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Trust and political life: the need to transform our democracy

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One of the major concerns of contemporary public life centres on how much we can trust our politicians and the public institutions and services that they, with civil servants and political aides, are responsible for. This of course is not a new concern as, ever since we have had a system of representative parliamentary democracy, we have needed to trust our elected representatives and those they appoint, to undertake good governance on our behalf. However, in more recent years trust in UK national politicians and political life has been put under considerable stress. A 2011 Europe-wide *Guardian/ICM* opinion poll found that only 12% of those polled in the UK said they trusted politicians to ‘act with honesty and integrity’. Further, 66% stated they did not trust the UK government ‘to deal with the country’s problems’ (Glover, 2011). Political trust is central to democratic rule, and any decline in this can reduce the quality and stability of our democracy. Importantly, a reduction of trust in government and confidence in political institutions can damage the vitality of our democracy.

We saw for example, during the debates up to and after the 2016 EU referendum vote, there was evidence that truth was often in short supply with divisions and mistrust being created between people and against those in power and in opposition. Then, more recently, we have seen trust in the UK government drain away when it became clear they were seriously mishandling the Covi-19 pandemic with a raft of misinformation emanating from politicians and government ministers including the Prime Minister. Trust was also eroded when it was revealed by the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian* that the Prime Minister’s chief aide Dominic Cummings had during the

pandemic travelled with his sick wife and child 264 miles to Durham from his London home to visit his parents despite official government advice that members of the public should not be visiting family members who do not live in the same home.

Historically, one of the most famous cases of lack of trust in politicians happened in the early 1960s and involved a minister of state lying to parliament and which later contributed to the fall of the UK government. A reminder that the then-Conservative government, under the Premiership of Harold Macmillan, had to deal with the fallout of a sensational sex, spy, and government scandal. It was in July 1961 that the War Minister John Profumo, who was married to the film actress Valerie Hobson, became involved in a sexual liaison with a 19-year-old model, Christine Keeler, after meeting her at the country home of the Conservative peer Viscount Astor. The affair had a national security dimension as Yevgeny Ivanov, a senior naval attaché at the Soviet Embassy, was also at one time involved in a relationship with Keeler. Although Profumo's clandestine liaison with Keeler was short lived, eighteen months later in December 1962 the press came to know of the minister's affair when a shooting incident in west London was linked to two other men who were also involved with Keeler. During the following months, rumours linking Profumo with Keeler increasingly took hold in press and political circles and provided the opportunity for the Labour MP George Wigg to take advantage of Parliamentary privilege to refer to the matter in a question in the House of Commons. The Conservative government, already feeling bruised by the humiliating withdrawal of British troops from the botched invasion of the Suez Canal six years previously, found this personal questioning of its War Minister by the opposition a further discomfort. In March 1963, and in response to mounting public interest in the affair, Profumo made a statement to the House in which he admitted to having met Keeler but said no 'impropriety' took place and threatened to sue any newspapers who said otherwise.

This threat failed to deter newspapers from publishing accounts claiming to reveal details of the liaison between the two, and in June that year an embattled Profumo made a further statement to the House of Commons, this time admitting he had lied to the House and, as a consequence, was resigning his office of War Minister. The scandal which had led to unprecedented news coverage in the press and media was to severely undermine trust in the Conservative government who then became an easy

target for satirists and opposition parties. In October of the following year, the damaged Conservative government was replaced by Labour who, under the leadership of Harold Wilson, ended 13 years in opposition.

What is important about this case, and which relates to trust and politicians, is that John Profumo believed he could get away with having a sexual relationship with a woman who was in contact with a Soviet naval attaché, and which may or may not have compromised state security. When confronted with this knowledge Profumo lied to his party, and to the House of Commons and therefore the British public. Once the press printed irrefutable evidence that he had indeed had a relationship with Christine Keeler he had to admit his lie and resigned his government office and left parliament. Profumo could be described as a narcissist, seeing himself as having a sense of entitlement; believing his class and status enabled him to do as he wished. Son of a diplomat and barrister, Profumo attended Harrow School and Oxford University where he was a member of the infamous Bullingdon Club which later admitted as members future Prime Minister's David Cameron and Boris Johnson. Sadly, Profumo's egoism blinded him to his responsibility to the British state and the public to protect both and which had trusted him to carry out his political and governmental role with honesty and integrity.

