Antipolitics in Britain: Dimensions, Causes, and Responses

Gerry Stoker

Popular political culture in Britain is deeply "anti" both politics and politicians. There has been for some time a ready market for the idea that all politicians lie and that none are to be trusted. As Colin Hay puts it, politics in today's understanding is "synonymous with sleaze, corruption, and duplicity, greed, self-interest and self-importance, interference, inefficiency, and intransigence. It is, at best, a necessary evil, at worst an entirely malevolent force that needs to be kept in check" (Hay 2007, 153) Politicians are reviled by many of us as a distant "them" who are lying, self-interested cheats.

Our abhorrence of politics tends to feed on itself. Commenting on an earlier period of moral panic about political sleaze and wrongdoing in the early 1990s under a Conservative government, Roger Mortimore (1995, 31) notes that "an existing general disdain and distrust of politicians has made the public consciousness a fertile ground for sowing more specific suspicions." In short, lack of trust begat a sense of sleaze, and Mortimore argues that a feedback loop driven by the media further undermined the confidence of the public in democratic politics as a result. The row over MPs' expenses that broke out in spring 2009 in the UK shows the same process happening again. Freedom of Information requests reveal details of MPs that are then exposed in the media. None of the expense claims are strictly breaking the rules of the UK parliament but the interpretation of those rules brings politicians into disrepute, gives journalists great populist

copy, and undermines people's faith in politics still further. It is worth quoting one piece, out of many I could have chosen from, because it captures the mood in the UK as I write:

> The Employment Minister . . . Mr. McNulty has been claiming expenses for a second house – nothing wrong with that when you are an MP – except that both houses are in London, one in Hammersmith about 25 minutes from the House of Commons, the other only eight miles away in his constituency of Harrow East, 40 minutes from Westminster by Tube. . . . The problem for many MPs is that they consider £63,291 a year a paltry amount for what they do (even with 18 weeks holiday a year). But because they can't vote themselves a pay increase, particularly when so many others are losing their jobs, they choose to abuse their allowances instead. . . . In November Hazel Blears, the Communities Secretary, gave a speech to the Hansard Society lamenting the "disengagement, cynicism and despair" of voters; she blamed political bloggers and the commentariat. But it's MPs such as Mr. McNulty who are the real culprits. (Thomson 2009)

To add insult to injury to the reputation of politics, a further row broke out in April 2009 about a political advisor to the prime minister seeking to offer stories to a potential website to launch untrue, scurrilous, and salacious attacks on leading opposition politicians and, it appears, their partners. The stories were seen by its proponents as a Left response to a range of Right-leaning websites that carry similar "gossipy," unverified stories about Government ministers and officials. In fact, the website was never set up and the whole issue

only came out when it appears someone hacked into the emails of one of the conspirators and then gave the emails to one of the Right-leaning bloggers. Our politicians hardly need to be held to account in that they seem spectacularly adept at shooting themselves in the foot. You have to laugh because otherwise you would be crying.

The mood of antipolitics that has captured the popular zeitgeist has already begun to have serious consequences. Politicians have started to respond to this world of antipolitics in ways that are beginning to significantly undermine the UK's capacity for collective and democratic decision making. It is possible to observe three forms of depoliticization (Hay 2007). The first is when issues and decisions that were previously the subject of public scrutiny are placed in a public, yet non-government, sphere. The displacement of decision-making functions to quasi-independent bodies takes politics out of the reach of the ordinary tools of the citizen's political armory and justifies this shift by arguing that politicians are not to be trusted with certain types of decisions—a double blow to the practice of democratic politics. The second form of depoliticization is where issues that might have previously been seen as issues of the public realm are moved to that of private concerns to be driven by private choice. The message is be an active consumer not an active citizen: If you care about the environment make market choices to buy greener goods and services, and if you want better health care then look to the private sector to provide a solution. The third form of depoliticization is where issues are transferred from the realm of political deliberation and choice to the realm of fate and the disavowal of human agency. The forces unleashed by globalization are often depicted in this way. The loss of faith in politics means that alternative ways of legitimizing decisions, issues, and choices are being taken out of the open realm of democratic collective decision making.

To respond to this challenge, we need a greater understanding of what has really changed in our political culture. What do we mean when we say we have an antipolitics culture? In the UK we probably never especially liked doing politics or trusted politicians in the founding days of our mass democracy but what makes our situation different today is that our culture has created citizens who feel disempowered and who have lost faith in the capacity of government. We perhaps do not so much hate politics but rather have been encouraged to see it as an increasingly pointless activity. As we shall see, this sense that politics is pointless is most widely held among lower status groups in UK society. The first section of this paper establishes these arguments. The next section asks why these changes have occurred. The final section considers how we should respond.

