

The 'Common Weal': A Politics for Generation Not Stupid.

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How did we get here? How did we create a politics that one way or another has caused half the population to disengage from the democratic debate about their country? Why is the language of politics so dense and complex that it means nothing to ordinary people? And is it a coincidence that since politics started to lock the doors and conduct its business in private, trust in politicians and the sense that the country is being run in our interests has collapsed?

There are three broad schools of thought on these questions. One is a technocrat's answer: politics just got too complicated and complex for a real wide spread debate and so we need to accept that the role of the public is to nod once every five years and otherwise accept government by expert. One is the 'insider wisdom' view, the weary, cynical hack view that 'it's always like this, always has been, always will be – we just have to get over it'. This view sees exclusivity of power as the natural order of things and an expectation of real participatory democracy to be a bit, well, childish.

Now of course there is some element of truth to both of these views. I work in policy on a professional basis but I wouldn't claim to be really able to take an informed view on every issue every time – on the use (or overuse) of medication to treat mental health and then to the regulation of GM crop trials and then on to criminal justice policy and then making sense of ten year bond yields. And of course power has a tendency to seek more power and bureaucracies have a tendency to resist change; thus it has been from the earliest days of civilisation.

But this is not sufficient to explain the extent of the change in politics over the last 40 years. There used to be active parties. There used to be some diversity of where the next generation of politicians came from. There used to be wider debate and

discussion about opposing views of our society and our economy. Now there is just the relentless hum of New Public Management, just out of sight but able to be sensed everywhere. And the rising sound of anger and frustration from a disillusioned population.

In fact, the closing down of politics in the neoliberal age is in no way coincidental to the bigger project that ideology brought to our politics. From 1945 until about 1980 Britain went through a period of politics which saw major gains in social mobility, reducing poverty and squalor, creating a more equal society, changing the nature of the economy and building up the concept of the welfare state. This period has an overarching outcome: some transfer of economic and social power from Britain's old aristocratic and colonial elite down and outwards to citizens.

Then came Thatcher. From 1980 until the present, this process was reversed. By doing the opposite of what had transferred power in one direction it has been rapidly transferred in the other: deregulation rather than regulation, privatisation instead of collective ownership, survival of the fittest rather than mutual development. And since this anti-democratic trend might reasonably have been expected to generate resistance it was better that people were kept out of the way altogether.

So in the 1980s and 1990s the emergence of 'lifestyle politics' became dominant. This model actively sought to make politics seem boring and irrelevant compared to rampant consumerism (particularly in the 1980s) and the imperative to define yourself through consumerised lifestyle choices (in the 1990s). So first we gave up society in favour of consumer goods. Then we gave up society to go snowboarding or to watch Premiership football in a pub.

The trail of breadcrumbs leading us away from that progressive politics is easy to identify. First it was Thatcher tempting us with cheap council house sales and underpriced shares in privatised companies that made us a small short-term profit (before leaving us at the profiteering mercy of monopoly capitalism). Then John Major took a shot at inviting us into an idyllic mythical historical Britain of warm

beer and cricket on the lawn. When that failed Tony Blair arrived with his much more successful 'Cool Britannia' – pop culture, credit cards, worrying about soap opera characters, the deregulation of gambling, the deregulation of pub licensing, the constant mockery of political activists (when he wasn't instructing the police to spy on them).

And where have we ended up? One of the most unequal societies on the planet. One of the lowest election turnouts in the developed world. And the European nation with the lowest level of trust in its politicians – and that includes Greece, Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

This is in large part what the Common Weal project is about. It is a major programme which is being run by the Jimmy Reid Foundation. We have already published over 20 major reports and have another 30 on their way. They are all based on seeking to identify where in the world nations have done better at creating a more equal, more effective society – and to learn what policies made that happen. It is an attempt to create a contested economic debate in which four flavours of neoliberal economics is not our only choice.

But as important and central as that need to create a broad, coordinated set of proposals for how to change things is the need to change politics itself, and in particular the language in which it is carried out and the expectations of the public. Firstly, we have worked to find ways of explaining things that mean something to people. So 'Common Weal' was chosen because it has some real resonance with people; they have a rough sense of what our common wellbeing means and what it means to share wealth in common. And we have tried to find ways to describe political ideas and philosophies in ways which everyone can understand. So when we wanted to find a way to explain the difference between neoliberal politics and social democratic politics we knew that the usual options are insider speak – 'free market economics', 'social market economics', 'Nordic model', 'neoliberal'. Most people have little idea what these things mean and they've been trained to switch off when this conversation begins, putting their fingers in their ears and reflexively answering

'boring'.

So instead we try to talk about the difference between 'me first politics' and 'all of us first politics'. People instinctively get what this means, they immediately have an opinion on it. In fact, we have taken All Of Us First and used it as the tagline for the Common Weal project. It's our website address (www.allofusfirst.org). We also have a Reid Foundation website (www.reidfoundation.org) where we put our detailed policy documents, but we use the Common Weal website to translate those documents into everyday language which anyone can understand.

It is an Einstein quote that drives much of this. He said 'if you can't explain it to a seven-year-old you probably haven't understood it yourself'. Quite right. We are pushing ourselves at every stage to create a politics which not only works and is credible but which is easy to understand and discuss. In fact, the very concept of democratic engagement with politics is at the heart of Common Weal – when you roll back democratic participation in the way we have over the last 30 years big power interests dominate. It is not only 'a nice thing' to re-engage people with politics; it is the only counterbalance to the abuse of power that we have.

So we can explain how a Common Weal Scotland would work: by creating a productive, high-skill economy by putting in place a national industrial strategy to make our economy what its citizens ask of it we can create a high-wage economy. High-wage economies are more equal and have little poverty and since the population is prosperous they can easily pay their taxes. Which means there is plenty of money available to invest in the public services and national infrastructure that people say they want. And that creates the sense of shared interest and community that provides a basis for people to try and be happy.

If people can understand politics properly and be presented with a meaningful choice, they will take an interest. This is a consistent link that can be shown in democracies all over the world. If we continue to allow politics to be the preserve of an elite class we will live in an elite society. Until we can talk to people in ways they care about,

we won't be able to challenge it.

How do we un-create our politics? How do we get out of this mess we've created? It's not 'the economy, stupid'. It's democracy. And you're not stupid!