top of the Pops style top ten:

- 1) First we have voting system which is both unfair and unrepresentative, which favours the bigger parties, prevents evolutionary change and particularly stops the emergence of new parties; As such it is a disincentive to voting.
- 2) It is a system which increasingly leads to political parties fighting on very similar ideologies as they try to attract an increasingly small number of swing voters in a few marginal constituencies.

- 3) We have an outdated party system which the public no longer supports and where membership is in free fall; yet we are considering bolstering the current system with state funding.
- 4) We now have a presidential system of government in which too much power can end up in the hands of the Prime Minister without the necessary checks and balances.
- 5) This is sustained by a deeply damaging system of patronage, which means Governments are not open to proper scrutiny by parliament and
- 6) a whipping system which means MP's are told to put party interests above their beliefs or even the interests of their constituents. As such they are increasingly simply party apparatchiks.
- 7) Fifty years of ever increasing centralisation has made us today the most centralised state in Europe with the single exception of Malta
- 8) As a result we, the public, are less involved in decisions affecting our lives at a time when we want more not less influence. Our system of representative democracy no longer satisfies that need, one vote every four or five years isn't enough.
- 9) We live in the era of the cradle to the grave politician. People decide to be politicians at university and most of them never do anything else. This is a particular problem when politics is no longer about ideology but about running things, about delivery. What do people with this background know about running anything?
- 10) Finally we suffer because those able to reform our democracy, the politicians, have no real incentive to do so and there is no-one else who addresses the long term question of the health of our democracy.

As I've said what all this has led to is a position where the numbers of people voting and interested in traditional politics is collapsing, especially amongst the young, and our trust in politicians is at an all time low.

So the urgent question we need to ask is how do we re-invent democracy in Britain for the 21st century, for the internet age, for an era when deference is dead, an era when people want more power and influence over their own lives not less.

OK, you might say today that that is all history. Our new Prime Minister Gordon Brown has recognised there is a crisis in our democracy, has listened to what people outside the Westminster village have told him, and has taken

it on board. I think it is very much to Gordon Brown's credit that he has listened and taken action; especially when you take into account that during his time as Chancellor he was one of the truly great centralisers, someone who moved across Government taking power from the traditional spending departments and concentrating it in the Treasury.

But I'm willing to accept that now he is in charge he is a changed man and recognises the problem I've outlined; and that is not me being cynical I mean it seriously and honestly.

The problem is that an understanding of human behaviour tells you there is very little chance of anyone in power really changing enough, or at the required speed, to counter the widespread cynicism about politics that exists today. Why? To use a famous cliché, turkeys don't vote for Christmas. Even if the people in power recognise that change on a significant scale is needed, they are unlikely to vote for it. Which is why although Gordon Brown's initial moves on democracy are to be welcomed they are only a start.

I thought Peter Riddell summed it up in the Times last week when he wrote "Overall these proposals should improve but not transform the way we are governed". My argument today is that we desperately need transformation.

First and foremost, we need a system of proportional representation because the current first past the post system is, by any standards, unjustifiable. For the Labour Government to be able to claim the right to introduce the whole of its 2005 manifesto on the basis of attracting 21% of the total electorate is farcical. Put another way 79% of the electorate didn't support that programme and 65% of those voting didn't either, so where's the mandate?

Now it's almost certain that any system of PR will mean the coming of minority or coalition government for Britain just as we have already seen in Wales and Scotland. Many in parliament give that as their main reason for opposing PR but why?

In a world when the way you vote is less likely to be dependent on class allegiance or the way your parents voted, and where people no longer vote just Labour or Tory as they did in 1951, it's only right that a whole range of differing views are reflected in government, rather than just the views of a shrinking minority in one particular party.

Whichever system of PR we choose it has to be fairer than the current first past the post system but I would argue PR will also have other advantages which will impact on my top ten problems with democracy and, as a result, make it the most important single change we need.