The Decline in Our Civic Culture

Almond and Verba's study of the civic culture of five nations became an instant classic. It compared Great Britain with the United States, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. Culture for these two American authors constituted the broad orientation of citizens toward their political system and their sense of citizenship, measured by way of attitudinal and behavioral data collected by the first academically-driven opinion survey conducted in Great Britain in 1959. What famously emerged in the study is a portrayal of a political Britain at ease with itself: citizens deferential and respectful of their leaders, but confident of their role and capacities and the responsiveness of government. Almond and Verba comment about politics in Great Britain:

> The participant role is highly developed. Exposure to politics, interest, involvement, and a sense of competence are relatively high. There are norms supporting political activity, as well as emotional involvement in elections

and system affect. And attachment to the system is a balanced one: there is general system pride as well as satisfaction with specific governmental performance. (Almond and Verba 1963, 455)

British citizens were more deferential than their American counterparts but this aspect of their culture was balanced by an active and participative orientation toward politics: a blend of activity and passivity that according to Almond and Verba allowed a civic culture to develop.

Almond and Verba's positive findings about our political system were not considered surprising but more as a confirmation of what was already the common sense of the age among British political scientists. The book "produced little reaction as a study of Britain largely because it told most British academics little that they did not think that they knew" (Kavanagh 1980, 127). The two hundred or so political scientists of that era were perhaps a little bemused by the behavioral research methods of Almond and Verba but they recognized and agreed with the depiction of the British political culture. The Americans with their newfangled techniques provided quantitative evidence for their own views about the virtues of our system. As Kavanagh (1980, 127) goes on to point out, such was the acceptance of the data and the associated interpretation that "the findings of the 1959 survey were still being cited ten years later as though the situation had hardly changed."

The reception of the civic culture thesis began to change, however, in the 1970s. There were criticisms from academics about the theories underlying the work in that they sustained a very elitist understanding of democratic practice and a rather individualistic understanding of culture. There was also a growing amount of evidence that disenchantment with the political system in Britain was beginning to emerge and be detected by practitioners of political science. Almond

and Verba gave a fair hearing to many of the theoretical criticisms in *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Almond and Verba, 1980) as well as revising and refining their own original argument. In the same volume, Kavanagh (1980) captured the evidence of a changing mood among British citizens about their political system. The shift away from a supportive civic culture was not complete but there were clear signs of decay and growing disenchantment with the political system. As Kavanagh notes, after only two decades you might not expect to see a large-scale shift in culture. But a further three decades on, from our vantage point, it is possible to conclude that the civic world described by Almond and Verba has gone.

It is difficult to establish that claim of a lost world in a clear-cut manner because no one has directly replicated the Almond and Verba work at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But political scientists in Britain have produced enough data and analysis to make a comparison between the world of the 1950s and the world of the first decade of the twenty-first century relatively deliverable.

The first thing to establish in the analysis of civic culture is to point out that Almond and Verba did not find a "perfect" world of politically engaged, knowledgeable, and interested citizens. Here are some key findings from their 1959 survey (see Almond and Verba 1963, 89, 96, 116, 263):

- 32% claim "to never follow" accounts of political and governmental affairs
- 2 in 10 can name no party leader or any government ministry
- 3 in 10 "never" talk about politics with friends and acquaintances
- Only 2% claim civic-political activities as a preferred leisure activity
- And finally, a finding from the survey not reported by Almond and Verba is that 8 in 10 are doubtful of the promises made by candidates in elections (Kavanagh 1980, 145 n. 58)

It would be difficult to claim in the light of these findings that in the 1950s British citizens were political sophisticates. Knowledge of and interest in politics is arguably just about at the same levels at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The 2008 *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society 2008, 13) found about half the population claiming an interest in politics, with 2 in 10 claiming no interest at all. The findings on these issues have remained relatively consistent since the first Audit published in 2004. Again, on issues of knowledge about half the population in the 2008 Audit claimed that they knew nothing at all or not much about politics and here too the findings are fairly consistent stretching back to 2004 (Hansard Society 2008, 14).

