

WHY AND HOW TO FIX OUR BROKEN
POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICES

RADIX PAPER NO 13
DECEMBER 2019

David Boyle
Steffan Aquarone

Foreword by
Dr Joe Zammit-Lucia

RADIX

THINK
TANK
FOR THE
**RADICAL
CENTRE**

**WHATEVER HAPPENED
TO DOING?**

HAS THE POLITICAL CULTURE
FORGOTTEN HOW TO MAKE
THINGS HAPPEN?





“TO AVOID CRITICISM
SAY NOTHING DO NOTHING
BE NOTHING”

Aristotle

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO DOING?

*Has the political culture forgotten
how to make things happen?*

*David Boyle
Director of Policy, RADIX*

Published in November 2019
by Radix Group Ltd

www.radixuk.org

ABOUT RADIX

RADIX is a non-aligned think tank for the radical centre. We welcome people from all parties and none. We challenge established notions and work to re-imagine our societies. We focus our efforts on policy initiatives that can drive towards system change rather than putting sticking plasters on the existing system. Our goals are to revitalize our liberal democracies, re-define capitalism, and re-build cohesive communities and societies. We want all citizens to live securely, with dignity, be active participants in society, and be free to pursue their own interpretation of the good life.

©Radix Group Ltd. The moral right of David Boyle and Steffan Aquarone to be identified as the author of this work is asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. Some rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical or photocopying, recording or otherwise for commercial purposes without the prior permission of the publisher. A CIP catalogue for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN (ePub) 978-1-912880-12-2

Radix Brand and Layout:
Mark Huddleston

CONTACT US

RADIX,
The Raincloud Victoria,
76 Vincent Square,
Westminster,
London SW1P 2PD

hello@radixuk.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



David Boyle is an author and journalist who writes mainly about history and new ideas in economics, money, business and culture. He is Director of Policy at RADIX. His most recent public role was conducting an independent review for the Treasury and the Cabinet Office on Barriers to Public Service Choice, which reported early in 2013. His book *Authenticity* put the phenomenon on the business and political agenda. His previous books *The Tyranny of Numbers* and *The Sum of Our Discontent* predicted and fermented the backlash against the target culture. *Funny Money* helped launch the time banks movement in the UK. His recent book *Broke* has launched a public debate about the plight of the middle classes. His latest book "*Tickbox*" is published by Little Brown in January 2020.



Steffan Aquarone is a UK digital entrepreneur and speaker whose experiences range from film to payments. He has consulted and trained for big brands and spoken around the world on innovation, entrepreneurship and digital marketing. In 2014, he was voted by university and secondary school students as one of the most influential new media figures under the age of 30. He is the author of *Fourth to First*, explaining how he was elected as a Norfolk county councillor.

FOREWORD

The Simpsons is a wonderful series. It uses humour to face us with the paradoxes of life.

In one episode, Lisa was urging her father to get off the sofa watching television and actually try to do something. Homer's response was so sadly reflective of some contemporary attitudes: "Trying is the first step to failure", he responded.

This culture of risk aversion, the idea that trying to do anything is far too risky, is a culture that has enveloped the UK and Europe – both in the commercial and the political worlds.

Commercially, anyone who has tried to raise venture capital both in Europe and in the US has been faced with stark differences. European venture companies are terminally risk averse. In the US, they always believe that here might lie the next Google. The economic results are there for all to see.

WE DON'T DOUBT YOUR CAPABILITIES. BUT WE FEAR THAT, IF WE WERE TO PROMOTE YOU, YOU MIGHT ACTUALLY...WELL...DO THINGS.

Politically, we are trapped in the same miasma of risk averse paralysis. Some years ago, a friend of mine, a long serving civil servant who was applying for promotion, was told at interview:

"We don't doubt your capabilities. But we fear that, if we were to promote you, you

might actually...well...do things." Since then things have not got much better. Maybe worse.

There are many reasons for this deplorable state of affairs.

First, we must look at ourselves. We have become unreasonably intolerant of human beings like us making mistakes. Why should politicians and civil servants do anything, be bold, try anything new, when we, the press, and the whole blogosphere, all seem to spend our lives ready to pounce on anything that might be described as a mistake or a failure?

WHY SHOULD OUR POLITICAL CLASS BOTHER TO DO ANYTHING WHEN WE ARE ALL HYPER-CHARGED TO PONCE ON ANY PERCEIVED ERROR?

But, as this paper explains, there is another reason why paralysis has gripped us all. And that is the paternalistic and technocratic culture that has enveloped our institutions and driven them to terminal inertia. The belief that the role of those who govern is to do things to and for people. That people's role is to be passive recipients of that which is administered to them by our all-knowing institutions, and to be eternally grateful for that which has been tossed to them.

This culture is positively medieval.

If the role of the public is to be passive recipients of things done to them by 'those who know', then is it surprising that not only will they learn helpless, begging-bowl passivity as the only way of being; but that they will place any failure squarely

THOSE WHO GOVERN EXPECT
PEOPLE TO BE PASSIVE, AND
GRATEFUL, RECIPEINTS OF THAT
WHICH IS SERVED TO THEM

at the feet of those who govern? That they will become increasingly intolerant of failure? And that helplessness on one side and risk-averse paralysis on the other inevitably ensue?

And the financial crisis has, rightly or wrongly, been seen by many as clear proof that that 'the elite' are not only incompetent, but that, when push comes to shove, they will bail out the vested interests while imposing hardship on everyone else.

All of this is creating a corrosive gulf between the public and those with the responsibility to govern and to provide public services.

WE ARE CREATING A CORROSIVE
GULF BETWEEN THE PUBLIC
AND THOSE WITH THE
RESPONSIBILITY TO GOVERN

CO-PRODUCTION

The authors propose a wide-ranging definition of 'co-production' as one route to breaking out of this destructive culture and consequent paralysis. If people are involved, and see themselves as involved, in politics and in the design and delivery of public services, not only will policies and services be better designed, but everyone

will be more determined, and put effort into, making them work.

Everyone will share in the benefits and everyone will better understand, and carry some responsibility for, errors and imperfections.