The figures from General Elections already show that turnouts in the marginal constituencies which matter most are significantly higher than in the rest. Why? The answer is pretty obvious, the parties work harder in those areas to get people to vote and the voters in those constituencies are aware that their vote matters more. Under almost any system of PR there will be many more constituencies where the individual vote matters which, I would argue, will inevitably lead to a bigger turnout.

Proportional Representation will also help the presidential power argument. A minority Prime Minister in a coalition government will never be as powerful as Thatcher, Blair or even Gordon Brown is today. The nature of coalitions means no-one will be able to do what Blair did on Iraq, commit us to war before consulting other ministers and ignoring all the advice from the relevant government department.

I also suspect coalition government will lead to more decision making by intelligent discussion rather than by central dictat from Downing Street, and I'm certain that that is what the British public are looking for. They have had enough of grown ups from different parties childishly slugging it out publicly on serious and difficult issues just to gain party advantage.

This sort of behaviour may be attractive to the activists, the politically committed and, importantly, to journalists but it's a turn off for the vast bulk of the population. Instead it's time our elected representatives discussed serious issues together, in an intelligent manner, in an attempt to find solutions. Arguably both coalition government or minority government would help rather than hinder that aim.

PR will also encourage a greater range of political parties to emerge. The chances of winning even a single seat with a new political party in Britain today are very remote even if you get say 15% of the vote right across the country. So why bother? This matters in a world where it is clear that voters are unhappy with the current choice of parties. At one stroke you would stop the current trend whereby all three political parties adopt similar policies in an attempt to win the middle ground.

If 10% of the population are on the far left or the far right, if ten per cent are anti-European, if ten per cent vote green they are entitled to be represented in parliament.

And to those who argue against PR because it might mean representation for the likes of the BNP I would argue that the areas where the BNP has emerged tend to be traditional Labour strongholds where the traditional parties have done little work. PR would change that.

Now it sounds like I am arguing that all we need

to do is change the current electoral system and we automatically cure all the current ills of our current political system. That isn't my position. PR is essential but on its own it isn't enough. So what other changes do we need to make?

There is a serious argument to be made for breaking up the centralised state and its agencies and devolving real power down to the regional or local level.

It is ironic to watch both the Conservative and Labour parties gradually moving to that position, gradually realising that the centralisation of power that they've introduced into Britain over the past 50 years has run its course and the time has come for the policy to be reversed, that the time has come for decentralisation.

So why are the two main parties coming to that conclusion now? I suspect there are a whole series of reasons – including being told by the voters and the activists that central control is increasingly unpopular - but for Labour in particular the fact that the centralised state is struggling to deliver the services the 21st century consumer is demanding is probably the most important one. It could be that they have finally realised that they need to devolve serious power downwards because people want their local needs met by a local provider, aware of local circumstances, tastes, traditions and preferences. They want services to be human in scale, accessible and accountable.

There is no better example than the Health Service which is Europe's biggest single employer. In the late 90's I was asked by the then Secretary of State Frank Dobson to review the patients' charter. After a year I came back with a series of recommendations which basically said you can't do this nationally, do it locally. The report was totally ignored because it didn't fit with Labour's view of the world at the time, a view that said that everything should be controlled from the centre who would then set targets and check them.

There are great people working in the Health Service but they are trying to manage and work an unworkable system. No business would structure itself the way the Health Service is structured. It is remote, unresponsive, monolithic, cumbersome, unproductive and hugely wasteful. It's time for it to be broken up and for responsibility for the delivery of health services to be devolved.

But the NHS isn't the only example of the centralised state struggling to deliver there are many others. What we should do is look at every function being carried out by central government and ask is there any reason why that function shouldn't be carried out at a more local level. If there's no reason for it to

be centralised it should be devolved.

But devolving power to national, in the case of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, regional or local government will only help if those institutions, as well as central Government, devise new ways of involving the electorate in the decision making process. A lot of experiments have been tried – some have been effective others not – but it is essential we find new ways of involving people in the process of making informed decisions about their lives. Again Gordon Brown has clearly been thinking about this.