The unreported finding from *The Civic Culture*, expressing citizens' doubts about the promises of politicians, indicates a level of cynicism about politicians in the 1950s that maybe was not fully captured by Almond and Verba. By the 1970s, Kavanagh (1980, 145–147) was able to offer findings that hint further at lack of trust in politicians. In the twenty-first century, lack of trust in politicians is a strong leitmotif. Politicians regularly rank among the lowest occupational groups in terms of the extent to which they are trusted. Low trust in politicians appears normal today not just in Britain but in most other advanced industrial democracies (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2004, 37).

Some things clearly have changed since 1959. Twenty-first century citizens of Britain have less civic competence, less pride in the political system, less belief in the fairness and responsiveness of government compared to their counterparts in the 1950s. Almond and Verba (1963, 185) found in 1959 high levels of civic competence: 8 in 10 claimed they could do something about an unjust local regulation and 6 in 10 made the same claim about an unjust national regulation. In 2007, only two-fifths (38%) of respondents to the Citizenship Survey (Communities and Local Government 2007) felt they could influence

decisions in their local area, and one-fifth (20%) of people felt they could influence decisions affecting Great Britain. In 1959 nearly half the British survey spontaneously mentioned the system of government and political institutions as a matter of pride to Almond and Verba (1963, 102). Such a response is almost impossible to imagine today.

The 2008 *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society 2008, 22) found that only 2% of citizens felt the present system of governing Britain works extremely well and could not be improved. Two thirds were of the opinion that the system could be improved quite a lot or great deal. Almond and Verba (1963, 108–9) found that 8 in 10 expected to be treated equally by government bureaucracy if they raised an issue and 6 in 10 felt that governmental bureaucracy would give their point of view serious consideration. Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (2004, 44–45) in their survey at the beginning of the twenty-first century found under 3 in 10 able to agree with the statement that "government generally treats people like me fairly." They conclude: "it would seem that a very significant decline in public confidence in government has occurred" (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2004, 44).

There is evidence of not just a shift in attitudes but also of major changes in behavior. Most obviously there has been a decline in turnout in national elections from roughly 8 in 10 to 6 in 10 voters. Party membership has also slumped. In the UK, 9% of all registered electors were party members in 1964 but by 1992 it was barely 2%, and it has remained at or below this level into the twenty-first century (Webb, Farrell, and Holliday 2002). The pattern of change in organizational memberships related to civic life would appear to be more complex. Comparing *The Civic Culture* data to other surveys and their 2001 Citizen Audit, Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (2004, 102) conclude: "fewer people are now joining just a single group but there is an upward trend in the number of people belonging to two or more groups." We are less inclined to join a political party but some of us are more inclined to engage with a wide range of single-issue organizations. In both

time periods it would appear that organizational memberships of campaigning groups are reported by only half the population.

A general pattern of decline in our civic culture has been established by comparing the findings of Almond and Verba's work with that of more recent studies by UK political scientists. There is a further feature of the portrait of change that is worth emphasizing, namely the shift in the pattern of social divides in that culture. Again difficulties in the way that Almond and Verba conducted their survey limit the certainty that surrounds what can be argued but it would appear that compared to 1959 there are now less gender differentials but greater social class differentials.

Almond and Verba (1963, 388) found that "men showed higher frequencies and higher intensities than women in practically all the indices of political orientation and activity that we employed." The 2008 *Audit of Political Engagement* (Hansard Society 2008, 14) found that while women were less likely than men to say they were interested in politics (58% against 45%) on other measures women were just as likely as men to engage as Table 1 shows. Almond and Verba (1963) found some class divides in the sense of civic competence and activism. For example, they found that 9 in 10 professionals felt they could do something about an unjust local regulation, while only 7 in 10 of the unskilled were of the same view. In general, across a range of tests of participation and civic competence provided by Almond and Verba, lower-status British groups scored higher than equivalent groups in other nations, including the United States. As Kavanagh (1980, 135) explains: "In Britain such long-established organizations as trade unions, cooperative societies, and the Labour party have made explicit appeals to the working class and mobilized them into comparatively high levels of political activity." The evidence presented in Table 2 derived from the 2008 *Audit of Political Engagement* suggests that the positive effect of these organizations in closing class differences in political participation may be on the wane. In 2007 citizens from professional and managerial

social groups were twice as likely as those from unskilled groups to vote or donate to a party or campaign and four times more likely to have engaged in three or more political activities.

There are other aspects of the social divisions that characterize engagement today. Young people are generally less likely to want to engage in formal politics, although it is difficult to tell from Almond and Verba's work whether that is a change from the 1950s. A range of ethnic minorities that were hardly a factor in *The Civic Culture* are now a vital part of our society, and their engagement in politics also creates a complex pattern of difference. For now we can simply confirm that the picture of confident citizens at ease with their democratic polity—which may have been slightly exaggerated in the account provided by Almond and Verba—is no more. We live in a culture where there is significant political disenchantment and where disengagement is particularly observable among lower status social groups and young people.