As important in this case was the fact that the scandal exposed seedy aspects of the British political establishment that had previously been hidden. For example, it was alleged that Viscount Astor, who was at the first meeting between Profumo and Keeler, had an affair with Keeler's teenage friend and model Mandy Rice-Davies. When Rice-Davies was told in court that Viscount Astor denied the affair she replied with the now famous response, 'Well he would, wouldn't he?'. The deference to, and trust in, those in authority which had slowly begun to be challenged in the immediate post war years was further whittled away by the scandal and what it revealed to the public. To quote Davenport-Hines:

Authority, however disinterested, well qualified and experienced was (after June 1963) increasingly greeted with suspicion rather than trust. (p345)

In more recent times, public trust in politicians was severely damaged by the parliamentary expenses scandal; a scandal that ended with the Speaker of the House

of Commons and five members of Labour's governing cabinet resigning from Parliament, and the imprisonment of eight MPs and peers. Expenses records and documentation of members of both the House of Commons and House of Lords were leaked to the *Daily Telegraph* forcing publication of them on the official Parliament website in June 2009. The website included details of all expenses and allowances between 2004 and 2008, together with details of claims that were not approved for payment, and correspondence between claimants and the parliamentary fees office. What angered the public was that, prior to the publication of the expenses, the parliamentarians were hiding behind the Freedom of Information Act, claiming that publishing the information would be 'unlawfully intrusive'. However, in May 2008, the High Court (England and Wales) ruled the information should be released, and a year later the claims were officially published but not before the *Daily Telegraph* had begun to daily splash details of the expenses across its front and inside pages.

What both the Telegraph's information and the official account showed was that parliamentarians had for many years been making claims over and above those necessarily incurred for the performance of their defined duties. For example, Margaret Moran, the Labour MP for Luton South, renovated three properties at the tax-payers' expense, including claiming for a £22,500 course of dry-rot treatment at a seaside house a hundred miles from her constituency. The Conservative MP Douglas Hogg infamously claimed £2,115 for having the moat around his country property cleared. Other claims Hogg made included £18,000 a year for a full-time gardener, £671 for a mole-catcher and around £200 a year for maintenance of an Aga oven. Perhaps the most notorious and ridiculous claim was made by Sir Peter Viggers, the Conservative MP for Gosport, who claimed £1,645 for a floating house for ducks on his pond. He had also been paid £30,000 over a three-year period for 'gardening', including the cost of twenty-eight tons of manure (UK Parliament - Allowances by MP, 2021).

Two *Daily Telegraph* journalists central to exposing the misuse of public funds, Robert Winnett and Gordon Rayner (2010), have argued that their investigation brought about major changes in Parliament and 'altered forever the relationship between the governed and the governing classes' (p. 489) and in particular that the expenses system was radically changed. This was not before an enormous public

outcry at what became the biggest political scandal since Profumo's fall from grace in 1963. The impact on trust of politicians was considerable. *The Times* called it 'Parliament's darkest day' with the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, apologising on behalf of all politicians in a speech in May 2008 to the Royal College of Nursing conference,

Just as you have the highest standards in your profession, we must show that we have the highest standards for our profession...and we must show that, mistakes have been made and errors have been discovered, where wrongs have to be righted, that is done immediately. We have also to try hard to show people and think hard about how a profession that, like yours, depends on trust – the most precious asset it has is trust – how that profession too can show that it is genuinely there to serve the public in all its future needs. (in Winnett and Rayner, 2010 p. 244)

Another instance of a significant breaking of trust was during the debates prior to and after the June 2016 EU referendum. It would be difficult to forget the outlandish claims made by the Brexiters. For example, a government minister Dr Liam Fox claimed that 'The free trade agreement that we have to do with the European Union should be one of the easiest in human history'. Of course the reality has been rather different, and negotiations so protracted and difficult that during the last four years two Conservative Prime Ministers and numerous cabinet ministers have resigned often in exasperation at dealing with the quagmire of legal and financial detail and the intricate politics involved in the discussions.

Another claim made by the Brexiters prior to the vote was that the UK contributed £350 million a week to the EU. Those championing leaving the EU claimed that, by removing ourselves from giving this imaginary money, we could spend it instead on the NHS. It is difficult to know how many people were persuaded by what has been referred to as 'the lie on the side of the bus', but the Head of the Office of National Statistics remarked that the use of such a claim was 'a clear misuse of official statistics'. A further claim made by the Brexiters a short while after the Referendum result in favour of leaving was that by the then Conservative Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng. He stated that the economy was performing strongly and much more strongly than 'the doom-mongers and naysayers' had suggested. This was at the

same time as the Centre for European Reform stated that Brexit had cost the UK economy the equivalent of £840 for every household each year.

During the run up to the EU Referendum in June 2016 it was difficult to find objective factual information on the pros and cons of continued membership. As MacShane (2017) has pointed out, many popular national newspapers supported the Leave campaign and were thought to have influenced the voting behaviour of the electorate:

The media establishment, in the sense of the papers owned by proprietors who paid no tax in the UK, such as the Daily Mail, the Daily Telegraph, the Sun, The Times and their Sunday sister papers, were relentlessly hostile to the EU. (MacShane, 2017, p. 101)

The main problem that the contentious EU referendum created, and which was overshadowed by the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox on the streets of her constituency during the campaigning, was the division it generated between leave and remain voters. In the months after the referendum the organisation *Hope Not Hate* polled tens of thousands of people and conducted numerous focus groups, listening to both sides of the divide. They heard people express their frustrations with the status quo, told of how their communities were changing, and spoke of their anger at how the Brexit process was unfolding. To quote Rosie Carter:

We find that divisions have deepened, and that mistrust in the political system has swelled. Not only do people feel alienated by the language and process of Brexit, but they also feel that politicians are keeping them in the dark over exactly what is happening, acting instead to further their own careers and interests A staggering 68% of people now feel that none of the main political parties speak for them. We are facing a crisis of growing political mistrust across all sections of the population (*Hope Not Hate, 2021*)

The British general election held on 12 December 2019 proved to be a resounding success for the Conservative Party who gained an 80-seat majority in the House of Commons, a net gain of 48 seats, winning 43.6% of the vote. The slogan they used during their expensive campaign was ‘Get Brexit Done’ which was arguably one of the most powerful British political slogans for decades. In these three short words the

Conservatives promised that if re-elected they would facilitate the UK's withdrawal from the EU by January 31st, 2020.

The general election then was fundamentally about Brexit, the Conservatives having positioned themselves as the true party of ensuring the UK left the EU. The Conservative election manifesto and campaign not only promised to 'Get Brexit Done' but also to introduce an Australian-style points-based system to control immigration. Underlying their message was that the UK had allowed too many foreigners into the country and by leaving the EU the government could control our borders.

It was no surprise to learn that on January 31st the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who had not long returned from a relaxing holiday in Mustique, was with his cabinet celebrating having achieved their desired goal of leaving the EU. However, on that very same day the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in the UK in the city of Brighton. The epidemic later become a pandemic had been first identified at a wet market in the city of Wuhan in China. International passenger travel facilitated the quick spread of the dangerous virus which began to kill people in countries firstly in the far east and the near east, and then in Europe and the Americas.

The Conservative government however was in its post-Brexit euphoria in February, and was more concerned with its populist agenda of getting ready to fully break with the EU at the end of December 2020 than dealing with the emerging public health and economic crisis. Meanwhile, the Labour Party was conducting its election for a replacement for Jeremy Corbyn, who was then leaving office and did not want to disturb any agenda for the incoming party leader. The outcome was that concern over the coming pandemic was clearly not on the minds of the political leaders in London, whilst in Scotland the agenda remained a nationalist one of opposing Brexit and demanding a referendum on its independence.

The tragic outcome of taking their eye off the ball was the failure by the UK government to order the cancelling of large sports events and rock concerts, believed to have helped spread the virus, then delaying the introduction of a national lockdown, whilst struggling to order sufficient and appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This was followed by evidence that older people were being sent from hospital to care and nursing homes without being tested for Covid-19. These

homes had insufficient PPE, leading to both residents and carers spreading the disease and contributing to the high death toll. In fact, the outcome of all these events have seen the UK having one of the highest deaths from Covid-19 per million population in the world.

Finally, the then Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Dominic Cummings, was found to have travelled across the country during the coronavirus lockdown. He admitted to driving from London to Durham and later, during his time in the north east of England, took a 60-mile round trip from Durham to a nearby town to test whether his eyesight was good enough to drive back to London. What angered and frustrated many when this incident was revealed by *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* was that Cummings was instrumental in drawing up the guidelines for what was expected of people during the lockdown. As Stephen Reicher, a professor of psychology at the University of St Andrews, and a government adviser commented, it was the notion of ‘a law for them and a law for us’ which violated the bond ‘of common identity and that bond of trust between the public and the authorities’ (in Bland, 2020).

It is clear that trust in our representatives and their aides is at a low ebb. The question is how to we fix it! There is no silver bullet that can deal with this problem and it will take a good deal of working at before trust can be restored.

One progressive way forward could be to introduce parliamentary elections with proportional representation (PR). At the moment, we have a system that reinforces the duopoly of the Labour and Tory parties, closes down the impact of smaller parties such as the Green Party, and rewards nationalist parties like the SNP. At the last general election, most people voted to the left of the Tory Party yet, with just a little over 40% of the votes cast, it was the Conservatives that achieved an 80-seat majority and gave them the power to introduce a Brexit. It is this sort of example that persuades many that we have a political system that fails to represent the majority and, in turn, cannot be trusted with delivering real democracy.

The UK’s political life clearly needs to have a population of critically engaged citizens. We need to be sceptical of politicians and their promises to deliver a ‘better and fairer society’. But we also need a more trusted system in which we have confidence, and where people’s interests are satisfactorily attended to. For democracy

to flourish we need trust in our political system and those that represent us. At the moment, it feels as if our democratic system is under considerable strain and if we are to successfully respond to future pandemics, we need to identify how we can rectify the present out-dated system. PR could be one positive way forward to regain more trust and transform our democracy. Whilst governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are all elected on versions of PR, the UK parliament is the only major one in Europe where parliamentary seats won at a general election are not divided between parties in a proportional manner.

Together with PR we need to introduce greater oversight and accountability of our elected members, and their aides and advisers. Now feels an opportune time to address this critical and important issue which could help bring greater trust into our political life.

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