But to do so, they will need to be able to break out of the corrosive relationship between citizen and state which has involved citizens solely as 'consumers' of public services – as if they could somehow shop elsewhere.

Failure to move in this direction has a huge cost – human and financial.

There was a time when the UK National Health Service had a human relationship with citizens. Its transformation into a supposedly efficient machine with a production line mentality has served to meet centrally designed bureaucratic targets. It has also resulted in lost human connection.

It used to be almost inconceivable for people to sue the NHS. It was something that they felt was theirs – an institution where people were seen to be doing their best and where the odd mistake was accepted as normal human failing.

No longer.

The NHS bureaucracy with its 'efficient management' is becoming ever more remote; ever more obsessed with perverse administrative targets; and ever less focused on the patient as individual rather than as a number to be put through the 'efficient' machine driven by generic protocols. One result: £2 billion per year in cash paid out for litigation cases and total liabilities of some £80 billion.

How's that for successfully making money go further for patient care?

LITIGATION IS RIFE IN AN NHS THAT HAS LOST ITS CONNECTION TO PEOPLE. THE COST: £2 BILLION ANNUALLY; £80 BILLION IN TOTAL LIABILITIES. EFFICIENT?

And it's the same with politics

Voters are disillusioned with politics because it has come to be seen as something that is done **to** them rather than **with** them.

Our colleagues Nick Silver and Zoe Hodge have recently described how much of the success of insurgent political parties across Europe rests on their ability to devise what is essentially a co-production political model. They describe how these new parties have used social media and effective leadership to energise a huge following by *“making them active and engaged participants in the party”*¹.

The technocratic approach to politics, governance and public services is an extension of the modernist philosophy of mass production. It is past its sell by date. As David Boyle and I have pointed out before:

“The modern idea of mass-production, where the consumer’s say was limited to one of making a choice among an array of standardized products, is starting to fade. Instead, we are seeing the rise of participation in production as an integral part of the

product and service being offered, what Alvin Toffler first described as ‘pro-sumers.’”²

Or what Alan Kirby describes as pseudo-modernism that *“makes the individual’s action the necessary condition of the... product”*.

This paper is timely. It is a call to action that needs to be heeded.

If the gulf between people and our politics, administrations, and public services does not start to be narrowed soon, then the consequences for our democracies and our economies will be dire.

Fortunately, there is an increasing number of examples of how this is successfully being done – usually at small scale.

CAN THE OLD GUARD BREAK OUT OF OUTDATED HABITS?

The main challenge posed by this paper is whether those steeped in the old ways of doing politics, governance and providing public services will show themselves capable of breaking out of habits and beliefs that may well have been appropriate for the past, to develop more energising, more effective approaches appropriate for our times.

As JM Keynes put it:

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.”

Dr Joe Zammit-Lucia
co-Founder RADIX

1. Nick Silver and Zoe Hodge. A Guide to New Political Movements: How to do politics in the 21st Century. RADIX, 2019
2. Joe Zammit-Lucia and David Boyle. The Death of Liberal Democracy? RADIX, 2017.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

*“Very brave, minister.
I congratulate you.”*

Sir Humphrey Appleby, Yes, Minister, 1980.

Some years ago, one of us found themselves giving evidence in the House of Commons at the public affairs select committee on the concept of co-production.³

It was, as it turned out, a rather select gathering to hear what three of us had to say. David (one of the authors) sat next to Matthew Taylor, who had recently finished his stint as policy advisor to Tony Blair in Downing Street. This clearly made him an object of suspicion, and not to Conservative MPs, who had not, in fact, shown up to hear us. It may be hard to remember how suspicious northern Labour MPs were of anyone too close to the Blair camp. And he was clearly ruffling their feathers just by being there.

Co-production, as I tried to make clear, was the idea that patients, parents or members of the public would work alongside doctors, police or teachers as equal partners in the business of creating health, safety or education⁴. The prevailing culture is shifting from passivity to co-production in most aspects of our lives⁵. But it requires an equal partnership and is, I believe, one of the few techniques that can lead to a

genuine partnership – by making possible a real shift of power. And primarily by the power of ordinary people doing things (of which more later).

Matthew Taylor clearly seemed to be on the same side, but he made the mistake – if indeed it was a mistake – of applying the same idea to politics. What is the role of politicians in a world that understands co-production, he asked? Should they be providers – or catalysts for people to provide for themselves?

Despite the risk, these were all valid ideas.

But the MPs were horrified. They did not understand it at all. They seemed to be determined to hang onto their self-image as generous providers, who like to appear among us – sprinkle fairy dust and distribute largesse – while everyone cheers.

“I don’t get it,” said one MP. “My constituents are very grateful to me.”



**“I DON'T GET IT,” SAID ONE
MP. “MY CONSTITUENTS ARE
VERY GRATEFUL TO ME.”**

And in that one giveaway sentence it seems to me lies the answer to why politicians are so often held in such low esteem – except individually for the co-production work they do without realising it, spreading power and responsibility.

3. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmpublicadm/410/410.pdf>

4. David Boyle and Michael Harris (2009), *The Challenge of Co-production*, London: Nesta. <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/the-challenge-of-co-production/>

5. See for example Zammit-Lucia and Boyle (2016), op cit.

Because there comes a point when being endlessly the fairy provider tends to infantilise constituents. “Charity wounds”, wrote the great sociologist Marcel Mauss, and this is what he meant. It keeps people artificially passive.

It may even be that members of parliament are the very last profession to ask themselves these kind of questions: are they clinging to the old ways of behaving, the old style of rhetoric, because they prefer their constituents to have an element of helpless children about them – so that the voters might always be grateful?



**WE MUST STOP
INFANTILISING PEOPLE AND
STOP ENCOURAGING A
CULTURE OF PASSIVITY**

Are they, in fact, infantilising the people who vote for them, not just by assuming they can achieve nothing for themselves, but by making sure that continues to be the case?

RADIX research on insurgent political parties abroad suggests that one reason for their success is that they give permission to members to go off and do things for themselves, without central direction from party HQ⁶.