Table 1 Political Activism in 2007: Male and Female Compared

Activity	% Male	% Female
Propensity to vote	52	55
Contacted elected representative in last two or three years	15	15
Donated to a political party	5	3
Donated to a charity or campaigning organization	39	36
Engaged in three or more political activities in last two or three years	11	13

Source: Developed by author from data in the *Audit of Political Engagement 5* (Hansard Society 2008).

Table 2: Political Activism in 2007: Social Classes Compared

Activity	% AB Social Class	% DE Social Class
Propensity to vote	66	34
Contacted elected representative in last two or three years	16	10
Donated to a political party	7	2
Donated to a charity or campaigning organization	52	24
Engaged in three or more political activities in last two or three years	21	5

Note: The social class definitions are used by the Institute of Practitoners in Advertising. A and B social classes include those with professional and managerial jobs; D and E include semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers and those living at the lowest levels of subsistence.

Source: Developed by author from data in the *Audit of Political Engagement 5* Hansard Society (2008).

Explaining the Rise of Antipolitics

There has been a considerable amount of debate in the UK political science community about the factors that are driving the rise of political disenchantment. Hay (2007) thinks that our politicians are to blame, not so much because they are comprehensively sleazy or corrupt but more because they have lost faith in politics themselves. His underlying fear is that our low expectations of politics and politicians—fostered substantially by political elites themselves— have created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The twist in the tail of Hay's explanation is that we hate politics because politicians have spent much of the last decades telling us that we should have low expectations of them. Our political masters have shot themselves in the foot by swallowing wholesale the economic analysis of politics, coated in a neoliberal framing of the limits and failings of the state. Their problem, which has become our problem, is that we have come to interpret politics as a game where all players are instrumental and self-interested. The economic analysis of politics has become manifest in the way that politics is presented and sold to us. Politicians compete not for our souls but for our stomachs: debating with us not values but rather who can give us the best deal. Politics has been reduced to competing marketing campaigns. As voters we are not asked to make a political choice about different political values or programs but rather decide whether one lot of politicians is more managerially competent than the next to deliver on its promises to provide a better life for us. "Judge me on my performance," the politicians demand. But the difficulty is that we have, with their encouragement, created a blame game that offers a thin and inadequate diet of politics. All aspiring politicians convince themselves they can deliver what people want, and every citizen wonders if this time they are going to get the real thing: a politician who keeps his promises. But all know that it will, every time and on every cycle, end in disappointment.

The actions and moves of politicians are constantly interpreted by the politicians and the media through a lens that emphasizes their instrumental, self-interested motivation. The blame game is conducted based on assumptions of instrumental rationality driving human action and, in particular, the practices of politics. The economic academic analysis of politics has infested the very practice of politics and undermined its capacity to engage people in collective endeavor. It has encouraged us to assume the worst and politicians and citizens

have taken its messages to heart. The gloomy atmosphere is reinforced by the hegemonic domination of neoliberal thinking that tells us to expect little but failure from the state, the public realm, and politics. Our best hope—we are told—lies in the introduction of market-like incentives to keep politics and public management on the straight and narrow as part of a strategy of depoliticization. The answer lies in less politics and more handing over of decisions to quangos (quasi non-governmental organizations) and consumerization of choice. In a difficult to control world it is the best we can hope for. This dismal offer is, as Hay points out, not surprisingly, rejected by many citizens who determine that if that is all that is on offer then why bother.

According to Meg Russell in her thoughtful pamphlet, we have failed to come to terms with mass democracy in our culture. She argues that "the ways that our political culture has adapted itself to modern life have, over time, conspired to erode faith in political rule" (2005, 4). The adversarial style of our politics has, when combined with the sense that politicians must permanently campaign, fed distrust. The culture of consumerism has led politicians to offer promises to the public on which they struggle to deliver effectively. Single-issue pressure groups add to the demands made on the political system to deliver without aiding any understanding of the need to balance competing demands. Citizens are given a constant message that suggests that politics is failing, and the cynical and simplistic approach of the modern media has also "played a key part in feeding all these problems" (Russell 2005, 5).

