

# **Bringing Politics Alive: Engaging the Disengaged in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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It is forty years since the Watergate scandal came to its conclusion with the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

Quite rightly, this is seen as a great triumph of investigatory journalism, and signified the importance of a free press in any democratic society.

The level of political engagement was considerable. Not only because the book and film were both 'bestsellers' but because of the level of interest in the Congressional hearings. Over 300 hours of primetime television were dedicated, displacing dare I say it 'soaps'! None of us would want to further engagement and participation in politics on the back of political scandals, yet this event 40 years ago does demonstrate just how much interest can be generated when the foundations of a democracy are rocked.

But here is the rub. Whilst no one can take away from Woodward and Bernstein's enormous contribution and dedication to protecting the democratic process in the US, one other factor has sometimes been overlooked.

Namely, that without the political process Nixon may well have brazened it out. This was of course down to the willingness of some members of Congress to take on the challenge and initiate the hearings, engaging the power that democratic politics possessed to achieve a beneficial outcome.

Participation is a force for positive change in its own right, involving people and developing a functioning civil society which is vital to the wellbeing of any democracy.

However, self-evidently power is exercised by those who have the levers to pull. The forces which drive political change are held by those interests which reflect the differences in wealth as well as power in society. The vested interests which are the most obvious demonstrations of such differences of intent, and the reality of the strength which can be mobilised to counterweight those interests, is what constitutes political action into meaningful political outcomes.

Many people for instance sincerely believe that changing the voting system would increase formal political engagement. As someone who played a leading part in the anti-AV campaign three years ago, I am biased. I believe that those who wished to use initial change as a stepping stone towards the Single Transferable Vote system sought permanent or near permanent coalition government. Indeed many of them were enough honest enough to say so.

My own view is that disillusionment and disengagement exists when people believe that democratic processes cannot achieve substantial change; that the system will not in reality make much of a difference especially when, as it is commonly asserted, 'all political parties are the same'.

Of course the electorate are like all of us, full of contradictions.

People want decisive leadership, clear direction and politicians who say it as it is. They say they want to back those who really know what they are doing, where they are going and have 'the courage of their convictions'. Yes, conviction politics.

And not surprisingly, sometimes in the same breath, they want more consensual politics. They do not like the shouting match, 'Punch and Judy' politics of Prime Minister's Questions. They want more 'people like us'. By which they mean, men and women who on the whole do not have major differences and when they do, usually settle them over a pint or a glass of red wine.

Equally, they want politicians to 'leave them alone' and let them get on with their own lives. In the next breath they demand politicians should 'sort out' whatever needs sorting!

Take the global meltdown and the catastrophic impact of the disintegration of the banking system in Europe and North America. Despite the fact this was clearly a global phenomenon and the result of the behaviour firstly of lenders in the United States and secondly of bankers more broadly, politicians were seen as the culprits (reinforced by the way in which other politicians have sought to blame other politicians)! In other words, that politicians should have stopped the bankers doing what another set of politicians had been advocating. Namely, letting the market rip, and putting profit before probity. The hypocrisy is breathtaking but, if Britain is anything to go by, such tactics have been highly successful!

But what has often been overlooked are other strands in the change in culture and therefore attitude in the build up to the global crisis in 2008. Amongst many other things, the demutualisation of the building societies and the dash for the immediate handouts which were offered, contributed. Yes, depositors themselves voted to demutualise. You could say they voted to 'take money and run'! It was to coin a phrase 'direct democracy'. The voters who over a pint would presumably blame the politicians for not stopping it happening!

The old ways of investors' money carefully reinvested in mortgages was no longer enough.

But as we now move into the backwaters of the five year Parliament and as the events at Westminster gradually grind to a halt, what should we turn our attention to in the months ahead?

Well, perhaps it is to challenge the electorate as to precisely what they want. Clear policy, with a mandate for a government enabled to act? Or alternatively, a set of policies agreed after the election, determined not by the coherence or attractiveness of a manifesto but the deals to be done behind closed doors?!

Two directions face us; either for the political parties to continue hoping for a decisive victory in May 2015, in my case for Labour, thereby rejecting any consideration of the implications of further coalition, or facing if it should come to it the dilemma of what deal might be done, on what basis and inevitably on what set of policies, to form such a coalition.

Unsurprisingly no party leader wishes to specify what their 'bottom lines' might be. It is not an attractive proposition, to negotiate and show your hand even before the real negotiations begin.

The Lib Dems are making ever greater play of their promise to lift tax thresholds below which no one should pay income tax. Already, the Conservatives have stolen their clothes. But whilst undoubtedly this has proved to be popular, little debate has taken place about the potential consequences. What for instance it might mean for less progressive taxation and as the IFS have pointed out, the contradictions about who actually benefits the most if this policy were to be pursued. I use this only as an example to demonstrate that policies pursued in isolation from an overall programme for government can distort priorities.

