

Response: Defending Political Democracy

Gavin Shuker MP

Every MP has their own favourite moment on ‘The Tour’. It’s a routine that each Member must develop – a witty and insightful commentary to accompany the leading of visitors around the Palace of Westminster. Mine is the revelation that, as fire destroyed the old building in 1834, crowds gathered on the south bank of the Thames to celebrate and applaud its destruction. Anti-politics sentiment has always run deep in Britain.

Yet, as Nick Clarke *et al* successfully argue, the phenomenon has accelerated, providing a very real threat to democratic socialist parties, including Labour. Cynicism about politics doesn’t hurt the rich, but it does create structural barriers to the implementation of policy that could transform outcomes for the most marginalised. Invariably, political parties chase the support of voters, not non-voters. To expect a party that seeks to form a government to behave differently is to ask it to aspire to Opposition.

So let us be clear about the task – not to seek to try and transform the nation’s psyche, for historical evidence shows that a scepticism bordering on the cynical is the default position of our liberal democracy; but to remove the barriers that prevent politicians from exercising their power in pursuit of the common good. Despite popular views to the contrary, those in elected office tend to want the space for political action and change to be expanded, not the adulation of a grateful electorate. Complaining about the attitudes of the public is a little like the equally British pursuit of talking about the weather: it passes the time while leaving you subject to the very same forces.

What, then, is to be done? The authors prescribe three talking cures: amplifying the critique while expressing that we are better; shouting louder by pitching to the ideologically pure; and letting the public set the topic of conversation and engaging on their terms. Of these, speaking to the electorate’s issues provides the most credible route to furthering Labour’s cause as well as the cause of democracy as a whole. What is missing, however, is a defence of our imperfect but broadly acceptable politics, and, implicitly, Labour’s claim to govern within that fundamentally sound system for the benefit of the country as a whole.

If our political leaders were suddenly to find themselves as airline CEOs, major newspapers would swiftly start to carry adverts designed to convince that booking

with any other carrier would result in a terrifying and fiery demise at 40,000 feet. Any passenger who reluctantly still chose to fly would listen to the in flight safety briefing doubting the veracity of the information provided, with barely concealed hostility to the overpaid, underworked and self-serving cabin crew. The airlines realise that robust competition should never be at the expense of degrading their shared core proposition: that flying can be a safe and pleasurable pursuit in which participation is an entirely logical and beneficial activity.

The authors note that today's voters – in common with those of the mid-twentieth century – view politicians with disdain. But they additionally view them as 'out of touch', 'career politicians', 'a joke' and 'all the same'. These narratives haven't come from nowhere. They are actively cultivated about other parties by political actors themselves.

In recent years, most new party leaders have tried a variation on the line: 'the other party isn't evil, it's just got it wrong'. This tone rarely sticks for long. By 2015 David Cameron – an early proponent of this strategy – was saying of the Labour leader: 'We cannot let that man inflict his security-threatening, terrorist-sympathising, Britain-hating ideology on the country we love.'

After polling and focus-group findings revealed Cameron himself was vulnerable as being seen as 'out of touch', the last Labour leadership made it a core part of their attack script. The message got through to the electorate, but they chose to apply it to the political classes as a whole. Labour were tarred with the very same brush they had used.

So how can Labour tackle the forces of anti-politics and restrict the political potency of this narrative? I suggest an alternative to the authors' amplification of grievance: an active defence of British political democracy in so far as it has proved the greatest mechanism for social redistribution and extension of ordinary peoples' rights we have. Wealth, privilege, and opportunity have never been bestowed on those without them simply because those who possess these things decide one day to give them away. This redistribution has been achieved in a democratic system, because of our politics. This is a distinctly Labour position, in contrast to the forces of the right who are perfectly content for politics to cede its power to the market.

In tone, this narrative should adopt a 'wrong-and-not-evil' attack line; in tackling abuses it should tighten rules where necessary as an act of sensible political hygiene but avoid portraying itself as 'whiter-than-white'; it should seek to 'own' the system and contextualise it positively in our democratic socialist history. In short, we should do all we can to compete without undermining the core proposition of our politics: that change is possible and participation in elections and in politics more broadly is a respectable and logical act of responsible citizenship.

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Response: Beyond anti-politics through democratic innovation

Oliver Escobar

Since support for democracy as an ideal remains high, interpretations of anti-politics often point to the pitfalls of ‘actual democracy’ and its engine: party politics. Consequently, Clarke, Jennings, Moss and Stoker outline reasonable recommendations to improve practices and perceptions of party politics. But this ignores the web of relationships (media, interests, allies, foes ...) that entangles and constrains politicians. Based on their insightful research, the authors (laudably) want to foster more genuine engagement between citizens and politicians, convinced that ‘talking, engaging, explaining ... will defeat anti-politics’. But can our current democratic processes and institutions enable high quality engagement? Can a *new* game be played on the same board, with the same rules?