I would agree with much of that analysis and the analysis provided by Hay. The way that politics is practiced today leaves too great a gap between governors and governed. Most of us are judging politicians from afar and through a distorted lens. The sense of moral outrage that pervades our reaction to politics, I think, reflects the fact that in most mature democracies most people have little if any direct

involvement in politics. Most people experience politics as spectators and through the eyes and ears of the media. The result of this alienated disengagement is that many citizens are able to combine a substantial level of cynicism about politics with occasional outbursts of moral indignation as to its failings and frustrations.

In my *Why Politics Matters* (Stoker 2006), I argue that the emphasis on individual choice and consumerism in our societies has created a challenging environment for the collective decision-making characteristic of politics. My explanation of why people are disengaging focuses on four factors which reflect common organizational and structural characteristics of the position of mature democracies. These factors are: the rise of a more intense individualization, the increasing specialization that is being brought to many functions in our societies including politics, the increased complexity of the challenges faced, and a rising tide of cynicism fueled in part by the practices of the mass media. The impact of these four forces is considerable. The first means that people fail to appreciate the inherent collective characteristics of politics in an individualized world. The second suggests that politics is increasingly professionalized, leaving most of us in the position of being spectators rather than activists in any meaningful sense. Globalization and technological advances tend to make politics even more remote because the complexity of the challenges they create means political decision making appears to be beyond the control of everyday citizen activity. The fourth factor encourages a culture of hopeless fatalism about politics. Each is explored in more detail below.

Making decisions through markets relies on individuals choosing what suits them. The collective processes that are essential to steer politics and government struggle to deliver against the lionization of individual choice in our societies. Politics, if anything, attracts as much interest as before, but that interest has been infected by the impact of the increased prominence given to market-based consumerism and

more intense individualization in the culture of many democracies. As a form of collective decision making, politics is, even in a democracy, a centralized form of decision making compared to market-based alternatives. Democracy means that you can be involved in the decision, but what the decision is is not necessarily your choice yet you are expected to accept the decision.

Politics as a form of collective decision making relies on voice rather than the market mechanism of exit to enable you to make your views known. If you do not like something you see in a shop you can go elsewhere, but in politics the only way to get something is to use voice, and that carries far more costs than exit. But expressing your interest or opinion is only the start of a more general challenge in politics—that of communication. You have to not only make your views known, you also have to listen. Politics is not about individual choice; it is about collective debate. Within it communication is a difficult, time-consuming, and problematic business. Knowing what you want and knowing how to get it out of the political system are very testing and complex.

Politics often involves a stumbling search for solutions to particular problems. It is not the most edifying human experience. It is rarely an experience of self-actualization and more often an experience of accepting second-best. It works through a complex process of mutual adjustment as politicians, officials, and others directly involved in government attempt coping or manipulative modifications to their behavior in the hope of inducing the right response from others. The results tend to be messy, contingent, and inevitably create a mix of winners and losers.

So it turns out that a propensity to disappoint is an inherent feature of governance even in democratic societies. I think that a substantial part of the discontent with politics is because the discourse and practice of collective decision making sits very uncomfortably alongside the

discourse and practice of individual choice, self-expression, and market-based fulfillment of needs and wants. As a result, too many citizens fail to appreciate the inherent characteristics of the political process in democratic settings. Politics involves two of the hardest human skills: listening carefully to the opinions of others and their expressions of their interests, and maintaining a certain resilience when things do not go right the first time. Doing politics in our large complex societies is bound to create some frustration. Democracy cannot wish away that reality.

Now let's consider the impact of increased specialization. It's not just that we characterize and understand politics in a mistaken way but that there are problems and difficulties with the way we practice it as well. As we have seen, most citizens' engagement has a sporadic and mundane character. There is nothing wrong with such expressions of citizenship; they are just rather limited. Much engagement is directed toward something that brings personal benefit or perhaps provides an expressive statement about a person's sense of him or herself and his or her identity. These atomized forms of citizenship mean that people often have only a surface engagement with political issues and complexities. There is hope in the range and diversity of engagement in democracies, but there are concerns because of its uneven spread and shallow quality.

Most of the real politics is done in a space where we are spectators. It is the sphere of professionals where we are the amateurs. The cohesion brought by parties, the advocacy of special interests by the lobby, and the challenge and dissent offered through various forms of protest offer vital links in the democratic chain between governors and governed. But all are failing to engage citizens-at-large in politics. Activists are odd people, very much in a minority in our society. They do a lot of the work of politics for us and we should be grateful to them. But the way their organizations work is in part responsible for people's sense of alienation from politics.