When people ask the question on the doorstep 'why should I bother voting', it might be worth reflecting on George Osborne's recent budget. Those who vote naturally get the attention of politicians! Rarely has the spin on what is supposed to be a contribution to the future economic well being of the nation been so blatantly unsophisticated. Not just the infographic by the chairman of the Tory party Grant Shapps after the budget on beer and bingo but the whole play for a particular niche of the electorate. Policies which may well be good in themselves (the emphasis on encouraging saving and the abolition of compulsion in relation to annuities) have reinforced the message that if you are likely to vote, your vote will be sought. Nowhere is this clearer than with those in retirement!

We already know that the young, the poor and the disengaged are least likely to vote. The figure for 16-24 year olds has resulted in an alarming 27.5% drop in income. Recent figures from the IPPR are stark in reinforcing the consequences to those very cohorts. Whilst the average voting households have seen an annual drop of £1,850 in their disposable income as part of the Government's austerity programme, non-voting households have seen a staggering drop of £2,135!

Looking at historic patterns, it is not difficult to see why non-voters find themselves hardest hit by austerity measures. The smaller the turnout in general elections, the more targeted will be those who fall into the cohort most likely to cast a vote.

In 1987 the difference between the richest quartile and the lowest was only 4% in terms of voting patterns. By 2010 this had risen to 23%.

Neither of these coalition parties acknowledge the existence of the 'Social Wage' or appear to acknowledge what is happening to the very fabric of public services, particularly in those areas where public expenditure was highest because need was greatest. Where need was greatest, cuts have been greatest.

Those of course whose values are based on operating purely through market forces and for whom the State is anathema will see this outcome as beneficial.

But whilst coalitions may have a superficial attraction in avoiding 'extremes', they perpetuate in my view the disillusionment with formal politics as a means of offering decisive action in the interests of those for whom political democracy is the only way of exercising any influence.

In simple terms coalitions make it more difficult to get rid of those in office. Being able to rid yourself of a government is after all the essence of democracy. The late Tony Benn made this point very effectively!

Coalition also hampers the opportunity of those elected to office, by winning the largest number of seats, from implementing any kind of coherent set of policies placed before the electorate in a manifesto. Few actually get what they voted for or wanted.

And the reason why I am spending time on this is a consequence demonstrated by a trend which appears to have started developing academic and philosophical respectability! I speak here of the newly emerging 'anarcho-populists'. The successors it would be appear to anarcho-syndicalism!

Now, I am not against a touch of populism. Recently, John Reid and I were designated as the most 'populist' politicians of recent times. I think it was intended as an insult but I take it as an accolade.

Being in touch with those who elected you and staying rooted in the community from which you came, seems to me to be a terrific antidote to the 'political class' which in one breath are so despised and in the next revered.

The anarcho-populists carry what they describe as 'participation' beyond engagement with formal processes. In fact they reject such processes and describe instead the 'negotiation' from the square or street.

I recently commented on Russell Brand and Will Self, who are very different in their approach but with a common theme. Namely, that formal politics is a fraud on the people who participate and therefore simple demonstrations of engagement, like casting a vote, only 'encourage' the political class to continue their wicked ways!

More dangerous voices exist in academia. David Graeber is an American anthropologist who is currently a visiting professor at the London School of Economics. He argues that the non-hierarchical decision-making process of pre-figurative politics makes this a fundamentally anarchistic project.

Comparing to the 'Arab Spring', Graeber has claimed that movements such as Occupy Wall Street and other contemporary grass roots protests, represent the "opening salvo in a wave of negotiations over the dissolution of the American Empire".

As I outline here, this disconnect with political processes which change the behaviour of rather than simply confronting those with their hands on the levers of power, offer very real dangers as well as contradictions.

David Graeber is as I understand it, a member of the 'Interim Committee for the Emerging International Organisation for a Participatory Society'.

Now, I have always wondered how anarchists square the circle of membership of an 'organisation' and taking something as collaborative as a 'committee', interim or otherwise.

But take another example of this foray into academic respectability. Michael Hardt, who I understand is described as a political philosopher, is a fierce critic of elections. He is best known apparently for his book 'Empire', co-written by Antonio Negri.

But what about Daniel Pinchbeck. He is the author of 'Breaking the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism'.

His take on this self indulgent piece of nonsense is about the use of modern technology and the perpetual use of referenda to determine the democratic outcome of campaigns on this, that and the other subjects. Undoubtedly truly anarchistic, but also it would seem to me involves the process of voting. Presumably therefore he has fallen out with those who otherwise see themselves as allies in the anarcho-populist struggle?

So what is the significance of what can be seen as fringe activity? The answer is simple. Those taking to the streets, to the squares, to demanding the removal of those 'in power' are the 'poor bloody infantry' of such a movement

Genuine action against tyranny is being captured by pseudo political philosophers.

Seminal events including the Arab Spring, but also now the events in Kiev and the aftermath of both, as may well the events in Venezuela, demonstrate the importance of being able to answer the question 'and what next'?

And that is where more traditional formal processes of participation and long-term engagement emerge as vital.