Without this – though clearly not without the rhetoric of empowerment in the UK – then we have an example of the much bigger trend which this pamphlet is about: the strange failure of the prevailing political and policy culture to embrace the idea of *doing* things any more.

This is also one of the issues raised by the Conservative leadership candidate Rory Stewart who identifies too much talk and too little action as the besetting sin of UK political culture. So we are not alone.

The idea seems strange, but consider the following peculiarities:

THE PREFERENCE FOR PASSIVITY

Since its inception, the welfare state's service institutions have generally preferred their patients, pupils and service users to be as passive as possible to make them easier to process – believing that the narrow interpretation of efficiency, as used in mass-production, is the only element they need to grasp. This is despite ample evidence that active and involved service users recover faster, learn faster and spread their skills and knowhow better. The prevailing, technocratic service culture finds this extremely difficult to understand or act upon⁷.

6. Silver and Hodge (2019), op cit.

7. See for example Edward Omeni et al (2014), 'Service user involvement: impact and participation: a survey of service user and staff perspectives', BMC Health Service Research, 14, 491.

**THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE
THAT ACTIVE AND INVOLVED
SERVICE USERS RECOVER
FASTER, LEARN FASTER AND
SPREAD THEIR SKILLS AND
KNOWHOW BETTER**

Incidentally, by 'user involvement', we don't mean the kind of narrow and passive choice developed by economists in public service in the mid-2000s. This was designed as a narrow choice of institution, and it failed to take accounts of how a broader section of society would benefit from services that were more broadly flexible⁸.

More recently, the same attitude now seems to have spread to front line staff. Their managers expect them to press the right buttons in the right order, to tick the right boxes and do what they are told, despite rhetoric about staff 'empowerment'⁹. They are expected to be part of the machine.

Worse, the same attitude has been spreading upwards through the hierarchies. We have spoken to senior secondees in the civil service and the military who find it next to impossible to persuade their staff to take any kind of decision. It seems just too risky. As if the ministers alone must take them all.

Yet, at the same time, ministers have managed to insulate themselves from all day-to-day decisions by using arms-length organisations to run services.

There may be nothing new about a do-nothing culture in the civil service – we have spoken to civil servants who were told at interviews for promotion that there were fears they might do something. In that respect, the civil service has not changed in the four decades or so since Yes, Minister. But to be fair to civil servants, it's partly our fault – the voting public – for our failure to forgive mistakes, for ridiculing small errors, and for demanding resignation as part of the normal day-to-day language of politics.

**WE ALL NEED TO SHARE
SOME BLAME FOR PARALYSIS
BECAUSE OF OUR FAILURE TO
FORGIVE MISTAKES**

In that respect, we may have inherited the political culture the previous generation deserves.

Perhaps it is also our fault for failing to challenge the political obsession with 'optics'. Our political parties, and many others, too often prefer the right gesture, that gives the right signals. Virtue signalling rather than a policy that might have some chance of actually tackling the problem it was supposed to.

8. David Boyle (2013), Barriers to Choice: the Boyle Review, Cabinet Office.

9. See forthcoming: David Boyle (2019), Tickbox, London: Little Brown.

PERHAPS IT IS ALSO OUR
FAULT FOR FAILING TO
CHALLENGE THE POLITICAL
OBSESSION WITH 'OPTICS'

One of us was a member of the Liberal Democrat federal policy committee for twelve years and – although they were by no means the worst offenders – this was a besetting sin. The problem is that politicians are no longer judged by what they do – the news cycle is too short for that – they are judged by their seriousness, their ability to convince the public that they *want* to do something. Having their heart in the right place about an idea has become more important than a genuine intention to act effectively.

THE TROUBLE WITH EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

How can you be against evidence-based policy? Nobody would want to advocate evidence-free policy, after all.

But unfortunately, this excellent concept has become, in many walks of life, an injunction to do nothing without evidence about the likely effects. Since this is rarely available, at least about new systems that have yet to be tested on the scale envisaged, evidence-based policy becomes a reason why some solutions can never be tried – for no better reason than because they do not conform to the metrics that the government has decided to use to determine 'evidence'.

In social research, it is nearly impossible to collect quantitative data without being drastically - and disastrously - reductive. Hence 'evidence' of educational progress in the government's eyes is reduced to measures like grade improvement or attendance rates, because civic engagement, wellbeing, enthusiasm, confidence, a sense of self-worth, and so on are extremely hard to measure.

THE STATEMENT 'THERE IS
NO EVIDENCE THAT THIS
WORKS' IS TAKEN TO HAVE
THE SAME MEANING AS
'IT DOESN'T WORK', WHEN
IT IS ACTUALLY NOT THE
SAME THING AT ALL

This has a catastrophic effect on the parameters of what is possible in the eyes of the civil service. Innovation is part of the Whitehall lexicon, but this is the reason they don't really mean it: because the statement '*there is no evidence that this works*' is taken to have the same meaning as '*it doesn't work*', when it is actually not the same thing at all.

Beyond Whitehall, those who are against a particular action or policy will muster these and many other arguments to stop it. In a world of trade-offs and retail politics, one cannot please everyone so the default position becomes do nothing so that we don't offend anyone.

**IF YOU DO NOTHING, YOU
OFFEND NOBODY.**

This is the regulators' problem too. Take drugs. If a drug does not get approved for use, nobody really misses it. If it gets approved and turns out to have previously unknown problems, then the regulators are castigated for having approved it. It is a problem some way beyond political or civil service culture. It is the overall sense that, if something goes wrong, someone must be blamed for it.

These are entirely different issues and processes, but they have the same fundamental flaw, the way the culture has turned away from the importance of doing things to talking about things, or consulting on things or measuring things or communicating things.

Just as so many of the big charities have shifted resources from the onerous and risky business of making a difference for the easier and cheaper business of lobbying, advocating and campaigning about why it is so important that somebody else does it.

**OUR CULTURE HAS BECOME
ENVELOPED IN TALKING,
CONSULTING, COLLECTING
EVIDENCE, MEASURING
AND COMMUNICATING -
ANYTHING BUT
ACTUALLY DOING**

What has happened to the culture that these shifts have been taking place under our very noses for decades without anyone apparently commenting?