As parties have lost membership, they have become reliant on professional campaigners and organizers and operate in a way that treats citizens as passive political observers who just need to be mobilized at election times to back the party (Webb, Farrell, and Holliday 2002) Citizen lobby organizations—such as Friends of the Earth—have large scale passive memberships, and they too rely on professional organizers and experts (Jordan and Maloney 1999). Members provide funding but the professional politicos in the lobby organizations decide what to campaign on. Citizens are a passive audience to be talked to about particular campaigns through the media and occasionally galvanized to send in letters or cards of support or join a public demonstration based often on rather simplistic messages. Citizens are offered little in terms of depth of analysis or understanding of the issues at stake by these organizations. Even more radical protest organizations tend to be professionalized in their style of behavior and their use of the media. The occasional engagement by a wider group of citizens in a protest "event" or rally is in danger of being more a lifestyle statement than a serious engagement with a political debate (De Jong, Shaw, and Stammers 2005).

Politics is about people deciding to take action, but what is the point if the world is so out of control and the challenges so complex that political forces cannot exercise influence over it (Gamble 2000)? In response to complex new challenges politics has had to move into arenas and modes of operating beyond the everyday capacities of citizens. Globalization has not ended the capacity for politics but it has pushed it into new and more remote settings. Governments at local and national levels can influence global trends but they do so out of the sight of most of their citizens. Technological change and the pressures of scientific development again create impacts that politics is only able to contain by moving decision making onto remote and expert terrains. An effective dialogue between science and democracy

has not been easy to create, as rows over GM (genetically modified) food, global warming, or cloning indicate. What is clear is that politics is in challenging and hard times and that as a result it has tended to be practiced in arenas remote from the everyday experiences of citizens.

Finally, as the culture of deference that dominated democratic politics in advanced industrial societies has declined, it appears to have been replaced by a culture of cynicism not just toward politics but toward many other institutions. The role of the media in promoting a culture of cynicism is worth examining. John Lloyd (2004) puts some of the blame on the poor reporting standards of the media, itself triggered by commercial pressures and the rise of multinational media groupings. There are several aspects of the argument to consider. First, there has been a "dumbing down" in news coverage, which means that people are less likely to understand underlying issues or complexities in respect of politics, and politics can often be seen to fail when what it is delivering is judged in a simplistic framework. Second, the fusing of news reporting and comment, which is a characteristic of modern media coverage of politics, probably feeds a culture where fact, opinion, and speculation merge into one another and which lends itself to a cynical take on political life. A third argument is that the media in some countries have actively spread a culture of contempt; and a fourth argument is that we have seen the emergence of a style of journalism that presents itself as the champion of the people and takes a strongly adversarial position to politicians, asking all the time why is this politician lying to me and you, the viewers and listeners. The first two arguments perhaps hold true across more countries. The last two arguments are much more difficult to establish but may hold for some countries—of which the UK would be a prime candidate.

Can We Challenge Antipolitics?

Our disappointment with the performance of politicians is often accompanied by a general sense that if we cared to we could do better. People often find it difficult to think beyond their own experiences and therefore tend to judge political decisions according to their own interests and circumstances. Naïve aspirations and assumptions about politics often flow from these preconceptions. People can assume that most other people agree with them (or would if only the issue was explained to them properly) and that the ideal outcome is one that suits them in every detail. As noted, in politics the only way to get something is to use voice—express your concerns in concert with others—and that carries far more costs than the exit mechanism available to us in market transactions. People generally do not like making a lot of effort for little reward. Accordingly, off-loading responsibility on to others as we have seen is a very common coping mechanism in political exchanges. But expressing your interest or opinion is only the start of a more general challenge in politics. You have not only to make your views known, you also have to listen. Politics is not about individual choice; it is about collective decision.

The negative response to politics that many of us share is I think a very human reaction to the way politics works. As an intricate mechanism in our multifaceted and complex societies, politics exists because we do not agree with one another. Politics is about choosing between competing interests and views. It often demands incompatible allocations of limited resources. Crucially, because it is a collective form of decision making, once a choice has been made then that choice has to be imposed on us all. There is no point having a rule that vehicles on a road must stop when a traffic light turns red unless it is generally observed and enforced. Politics at the level of today's large-scale, interconnected, and diverse societies is on a

tough beat. Our collective will—which is what politics is supposed to express—is not easy to fathom or always comfortable to accept once it is decided upon.