I'm not talking about constant local referendums, or on-line votes on issues where people's uninformed prejudices can easily dominate, I'm talking about involving people in the decision making process by giving them the information they need to make proper judgements. That will involve their time and being involved in proper discussion and some won't want to be involved on that basis, but the time has come to make the effort. The days of old fashioned representative democracy whereby we elect a councillor or MP for four or five years and let them make every decision on our behalf are, I suspect, over. We, as the public, want to be more involved than that.

In my time at the BBC we tried to change the organisation with a massive culture change programme, the most important part of which was talking to the staff in a massive consultative exercise about their views of the organisation, how it should be run and what it should do in the future. Once we'd collected all that information it gave me, as the leader, a massive mandate for change and when specific proposals for change were unpopular I was able to say but this is what you, the staff, wanted. That's the relationship politicians need to have with their voters.

So with power shifting downwards what happens to the nation state? It could be that the 19th century notion of the all powerful national state is simply not sustainable in the faster, smaller, more inter connected world of the 21st century and it has no role. I'm not sure I buy that argument but I do believe its role will change. Clearly there are functions which should be tackled nationally and in the globalised world it is clear that there are common issues which can only be tackled internationally, things like climate change, international trade, intellectual property rights, crime, money laundering, terrorism etc. etc. If this is the case we, as the citizens of this nation, need to know our interests are being looked after in that world. That, I suspect, will increasingly be the role of those elected to national government in the years to come.

Now I don't claim to have all the answers to the problems I posed earlier in this speech. What I do know is that if democracy is to flourish we need a comprehensive debate about the whole nature of our democracy culminating, if that is what the public want, in radical change. There are lots of ideas to be discussed.

It could be that Mrs Thatcher and Tony Blair were right in identifying that we need strong leaders who can take quick decisions in the world we now live in; maybe we do need a presidential system. But if that is the case we need the checks and balances that go with it. Perhaps we should have a directly elected Prime Minister serving for a maximum of two specific terms?

It could be that it is time to separate the executive from the legislature so that the Cabinet is not chosen from the very same people who also have the role of holding the executive in check? This too would mean that the cradle to the grave politicians in parliament are unlikely to become members of the executive. Then we really would have an executive of all the talents – rather than just a collection of people who joined a particular party at the age of 20 with the aim of becoming career politicians which is what we have today.

It could also be that MP's and members of the House of Lords should have term limits, so that we get people from differing backgrounds spending just a part of their life in parliament.

It could be that it's time for us to have an elected House of Lords, with members elected by proportional representation for a single term only, but with no whipping system? It is ironic that if we suddenly had a fully elected second chamber today, elected and whipped on the same basis as the Commons, it would almost certainly be less challenging of Government and in particular the executive than the current hotch potch of hereditary peers, independents and party time servers who are in the House of Lords.

I am by nature an optimist and I do believe, as I said earlier, that in twenty years time historians will truly look back on the Iraq War as a turning point in the debate about our democracy. Tony Blair's biggest mistake could well be his unintended democratic legacy. I believe that over the next decade there will be a significant campaign demanding that Britain becomes a more democratic country, but I doubt whether the radical change we need will come from the Government of the day, in fact I doubt whether the solutions will originate with politicians at all.

Instead they will come from academics, think tanks, serious journalists and writers who are already beginning to question the system. But

most of all the demand for change will come from the electorate who, increasingly, have had enough of the current system and are telling us so.

Of course if the next election ends with a hung parliament – and there must be a very fair chance of that happening – we could see fundamental change happening very quickly. It could be the Berlin Wall moment for democracy. What is important is that in those circumstances those of us who want something different know what changes we want and how they can be delivered.

To sum up. Our democracy is in real trouble and needs to be reformed if it is to be effective in modern society. As I said earlier the world is changing at an enormous pace and our political system appears moribund in the face of that change. As a result our democracy no longer works effectively and if we care about it we need to do something about it and fast. If we don't I suspect we will all live to regret it.