Because it is a serious omission, and it has serious consequences.

It has arguably led to a widespread disaffection with formal politics – so incapable of acting, so miserably failing to do – that it has led to the rise of the populists and Brexit and all the rest. The prospect of a hollowing out of the political world is what we fear, and – looking closely – we find it has been hollowed already.

Politics has been overtaken by a kind of fearful lassitude which believes that doing is somehow too dangerous, too basic, too committed, too worrying, too complex – possibly even too vulgar.

**POLITICS HAS BEEN
OVERTAKEN BY A KIND OF
FEARFUL LASSITUDE**

How did we get into this position? The next section tests out some hypotheses.

POLITICS:

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

“I am nailing my colours firmly to the fence.”

Unnamed Conservative MP during the internal divisions that last plagued their party, 1904.


On the day of the anti-Brexit march in London in October 2018, one of the authors found themselves already committed to taking part in a climate change debate hosted by Christian Aid in Norwich.

Clive Lewis, MP for Norwich South, was supposed to be attending but was swapped out at the last minute, leaving a motley crew of local politicians to have it out amongst themselves about the impact of climate change and what could be done about it.

The spokesperson for the Green Party was a respected academic and campaigner, but we, at least, found it hard to engage with the screeching apocalyptic threats he was making to the room. Especially as those present were all, by virtue of their attendance, already converted. They had even turned down a competing anti-slavery march in Norwich to be there.

The most striking thing about the speaker’s passionately-delivered dystopian forecast, is that it forgot the fact that the vast majority of people are busy just trying to keep their lives together.

That doesn’t mean there *aren’t* bigger issues, or that there *ought* not to be, but simply that the vast majority of people are more worried about what is going to happen to them in the next five months or weeks, than they are about what will happen to their country and the world in the next twenty years.



THE VAST MAJORITY OF
PEOPLE ARE BUSY JUST
TRYING TO KEEP THEIR
LIVES TOGETHER

It is not because people can’t think on those time scales. It is because a lot of people are finding things hard.

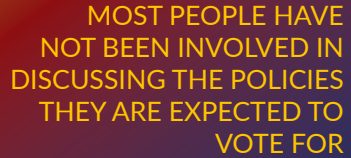
As politicians, we only have ourselves to blame for this. We have allowed a situation to arise, for the reasons explored in chapter one, whereby people no longer see us as capable of fixing any of the problems that are relevant to them. Only when people’s basic needs are more reliably sorted will they have the capacity for small, manageable pieces of action on anything else.

EXPLANATION #1. PEOPLE DON'T HAVE A REAL POLITICAL CHOICE

The oft-quoted adage that people get the politicians they deserve is cute but it may also be insulting when so many people's votes don't count because they don't live in marginal constituencies. Individually, many, if not most, people have not in any way created these issues.

Much has been written about quite how badly broken the British electoral system is: how first past the post means only a few people's votes really affect the outcome of who governs, and how decades of playing by these rules mean that many groups and individuals are managed out of having a voice because there's no point in opposition parties campaigning in their areas.

It is much more fundamental than that: even when they come to vote, the reality is that a lot of people haven't been nearly involved enough in the discussion about the policies they're voting for, or in shaping the circumstances that determine the politics they're going to get, for it to feel like it matters to them. They might still be voting, but they are removed from the process through which candidates arrive on the ballot paper – and they are even more removed from the way that party political movements position themselves and reflect the will of society.

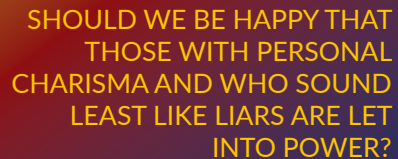


MOST PEOPLE HAVE
NOT BEEN INVOLVED IN
DISCUSSING THE POLICIES
THEY ARE EXPECTED TO
VOTE FOR

No wonder the Obama campaign found that the two most influential factors affecting people's voting behaviour were personal charisma and perceived competence. If you can't make any sense out of the information you receive, or you have good reason to be suspicious of it, then basing your judgment on the person standing in front of you, or on your screen, sounds fair enough.

Except politicians are like narcissistic snakes: we will do and say anything to get people's votes. So if we're presentable enough, and out in enough force, we will probably win. But this is not good enough either.

Should we really be happy that the people that sound least like liars are let into power?



SHOULD WE BE HAPPY THAT
THOSE WITH PERSONAL
CHARISMA AND WHO SOUND
LEAST LIKE LIARS ARE LET
INTO POWER?

Hugely increased participation in the democratic process might sound idealistic but it is absolutely vital. Voting because people died for the right to, or because it gives you the right to grumble about the roads, are not good enough reasons. And yet some people pin the democratic deficit on apathy, and call for mandatory voting – which is a bit like a business that goes bankrupt blaming its customers.

We need to give people a reason to vote that's about having a real stake in what happens, and this will only be the case if they've been involved in shaping the conversation beforehand, so they can see the outcome as relevant to them – as some of the insurgent parties on the continent have managed to do, like the Italian Five Star Movement. Then, through compromise, and representation, but in some significant way, they might see their vision for the future of society being brought to life.

**WHY SHOULD PEOPLE
BOTHER TO VOTE?**

EXPLANATION #2. ATTEMPTS BY POLITICIANS TO POLL OUR WAY OUT OF THE PROBLEM HAVE HAD THE OPPOSITE EFFECT

Whilst higher election turnouts are certainly desirable, and undoubtedly convey greater legitimacy to those elected, increasing democratic participation must not be seen simply as the act of more people voting on more things.

We need to see voting as the act that seals the deal – not the main act of political participation.

**VOTING SHOULD BE THE
ACT THAT SEALS THE DEAL,
NOT THE MAIN ACT OF
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Once the debate has been held and the arguments heard, *then* let's have a vote.