We should not imagine that we can continue without politics. You might argue that politics persists only because humans make the wrong choices. If they followed the right path, set down by religion or some other moral guide, they would all choose the same thing and as a result politics would not be necessary. You might alternatively argue that politics operates only in societies that are structured so that people's interests are fundamentally opposed but that it might be possible to structure a society where people's interests were always aligned and as a result politics would not be required. The former argument has at various times been made by some religious and other moralizing opinion leaders. The latter is one used by some radicals and utopians of various hues. Neither is particularly convincing to me and neither can take much succor from the historical record to date. There is little to suggest that human beings or human societies are perfectible as implied by these contrasting understandings.

Given human society as it has been and as it might reasonably be expected to be in the future, we could argue that people will make judgments about what is right for themselves and for others and that there is no reason to assume that those judgments will be shared. Equally it is clear that as humans we need to find ways to act together, to engage in collective action, to resolve the problems and challenges of living together. It is an integral part of human nature to value the opportunity to be involved in decisions about issues that affect you. We will differ about what the outcomes could or should be but somehow in a democracy we need to sustain a commitment to the process and institutions of politics. We may not like its outcomes but we should be willing to support the complex expression of collective will that in our democracies politics is attempting to deliver.

Understanding the above is the dynamics of an effective democratic politics, which is the key. How could we create a political culture that rests on such insights? We could try to shift the culture of elite politics as a first step. Meg Russell (2005, 55–58) proposes a new political charter in which politicians are encouraged to be more honest about their mistakes. They would need to explain the hard choices that have to be made as well as the constraints faced by decision makers and be more generous to their opponents in not making exaggerated or unnecessary attacks and in campaigning responsibly and in a way that does not exploit citizens' distrust. She adds that media coverage and citizens' attitudes to politics will also need to change. But her optimism that such a new political culture could take hold needs to be tempered by a recognition that when activists do their politics they do so with a mix of motives from passion for a cause to self-interest. But, above all, they campaign, demonstrate, bargain, organize, and do the mundane work of filling out envelopes and making phone calls in order to win. There are no neutrals in politics and to ask activists to forgo potentially winning strategies may be asking for too much. For example, Gordon Brown's political opponents are unlikely to give up the sleaze attacks, allow him to show fallibility without sanction, or forgo the chance to argue they could avoid the hard choices he will be forced to make.

Many argue that there may be ways of re-engaging people in politics directly and this was a central theme that I developed in my call for a new politics for amateurs in *Why Politics Matters* (Stoker 2006). The "Make Poverty History" (MPH) protest in the summer of 2005 could be seen as exemplar of the new politics of engagement. It connected campaigning with formal representative politics in a powerful way and did so in a way that reached out to millions of people who were relative novices in the political process over an issue of high moral import. There are lessons that can be drawn from that campaign if we

are interested in a remoralizing of politics and restoring trust in the political process (McNeill 2006). The first is that hope sells rather than guilt. MPH convinced people that they could do something to make a difference to improve the lot of the world's poor. Second, it built very deliberately from the bottom up and then tried to link visionary leadership to that base, but the base was around the local school-gate, bus stops, places of work rather than the elite institutions of politics. Finally, its message was one of rehabilitation and renewal as converts to the cause were welcomed from all quarters and not derided for making a U-turn or because they were latecomers.

Not all politics can be packaged in the same way as the MPH campaign, but it stands out as a politics that successfully brought together the formal institutions of governance and the informal power of civil society. There are other examples from across the globe. Graham Smith (2009) shows how there has been innovation in forms of public engagement worldwide and offers the following categorization for these schemes: consultative, deliberative, co-governance, direct, and e-democracy schemes.

However, even if we did find ways of drawing in to a degree more citizens into decision making, the bulk of citizens would still remain observers rather than practitioners of political practice. Moreover, the big unknown is how these observers come to understand politics and whether they could develop a complex and nuanced understanding of its practices. Even if we convince citizens that politics is not all about politicians narrowly pursuing their self-interests in a cycle of ineffectual games, we still need them to understand that politics is an awkward and difficult process.

As Michael Walzer puts it, political decisions are inherently and permanently conflictual:

> Very few political decisions are verdicts in the literal
> sense of that term. I don't mean that we can't sometimes
> insist that it is morally right and perhaps imperative to
> do X; but even people who agree on the necessity of
> doing X are likely to disagree about how to do it, or how
> soon, or at whose expense. . . . Permanent settlements
> in politics are rare in political life because we have no
> way of reaching a verdict on contested issues. (Walzer
> 2004, 103)

Politics as a result often requires messy compromises that are presented through "smoke and mirrors" to bridge conflicting interests and values. Deliberation and the open exchange of different ideas are part of politics but they do not capture the roundness of its practice. Politics is a sustained battle of interests and ideas and claims for influence, accountability, and scrutiny. It is an inherent reflection of our plurality and differences as human beings. Its nobility is in its capacity to enable us to manage our mutual interdependence, but its practice is often labored, dull and untidy, muddled and occasionally dirty.