For anarchy is all very well for a BBC Radio 4 gimmick; 'A Day of Anarchy' this Saturday on Radio 4 (since the control of Radio 4 announced the intention to hold this day the title has been changed to 'Invasion'; unfortunate, given the juxtaposition of what has happened in Kiev and the Ukraine and the invasion of the Crimea!). But it is always the least powerful and least well off who find themselves the victims when destabilisation and instability occur.

Negotiation 'from the street', can remove but how does it create? When Stalin asked the question "and how many battalions does the pope have?", he was reflecting from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century what Vladimir Putin more diplomatically must have been reflecting on in discussions with colleagues about the tactics of facing down Western governments. For all of us who are not anarchists, it is what comes after not the thrill of the moment that really determines progress. In the Ukraine (and I have been to the Ukraine), those on the street made progress but were not able to continue into the more formalised framework of a functioning state. Rather what has followed is the 'annexation' of the Crimea and the economic meltdown that currently faces the Ukrainian people.

So, when push comes to shove (as they say in my neck of the woods), it is worth remembering the strictures of my old professor Sir Bernard Crick, after whom, incidentally, Professor Matt Flinders and I are naming the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the public understanding of politics.

He argued that politics is a messy business; that it is not really democracy unless people are engaged at all levels and in different ways. Like 'Make Poverty History' ten years ago, influence was exercised for a positive outcome, by bringing pressure to bear on the political process and those with access to power.

Plus, and this was the third stricture, the power of government linked to the peaceful power 'from the street' to counterweight vested interests, transnational financial power and the

unfettered operation of the market. He argued 'In Defence of Politics', that not only should political democracy facilitate that counterweight but also reinforce the continuing role of those participating in day-to-day decisions in their neighbourhood and workplace, as well as of course engaging by voting.

As I spelt out in my lecture in early January to the Centre for Social Justice, this can mirror the coming together of people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the workplace to provide a collective voice.

For example the Big Switch, which enabled families to unite together in the West Country to negotiate with energy companies and achieve a substantial reduction in bills, is an example that could be taken up elsewhere.

If this took place alongside the use of the power of government to freeze bills and restructure the regulative market, we could have a two-track approach to bringing about beneficial change.

The Daily Mirror is now running a campaign under the heading The Great British Switch with similar objectives. Men and women using people power and demonstrating what can be done when people combine their influence.

Action by people themselves to take on the large trans-nationals who refuse to pay tax in this country could play a powerful role in changing their practices. Alongside a boycott of goods or services, (which played a significant part in the downfall of the apartheid regime in South Africa), consumer action can be significant. This was demonstrated years ago in the United States, led by Ralph Nader.

In challenging the anarcho-populists, I do not wish to underestimate or in any way denigrate the part that the brave men and women of Tahrir Square or Kiev played (many having lost their lives) in challenging autocracy and demanding a say in their own destiny. Far from it.

Rather, to learn the lessons from the French revolution onwards, and many more recent events. That the people linked to the political process can achieve not only the downfall of existing regimes but lasting solutions in establishing functioning democracy.

That is why we need to find imaginative ways of persuading people that politics can really make a difference, that governments can bring about change for the better and, like it or not, that political parties and processes do matter.

We cannot of course live in the past but we can learn from it. Times change, deference (thank goodness) disappears. But ironically greater transparency also brings the danger of scepticism morphing into cynicism.

It is worth therefore examining the events (cleverly chronicled by David Kynaston in his book 'Austerity Britain') where interest in politics remained even when the excitement of the election of the post-war Labour Government was fading.

In 1950 82% of the population voted in the general election which was nearly a dead heat. People thought it was a 'boring' election, and that there had not been great fervour. In fact, the statistics are interesting. A staggering 44% of the population listened to the last radio

broadcast of the election and over a third of the population listened to the Election Day results into the early hours of the morning. Even at 7pm on the day after the election as the final results came in, two fifths of the population were still listening to the news!

Whilst over the last 20 years there has not been the predicted fall in radio listenership, there has been over these two decades a substantial drop in mass viewing of traditional television news broadcast (for instance the 6 and 10 o'clock news output). The already interested have 24 hour, seven days a week output, but the disengaged are more likely to be downloading or streaming music with no 'interruption' from news or information.

Modern communications both facilitate such engagement but also offer a pluralistic landscape and therefore alternatives to traditional methods of accessing news and current affairs. Yet it is that very technology that enabled the coordination of uprisings in the Middle East, the rapid gathering of people in Independence Square in Kiev. What can be a force for apathy and 'bread and circuses' can also be a force for both understanding and political action.

But politicians as well as the media have a key role in avoiding alienation, disengagement and downright cynicism. If you denigrate a process often enough, it is not surprising people come to believe that it will never deliver the change you seek.

As Peter Kellner President of YouGov said, if the five big supermarket chains knocked bells out of each other like the political parties on a daily basis denigrated their opponents, no one would shop at any of them. How could I disagree?