If people's votes record the outcome of their deliberations, then the vote itself stands a lot more chance of providing clear instruction. Recent experience suggests that voting as it is currently undertaken has led to anything *but* clear instruction:

- In the UK, no party has won a general election since 2005, with the possible exception of 2015.
- The result of the referendum on membership of the European Union has so far proved to be unworkable.
- And aside from being one of the least popular polls in political history, getting people to vote for Police and Crime Commissioners marked the start of an increase in modern slavery, online child abuse and organised crime – and albeit a reduction in burglary and speeding. Is that what the largely Tory-leaning voters really wanted? Was there any causal connection?

And if not, why not?

Doing more of what's already not working is rarely a good idea.



DOING MORE OF WHAT'S
ALREADY NOT WORKING IS
RARELY A GOOD IDEA

EXPLANATION #3. THE CHANGE THAT NEEDS TO COME FROM OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM HASN'T YET HAPPENED

The received wisdom is that if you win elections, then you can bring about change.

But that assumes that getting elected is the only way to exercise political power. And, more dangerously perhaps, that you'll use that power to change the system once you are on the inside.

If the last twenty years have taught us anything, it is that getting elected is neither necessary nor sufficient to exercise political power. Theresa May has been in power; UKIP was not. Which one had the most effect?



GETTING ELECTED IS
NEITHER NECESSARY NOR
SUFFICIENT TO EXERCISE
POLITICAL POWER


Individual politicians can still do a hell of a lot of good, even if they're just one person on one local authority. Better still a majority. But they're not going to be able to enact a vision for the future of society this way.

The challenge is that, as our first section explored, well-meaning politicians are part of the problem. So long as we carry on fixing some of the worst effects of their empires of entitlement, we somehow, in a sickening way, legitimise the system as it stands.

This might sound like a rallying cry for a single-issue campaign for electoral reform – but it is not, because the debate has not been started. People didn't vote for it when it was put to them in the UK in 2011, and changing what we say won't fix that. We've got to change who it is that is calling for change.

That requires us to stop thinking we have all the answers and instead give over the stage to people outside politics. Involving people in the conversation again, about what they see as their vision for society, and what they think politicians should do differently, is the only way to bridge the divide between 'them' and 'us'. This calls for a radically different sort of politics. But in order to enact it, we first need a revolution in ourselves, and how our political parties do politics.

The final section of this pamphlet looks towards some possible ways forward through our current impasse.



CHANGING WHAT WE SAY
WON'T FIX ANYTHING. WE
HAVE TO CHANGE WHO IS
CALLING FOR CHANGE

THE SITUATION RIGHT NOW – AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT.

“Monitoring has become almost religious in status, as has centralised control. The demand for quick hits and early wins is driven by a central desire analogous to the instant gratification demands made by drug users themselves.”

Richard Elliott of the Bristol Drugs Action Centre, 2009

What has been going on?

Why has our culture given itself over to this peculiar piece of learned helplessness?

There are at least three major trends which seem to us to be responsible, and we set them out below, along with some thoughts about what can be done.

TACKLING GROUPTHINK

On the face of it, the obvious way to tackle this central problem of our increasingly do-nothing culture is to recruit people from outside politics.

There are vast swathes of talented people capable of making this transformation a reality. But they have come to believe that politics is a shocking snake pit full of self-servers, sexual predators, and poisonous narcissists.

The first step will be to persuade some of these people (the swathes of talent, not

the poisonous narcissists) that the mission is genuine, and to point them towards the positions of power.

THERE ARE VAST SWATHES
OF TALENTED PEOPLE
CAPABLE OF MAKING THIS
TRANSFORMATION A REALITY

Most industries think they're special and that the only people who can possibly operate in them need prior experience. But this is plainly untrue when the central theme of The Change is about modernisation and communications.

Believing in the cause is not enough to attract real talent. It's not even necessary.

McDonald's attracts amongst the brightest senior managers in industry because it is still a great place to work, people have autonomy, and they can accelerate their careers. And sometimes just doing what you do because you believe in the cause goes hand in hand with a mode of surviving rather than thriving.

It isn't going to be easy for isolated individuals to make the shift, however talented they may be. They need to be part of a movement with an objective and where they can derive some support.

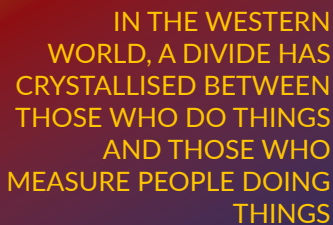
They will also need support in particular to overcome the great divide emerging among professionals and their various shades in the class system.

It is the same divide that used to lie between grammar schools and secondary moderns, between blue-collar and white-collar workers, CSEs and GCEs grades, between apprenticeships and degrees – and all those other elements of the besetting sins of the UK educational elite.

It is more of an intense snobbish divide in the UK than almost anywhere else in Europe, where they value their engineers, and their practical people. It is in a sense part and parcel of the long-standing Platonist division between those who do, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, and those who just think about doing, and who fancy themselves as junior versions of philosopher kings.

Except that, in the western world, that divide has crystallised into a distinction between those who do things and those who *measure* people doing things.

Between those who make things happen and those who study them doing so and try to direct their experimentation more directly.



IN THE WESTERN
WORLD, A DIVIDE HAS
CRYSTALLISED BETWEEN
THOSE WHO DO THINGS
AND THOSE WHO
MEASURE PEOPLE DOING
THINGS

This is an anonymising and dehumanising experience for both sides. What begins as a preference for measurement and analysis over doing – and those with clipboards tend to earn more than those who only do – ends up as a snobbish horror of doing anything.

It seems modern, but it is actually worryingly medieval, like the mandarins in the Chinese court, or the gentlemen hidalgos, who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage, but felt it was beneath them to help build huts or defences when they reached the new world.

It is the clear preference for most people to do something, and to help other people¹⁰. We know all too well, through the experience of time banks, the huge psychological difference it can make to someone who has never been asked to give back after a lifetime under professional care when they find they have a useful role. It is an absolutely basic human need.



HAVING A USEFUL ROLE
IN COMMUNITY IS A BASIC
HUMAN NEED

Although there are individual politicians who understand this, they exist in a culture which can't – which believes that most people aspire to be at the table, discussing and taking decisions.