All of the proposed strategies of reformers may help, but as Colin Hay helpfully suggests, we are slightly pitching in the dark. We do not know enough about the problem to know what the answer might be. As Hay (2007, 162) argues in terms of the silent majority we "know very little . . . about the cognitive process in and through which [they] come to attribute motivations to the behavior [they] witness, or how [they] come to develop and revise assumptions about human nature [they] project on to others. If politics depends ultimately on our capacity to trust one another . . . then there can be no more important questions for political analysts than these."

We need a political culture that is able to live with and manage contradictory forces. Citizens should engage directly in politics and be

engaged by the mainstream representative political process. Yet even if that occurs they will differ about what the outcomes of democratic politics could or should be. So, somehow, we citizens need to be willing to support the multifaceted expression of collective will that we call politics even when the outcomes may not be to our liking.

Conclusion

The tensions of our current political culture are often resolved by citizens opting out and condemning politics with a mix of cynicism and high moral fervor. Politics demands a better response than that and if we understood it more we would give it more leeway and scope. But citizens also need to be more directly involved in its processes. Politics is a human tool for dealing with conflicts and interdependence. We need to recognize its continuing capacity to enable us to live together in a complex world and learn to accept its lack of perfection.

Politics in a democratic context demands a complex moral universe. One that grants you the freedom to challenge authority, criticize all actors and actions, and cajole others to support your views, but at the same time demands from you a collective responsibility to uphold a system that may produce outcomes that you may strongly object to or find morally dubious or even repugnant. Cynicism mixed with moral outrage is our default response to a democratic politics. It is a caustic and disabling mix and its grip needs to be broken.

I am not about to argue that we all need to become new model active citizens. Democracy should be about providing opportunities to get involved and engaged in a whole range of institutions and decisions from neighborhood to the global. But it is important to recognize that for most people politics is not their first choice of activity. There are trade-offs between time spent on politics and the joys of private life. We should be cautious in our expectations about the extent and depth

of engagement that people want. In this light two reform strategies stand out: the need to offer viable ways for people to engage in politics directly and the need to make representative politics work better. Some form of representative politics is therefore likely to remain at the heart of everyday politics in mature democracies. The challenge rests on reconnecting representative politics to its participative roots and in so doing making it a more plausible and effective arena for resolving conflicts and choosing pathways to coordination.

References

Almond, Gabriel, and Sidney Verba. 1963. *The Civic Culture.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Almond, Gabriel A. and Sidney Verba, eds. 1980. *The Civic Culture Revisited.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Communities and Local Government (2007) Citizenship Survey: April–June 2007, England and Wales Available at: http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/corporate/pdf/citizenshipsurveyaprjun2007.pdf (accessed 19th April, 2009)

De Jong, Wilma, Martin Shaw, and Neil Stammers, eds. 2005. *Global Activism, Global Media*. London: Pluto.

Gamble, Andrew. 2000. *Politics and Fate*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hansard Society. 2008. *Audit of Political Engagement 5. The 2008 Report*. London: Hansard Society.

Hay, Colin. 2007. *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Jordan, Grant, and William Maloney. 1997. *The Protest Business? Mobilizing Campaign Groups*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Kavanagh, Dennis. 1980. "Political Culture in Great Britain: The Decline of the Civic Culture." In: Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, eds. *The Civic Culture Revisited.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 124–176.

Lloyd, John. 2004. *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*. London: Constable.

McNeill, Kirsty. 2006. "Can We Restore Trust?" *Fabian Review* 118/4: 16–17.

Mortimore, Roger. 1995. "Politics and Public Perceptions." In: F. F. Ridley and A. Doig, eds., *Sleaze: Politicians, Private Interests and Public Reaction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pattie, Charles, Patrick Seyd, and Paul Whiteley. 2004. *Citizenship in Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Russell, Meg. 2005. *Must Politics Disappoint?* London: Fabian Society.

Smith, Graham. 2009. *Democratic Innovations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stoker, Gerry. 2006. *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomson, Alice. 2009. "MPs Who Abuse Allowances Turn People Off Politics." *The Times*, March 24.

Walzer, Michael. 2004. *Politics and Passion.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Webb, Paul, David Farrell, and Ian Holliday, eds. 2002. *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Societies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.