British politics in the Age of Uncertainty: the link between old, new, and anti-politics

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Party leaders – from Tony Blair to David Cameron – have promised a new way of doing politics when campaigning for election, yet failed to deliver on such commitments when elected. **Dave Richards** writes that there is a link between such calls and the rising climate of anti-politics, yet there is no sign that the Westminster bubble will burst anytime soon.

In the midst of the Watergate Scandal, the BBC approached the eminent political economist J.K. Galbraith to make a television documentary reflecting on the tensions of that era. It led to both an acclaimed series and book – *The Age of Uncertainty* [with a discernible nod to Eric Hobsbawn] – in which Galbraith explored the rising challenges confronting a set of deeply embedded modernist certainties.

Four decades later and with the after-shocks of Brexit and Donald Trump's presidential victory freshly reverberating across two of the oldest, modern democracies, Galbraith's title takes on a fresh resonance. These are undoubtedly times of uncertainty, no more so than in the way modern democratic politics conducts itself and for the traditional institutions of the liberal-democratic state which aggregate our individual political impulses.

An increasingly prominent feature in the current climate is the so-called rise of 'anti-politics'. It is a somewhat slippery term covering a multitude of pathologies concerning power, democracy, legitimacy, participation, and accountability. One of its more popular caricatures is reflected in a perceived growing public disenchantment with the way politics is done, expressed for example in the disengagement with traditional forms of arena politics (voting, joining a mainstream party etc.). Another is in the depiction of the so-called 'left behind', of those who are: 'on the wrong side of social change, are struggling on stagnant incomes, feel threatened by the way their communities and country are changing, and are furious at an established politics that appears not to understand or even care about their concerns'.

One response has been to vote [sometimes for the first-time] for the increasing number of 'insurgent' or 'populist' parties who seek to offer an alternative to the failings associated with traditional mainstream, party politics.

Part of Trump's successful electoral campaign, mirrored somewhat in the strategy adopted by Brexiteers in the EU

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referendum campaign, can be explained by the effective use of populist and anti-establishment rhetorical appeals. An example, from which there are many, is Donald Trump's call for the need 'to drain the swamp in Washington'. It is a sentiment now echoed by the major UKIP financial donor Arron Banks. In the context of Westminster, he has offered to bank-roll candidates to challenge, Martin Bell[esque] style, what he regards as the 200 worst and most corrupt sitting M.P.s:

> *'It's a very simple agenda: to destroy the professional politician. I like the idea of clearing the place out, setting new rules, maybe reducing the number of MPs. Not a party from the left or right. Just to clear out the worst lot.'*

Such calls are symbolic of an ever louder cacophony of voices being heard railing against a disconnected, out-of-touch, self-interested and self-serving set of elites, operating in their own bubble and who are seen as incapable of listening to the everyday needs of those who they purport to represent.

In the context of the UK, as elsewhere, studies have shown that anti-politics is by no means a new phenomenon, though it has gained fresh traction in more recent times. The political class are of course not immune to this live issue, given their reliance on claims to democratic legitimacy as the lodestone of the representative process. And it is here that an intriguing paradox has emerged in recent decades. A pattern of leaders of mainstream opposition parties calling for a 'new politics', but then when in office adhering to the established ways and means of governing.

In surveying the calls for change in the last twenty years, while the context behind them may vary, they are bound by a familiar ring in their rejection of the old ways of doing politics and the need for an alternative. In May 1997, Tony Blair argued his government: '…*will govern in the interests of all our people…and restore trust in politics in this country. That cleans it up, that decentralizes it, that gives people hope once again that politics is and always should be about the service of the public.'*

In April 2010, David Cameron observed that the UK electorate had been: '…*betrayed by a generation of politicians, by an elite that thinks it knows best. People have lost control. The politicians have forgotten, the public are the master, we are the servant. That's what needs to change in our system…Blow apart the old system. Overthrow the old ways. Put people in the driving seat.'*

His Coalition partner, Nick Clegg in a similar vein mused: '*This government is going to transform our politics so the state has far less control over you, and you have far more control over the state,…break up concentrations of power and hand power back to people…This government is going to persuade you to put your faith in politics once again*.'

Fast-forward to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and Alex Salmond asserted that: '*Whatever else we can say about this referendum campaign, we have touched sections of the community who have never before been touched by politics….I don't think that will ever be allowed to go back to business as usual in politics again*.'

Finally, and most recently, there is Labour's own careerist insurgent turned Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who saw his elevation to Leader of the Opposition as: '…*a vote for change in the way we do politics…Kinder, more inclusive. Bottom up, not top down. In every community and workplace, not just at Westminster…Something new and invigorating, popular and authentic, has exploded*.'

What binds all these leaders' narratives together is the way in which they are implicitly seeking out a position not wholly removed from that of an anti-establishment platform. One that is committed to taking on vested powers and interests, challenging the status quo and in so doing, changing the way politics is done. Theirs is an offer of a new, more devolved, deliberative, bottom-up and participatory approach, one that is capable of listening and being receptive to the needs of the electorate. It is hard not to ignore the obvious link between such calls being made and a rising climate of anti-politics. It is ostensibly a search by an elite wishing to burst its own bubble by offering a new

social contract of renewal and re-legitimation for the governing class.

Yet, if we survey the political landscape of reform in the UK during these same two decades, reform has been limited and where it has occurred, for example Scottish devolution and more recently Brexit, it appears more as an unintended consequence, rather than the culmination of government strategy, even less so a new politics. It is at most, an ad hoc approach, the grafting on of reform to the existing Westminster system, which remains an elitist model based on weak, limited principles of representation and an electoral system that privileges stability over proportionality and participation.

The British approach to governance has of course long-been recognised for its centralising and top-down tendencies – what has been called elsewhere a 'power-hoarding' approach. It is difficult then to see how a circle can be squared between the old politics of the Westminster model and the pressures building for a less elitist, more de-centralised and responsive polity evidenced in the persistent calls for a new politics to address the pathologies within the rising tide of anti-politics.

There is an emerging post-Brexit irony that should be lost on no one. As the government maps out a new political settlement for the UK, its attempts to reconstitute the Westminster model as part of a simple, zero-sum game in sovereignty grab-back from Brussels [which appears its current position in the scant pronouncements so far made], is the very antithesis of previous calls for a more devolved and deliberative approach to politics required to address the serious discontents revealed by some in the run-up to the Brexit vote.

Douglas Jay's euphemistic observation that 'the man in Whitehall knows best' was understandable in 1937; it is not a mode of governing fit-for-purpose in the twenty-first century. As Tony King observes, it is an approach organised round a set of principles that do not: '…so much disdain deliberation as ignore it altogether…[and is] not concerned with promoting the value or principle of citizen participation.' The May Government needs to explain how 'taking back control' by a Whitehall-driven, centralising strategy will resolve the U.K.'s longer-term democratic incongruities? Brexit presents a unique, if uncertain, opportunity for change, yet there is no sign that the Westminster bubble is about to be burst by a self-inflicted, pin-prick.

Elsewhere, the question that has not been put to the political class, but is one that needs answering is why for two decades they have persistently called for a new politics when in opposition, and yet patently failed to deliver on such a commitment when holding the reins of power.

The answer one suspects can be found in the comfortable blanket of power and control afforded by the Westminster model. In an age of uncertainty, it is hard for minsters to once again resist being enveloped by this protective metaphorical blanket of power provided by Whitehall, rather than being left exposed to the risks involved in pursuing a real form of new politics.

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