10. See Edgar Cahn on this (2000), No More Throwaway People, Washington, Essential Books.

Most people in our experience prefer to be almost anywhere else. But they do welcome the chance of doing something useful to help.

These may be the roots of the horror of action. It is about snobbery. So if we are going to train up a new cadre of leaders, they will need support to understand the enemy they are taking on.

TOWARDS A NEW SET OF VALUES

Most people don't – and won't – have time to read manifestos, let alone get their heads around policy debates. It is part of the same set of reasons they tweet in a few dozen characters, and don't read instruction manuals.

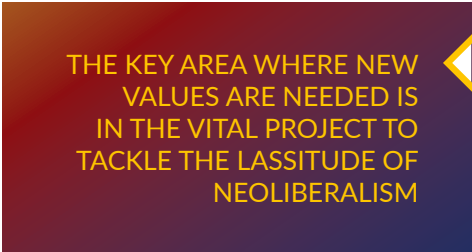
Besides, the expectation of modern consumers is that things don't need careful explaining: they 'just work' (as Steve Jobs famously said on the topic of good design).

Likewise, the substance of people's engagement with politics needs to be achieved in fewer words and less time. The need for precise debate about the most effective policy measures doesn't go away – just like underneath the cover of the iPhone is a pretty large amount of complicated tech. It is said that actions speak louder than words, but these actions still need linking to the vision and the values that underpin them.

As Simon Sinek puts it in his Tedx talk, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*: people don't care what you do, they care why you do it.¹¹

The key area where new values are needed is in the vital project to tackle the *lassitude of neoliberalism*.

The American advocate of the commons and of co-operative working, David Bollier, gave a lecture in 2018 when he talked about what he called 'the war against imagination'.¹² He talked about the way that market fundamentalism – the obsession with markets to the exclusion of all else – “sucks all the air out of our public life and politics.”



THE KEY AREA WHERE NEW
VALUES ARE NEEDED IS
IN THE VITAL PROJECT TO
TACKLE THE LASSITUDE OF
NEOLIBERALISM

Over the past 40 years, a version of market liberalism has emerged, based on Friedrich Hayek yet much more limited than he proposed, which believes that nothing is possible for us limited human beings unless the market wills it. And if the market wills it, of course then action will not be required anyway.

This is a byway of market orthodoxy. We don't actually believe there is any such thing as 'neoliberalism'. It was a label dreamed up by the left to make liberals seem responsible for orthodox economics. But it has now become the accepted label for a bundle of attitudes towards economics and the market which have dominated the mainstream for the past

11. https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en

12. <https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/the-insurgent-power-of-the-commons-in-the-war-against-the-imagination/>

four decades. So, to that extent, we have to live with the description.

What we don't need to do is to blame Hayek himself, because his 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom* set out a free-market approach that was a sceptical critique of state monopoly. This critique has been transformed more recently into a kind of lassitude, a hopelessness, where human endeavour is pointless. All senior politicians have to do is to accept their own powerlessness, and endorse the orthodoxy, to prove their seriousness.

And as a result, absolutely the last thing they should do is to act. This attitude is supported by civil servants who have convinced themselves they are hard-headed advocates of evidence-based policy, which, as we have seen, has become all too often a reason to wait endlessly for evidence to emerge when it never can.

TIME TO START LISTENING

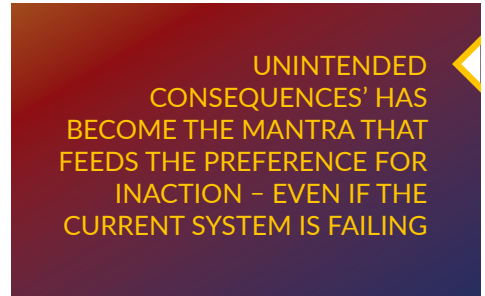
Because listening to people may be the best antidote to complexity in public policy.

The state's machinery, and its policy and laws, are not simple: they are often the sum total of every stitch up and compromise over the past 200 years.

It is, in fact, so complex that one shift can unravel everything.

We have seen Sir Vince Cable, as business secretary, stomping about in a rage because he had inadvertently removed the eligibility of women over 50 from funding for further education. Nobody had warned him. Nobody knew this was going to be the likely result of his tweak to the system. But it was so complex that that was what happened.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that there is a built-in bias against action.



Infuriating though they are, such unforeseen effects, inevitably happen when one tweaks a complex system. And they are latched onto by those who believe that political paralysis is the best thing that could happen.

We have lost count of the number of business people who claim that government should not really do anything because whatever it does will have unintended consequences. Best leave well alone – even if the current system is failing.

Some years ago now, one of us persuaded the bosses of Transport for London that they should give Oyster cards the ability to buy chocolate or cigarettes or newspapers from kiosks in underground stations. It never happened because the system was so complicated and operators were afraid that any change would lead to collapse of the entire thing.

Again, it was too big a risk.

The combination of these three trends has led to a strange sense, not that nobody wants to act, but that nobody really should. Certainly that nobody really *can*. This has led to a situation whereby old-fashioned action seems somehow crass compared to measurement and analysis.

The phrase 'paralysis by analysis' is now all too often the only reality.

A COMBINATION OF TRENDS
HAS LED TO A STRANGE
SENSE, NOT THAT NOBODY
WANTS TO ACT, BUT THAT
NOBODY REALLY SHOULD

We were told recently by the chief executive of a combined authority that, as an analyst, all they needed to do was to analyse the data – and the action would automatically follow. The problem is, of course, that in practice it tends not to do – for some of the reasons set out here.

Once again, David Bollier's war on imagination seems to spread out beyond market economics. The mainstream policy world has been widely infected by the fear of doing. There is a real pressure on them against thinking differently, which at the same time has spread a closed and rigid mind.

We believe that encouraging a culture of listening to people may be an antidote to this.

Modern communications organisations (which political parties should surely aspire to be) can no longer rely on people taking what they say for granted.

Brands that market to millennials start by finding where the conversation is taking place, and then going there. First, they listen, then they offer something to say. They don't rely on people reading their advertising, or believing their claims.

They understand that what used to be confined to word of mouth is now visible, searchable and analysable on the social web. So they spend lots of time and money identifying where their most likely customers are, and then going there to hear what they have to say.

Only after that do they start to talk – hence the phrase *'two ears, one mouth'*.

MIGHT IT BE POSSIBLE FOR
POLITICNS AND POLICY
MAKERS TO LEARN FIRST
TO LISTEN AND ONLY THEN
TO TALK?

And then further beyond that is when they might invite someone to bring the conversation onto their patch – or take another action that fits the early stage of a relationship.

The way most parties operate – harvesting email addresses and then sending relentless demands for money and time – is in courting terms, like getting someone's number and then texting them relentlessly to ask them out. Modern courtship is about both parties being equal, participatory, relevant and consenting.

All this listening sounds like hard work but maybe, just maybe, listening to what people want will lead to clarity. But if that is all it is, then it is a somewhat naïve optimism.

Unfortunately, as Ford car company founder Henry Ford is often misquoted as saying, “if I'd asked people what they want, they'd have said a faster horse”. In politics, as in product innovation, there is still a need for profound leaps of creativity.

The equivalent in political terms is to look ‘under the hood’ at what's going on behind what people say, in order to identify what's really going on. There are a range of research techniques, informal and formal, which allow us to delve into issues in a qualitative way.

If you spend a lot of time talking to people on their doorsteps you might already have seen the benefits of this – and it's certainly not restricted to online social media.

Richard Curtis, creator of Blackadder, is rumoured to have been unsatisfied with the reported viewing figures for the show, as they told him nothing about whether people found the jokes funny. So he stalked the streets of Shepherd's Bush, peering through people's curtains, to see if they were laughing. He didn't emerge with new crowd-sourced jokes.

A friend who is a marketing specialist used to describe this approach as ‘shooting a video of a day in the life of a customer.’ You use that to understand the issues people face in everyday life and then use your knowledge, creativity and imagination to help them with solutions. It's the equivalent of deep listening.

In a digital world, the equivalent feedback loop is now at all modern political parties' fingertips – if they'd only seize the opportunity to understand more about the daily lives of their electorates and what really makes them tick.

These are the circumstances through which bold, radical and creative policy ideas can emerge. The very next thing to do, of course, is test them out by going back to people and hearing what they think.

WHAT POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD DO DIFFERENTLY

“Italy is a tough country to be a comedian in - I can't invent stuff like this.”

Beppe Grillo, Five Star Movement

Addressing the need for a rebuilding of the relationship between politics and people is something that will require wholesale changes to the business model of political parties. It will also require a change in the political culture.

This is not unprecedented.

Across Europe and North America, parties have adapted themselves to become more involved in the day-to-day conversations voters are having. Whether that's Justin Trudeau's perceived image as a 'man of the people', willing to walk the streets talking to citizens. Or the *Italian Five Star Movement's* use of technology to host online discussions with its target electorate.

Also striking is Emmanuel Macron's *La République En Marche*, which sought to mobilise supporters via regular online engagement methods, with the aim of directly shaping the conversation they would go on to have with friends and family about the issues at stake.¹³

Macron is a paradoxical figure in this argument. Once in power, he chose to be seen behind his golden desk. He also did things. And was rewarded for doing so with *les gilets jaunes*.

MACRON DID THINGS. AND WAS REWARDED FOR DOING SO WITH LES GILETS JAUNES.

But, politically, in other places there have been changes that are not insignificant. Some of the tactics deployed by British political parties indicate that politicians have a firm grasp on the power of modern digital communication.

But this has not yet led to any transformation in the political landscape, or wholesale reshaping of the structure of any political party.

That's because the digital revolution that's been happening since 1995 (whilst politics has blundered on, believing that switching from velum to paper means innovation) has created wholesale changes in the way people see themselves in the world.

Far from simply succeeding in exploiting the precise targeting opportunities afforded by digital advertising, or the cost-effective ways of doing business with little or no physical presence, successful businesses that have grown up in the modern marketing era have realised that two-way communication allows them to rewire fundamentally their relationship with their audiences.

13. See Silver and Hodge (2019), op cit.

IN A DIGITAL WORLD WHAT
PEOPLE SAY TO YOU AND
ABOUT YOU IS MORE
IMPORTANT THAN WHAT
YOU BROADCAST TO THEM

They have recognised that what customers say back to and about them matters more than what they broadcast as brands. They have adapted to the fact that individuals have significantly more influence in shaping their reputation than ever before. And they have recognised that the balance of power has shifted: people will no longer take what is said as read, or rely on traditional authority figures for information.

They rely on other influences – and influencers, to sift and select from the vast streams of information they receive. And, crucially, if they don't see anything they like, they will simply go elsewhere: like clicking away from a site in an instant, or changing supplier because they have found a better deal. Or simply not showing up to vote.

The striking truth is that the majority of the big names that have made this their new normal originated in the era of the web. They didn't need to learn or change because they were started, owned and run by people who 'just got it'.

And that means political parties need more young people, properly empowered, driving the bus.

This is something that Momentum under Jeremy Corbyn appears to have done well, but the so-called 'youth quake' has stopped short of genuinely empowering young people to decide on their policy priorities. Most of the people at the top of the movement look and sound like the same old stock and, it has become clear, that, in spite of the rhetoric, they are more about central control than about listening and meaningful two-way communication. This is true for all UK political parties today.

SUCCESSFUL NEW PARTIES
ARE CREATURES OF THE
DIGITAL AGE AND 'JUST
GET IT'

For the political landscape to adapt to this need, political parties need to reboot and be digitally native in every respect. This will require a fundamental pivot from being organisations of proselytisation and vote winning, to ones that truly reflect the hopes, fears and dreams of their participants and focus on promoting their values-driven causes in the long term.

The problem for existing political parties is that they only change the outward forms, the digital infrastructure, and not how they use it. This injunction is normally interpreted as doing what they have always done – with the same attitude they have always had – but now doing it digitally, with no change in their attitude or relationship to members, supporters or voters.

ESTABLISHED POLITICAL
PARTIES ONLY CHANGE
THEIR OUTWARD FORMS.
THEY HAVE 'DIGITAL
INFRASTRUCTURE' TO KEEP
DOING THINGS EXACTLY
LIKE THEY'VE ALWAYS
DONE THEM

Old-fashioned marketing used to be to develop the product, then sell it hard and refine 'the message' for how to sell it. Modern marketing is to understand how you can improve your customers' lives, then co-develop the product through feedback loops. You don't sell the product, you sell the improvement in people's lives.

Most established political parties are still behaving like marketing organisations used to behave 40 or 50 years ago. They are still at the Neanderthal stage of marketing.

If a political party can do this, and can set their sights on unashamedly promoting what they stand for deep down, then they might even attract some more excellent people from 'the outside' into their midst to become the candidates, volunteers and party workers of tomorrow.

Assuming the old guard actually wants that. Most would rather jealously guard their own petty powers.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We are stuck between a political culture that has turned against action and a political class still in the Neanderthal stage of delivering one-way messages to an audience they regard as increasingly recalcitrant.

This may be enough in itself to explain the current disaffection with mainstream politics and the impasse of populism. As such, it is an urgent problem to solve. But how?

Here are our top proposals.

1. *Grow a new culture inside political administration*

- *Licence the growth of a co-production sector across all services, and funded by service contractors as a preventive infrastructure designed to reduce demand, year on year, and to make innovation possible - so that doctors surgeries, hospitals, housing estates, police stations and schools have a general licence to experiment with involving patients and the public as equal partners in the delivery of services..*
- *Provide a right to demand flexible service delivery. For example, if someone supported by social care wished to be put to bed later, or wanted to set a different pattern of seeing consultants, a relationship or system would be in place to allow these desires to be acted upon. Or the service provider would have to explain with an open letter why the request needs to be impossible. This is a reasonable way that service users can inject flexibility into the system.*

- *Carve out areas of experiment in government or public services, which will not be required to provide target or KPI data.*

2. Grow a new culture inside political parties

- *Recognise that the current business model of politics is broken. That is an important pre-requisite.*
- *Recruit more people from outside politics – and train them to help people achieve what they want. Parties would then become more like alumni organisations for those who have undergone the training.*
- *Set up parties inside parties, along the lines of Momentum, which are licenced to experiment – and link them up with community development groups with local knowhow and listening skills.*

3. Shift the leadership culture

This will involve launching a national debate about the kind of leadership we require and how best to nurture and protect it. It will also involve the deliberate promotion of people who are able to:

- *Work with influencers not just traditional authorities*
- *Simplify everything*
- *Talk about values*
- *Go where the people are*
- *Listen first, talk second*
- *Look for the underlying problem*
- *Be creative*

4. Change the way we all behave

In his Tory leadership bid, Rory Stewart provided a glimmer of hope because he clearly understood the problem. As he said, our political culture is far too focused on process, and not nearly enough on actually doing. For the reasons we set out above, this is a dangerous situation to be in.

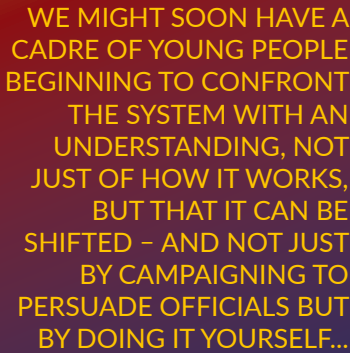
The next issue to grapple with is where to intervene to shift this, given that most politicians have little idea what you are talking about if you were to ask them. Our proposal is that this is something that could perhaps be addressed by schools, although we recognise the difficulty of imposing the idea on the hollowed out, tickboxed factories that too many of our schools have become.

This is bound to be a long-term project to transform citizenship education into a curriculum that helps people learn how to make things happen, personally or politically – perhaps along the lines of the successful Learn to Lead programme, which began in schools in Somerset, and has now spread nationwide.¹⁴ This need not be a course that is only delivered in schools either (as Learn to Lead has also spread beyond them). It ought perhaps to be taught also by community groups or political parties themselves.

Not everyone can be a social entrepreneur. Not everyone will want to be. But the skills required – how to make things happen and how to negotiate with those around you to make it possible – are vitally important skills to grasp.

14. See. www.learntolead.org.uk

If we can begin soon, we might soon have a cadre of young people beginning to confront the system with an understanding, not just of how it works, but that it can be shifted – and not just by campaigning to persuade officials but by doing it yourself.




WE MIGHT SOON HAVE A
CADRE OF YOUNG PEOPLE
BEGINNING TO CONFRONT
THE SYSTEM WITH AN
UNDERSTANDING, NOT
JUST OF HOW IT WORKS,
BUT THAT IT CAN BE
SHIFTED – AND NOT JUST
BY CAMPAIGNING TO
PERSUADE OFFICIALS BUT
BY DOING IT YOURSELF...

That should be the most important way forward: teaching young people – but, through them, everyone else as well – so that they know they are allowed visions and can make things happen step by step to achieve them.

This is an old-fashioned idea, but one that we can make happen.

One of the authors of this pamphlet (Steffan) has been running a series of public participation events in North Norfolk, asking people what their vision for the future of society is, what they think politicians and political parties should do differently, and what difference this would make. Having completed fourteen events, they have recently published the first draft of the responses with a view to inviting further collaboration online.¹⁵

15. https://www.norfolklibdems.org/village_hall_events



'IT'S ALL ABOUT
LIVED EXPERIENCE,
NOT IDEOLOGY, AND MORE
ABOUT LIVING SYSTEMS THAT
EMERGE FROM THE BOTTOM UP
THAN ABOUT POLICIES IMPOSED
FROM ABOVE'

David Bollier
Director of the Reinventing the Commons Programme
Schumacher Centre for a New Economics

RADIX



THINK
TANK
FOR THE
**RADICAL
CENTRE**

www.radixuk.org

hello@radixuk.org

The Raincloud Victoria
76 Vincent Square
Westminster
London SW1P 2PD

Registered Education Charity
1167393