We *should* expect more from elected representatives, but perhaps we must first create the conditions for new forms of democratic leadership. Democratic innovations – processes and institutions that enable direct participation of citizens in political decision making – can do this. Well-known examples include participatory budgeting, online crowdsourcing, citizen ballot initiatives, and mini-publics (citizens’ assemblies and juries, consensus conferences, planning cells), and the field exudes experimentation with new innovations and hybrids (see www.participedia.net). Such innovations are happening in local, national and transnational contexts, on issues ranging from finance, to energy, environment, public services, electoral reform and constitution-making. They show that when citizens are supported to participate, learn about issues, perspectives and trade-offs, and deliberate with diverse others under appropriate conditions, they can engage with complex debates and offer considered judgements to inform decision making.¹ Far from perfect, democratic innovations bring new challenges, but also the potential to redesign our institutions and create a deeper form of democracy.

Clarke *et al.* state: ‘We are not opposed to democratic innovations... but we think the main message of citizens to politicians is: do your own jobs better!’ This

overlooks the possibility that politicians may do their jobs better precisely *by* drawing on democratic innovations. These can help increase transparency in decision making; place values, evidence and public reasoning at the heart of policy making; diminish undue influence by lobbyists; and increase legitimacy and trust in our institutions.

The authors add: ‘We have found no evidence of a widespread desire among ordinary citizens for more participation in decision-making’. This is too stark a summation of mixed evidence. Firstly, we must be cautious about unequivocal statements about ‘what citizens want’, as there are limitations in research methodologies. For example, when survey or focus group participants are asked whether they would like to participate more, what kind of participation might they have in mind? Arguably, many will envision mainstream opportunities for participation (consultations, associations, public meetings, campaigns), not fringe democratic innovations. Many people may be unenthusiastic about *prevailing* forms of participation. But when citizens who participate in democratic innovations are asked about their experience, they tend to say participation is rewarding, meaningful, enlightening, challenging, and even enjoyable.² Furthermore, other studies *have* found evidence of a desire for more participation.³ The debate on stealth democracy vs. sunshine democracy is, thus, far from over. This is a choice between government by competent elites (civil servants, experts, politicians) versus government by citizens in collaboration with elites. And this choice entails, at least, two fundamental questions for the left.

The first is: *What kind of citizen are citizens invited to be?* Besides the ballot box, mainstream forms of political participation typically offer citizens roles as spectators, bystanders, followers, complainers... Democratic innovations allow citizens to be co-creators, problem-solvers, deliberative thinkers, decision makers... Different spaces and institutions for participation create different dynamics, and more or less diverse publics,⁴ and this has profound consequences for the effectiveness and legitimacy of democracy. Democratic innovations seek to involve diverse citizens, especially those currently suffering from inequalities of power and influence.

The second and related question is: *Should the left subscribe to an elitist or a participatory vision for democracy?* An elitist model says governing should be the business of the few. A participatory model says it should be the business of the many. This ideological divide cuts across traditional left and right. Citizen participation can be articulated and implemented with different agendas in mind (e.g. a consumerist model vs. a social justice model). I would argue that, drawing on its democratic and social justice heritage, the left should be at the forefront of articulating a compelling vision for participatory democracy built on democratic innovation. To

do this, we must reclaim terms and concepts that have become narrowly defined in public life. Politics is *more than* party politics. Democracy is *more than* representative democracy. Anti-politics is a hole that widens when political life is reduced to a spectators' game, feeding unchecked cynicism that often excels in complaints but fails in the problem-solving department. Part of the remedy is to engage in democratic experimentation grounded on ongoing research and critical optimism.

Clarke and colleagues rightly say that improving the party political game is possible, but I doubt that this can be accomplished by focussing solely on elite players. Democracy can be an elite sport, or one that also includes citizens and communities. The temptation is often to solidify democracy, fixing it in its current form, rather than learning to evolve with democracy in flux. I believe that is precisely the outstanding quality of democracy: it's a never-ending collective endeavour that contains the seeds for its ongoing reinvention. The left must look back and forward, and become an engine for social justice through bold democratic innovation.

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Notes

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Response: The limits of representation

Andrew Gamble

Clarke, Jennings, Stoker and Moss's analysis of anti-politics is persuasive, but will the remedies work? Democracies are imperfect and rarely live up to the ideals of many who fought for them. The fault lies partly with politicians, but also with ourselves. We want contradictory things. We want politicians to refrain from mudslinging, negative campaigning, and point-scoring, and to behave like statesmen, cooperating for the public good. But at the same time we enjoy politics as a blood sport and have a huge appetite for reading about politicians' misdemeanours, mistakes, follies and scandals. Politics has become a soap opera, and is constantly portrayed as such in the media. Politics is also often most effective when it is most negative. Politicians play on the fears, insecurities, and self-interest of voters rather than appealing to their more rational, altruistic natures because such tactics so often succeed. The current contest for the Republican nomination in the United States may seem an extreme form of this but it tells us something about democratic politics and about ourselves.

The paradox of democratic politics can be seen in other ways. The authors identify two harmful consequences of anti-politics; it can lead to complete disengagement and non-participation in politics, and it can give rise to populist parties, which gather support by attacking the established parties and 'the system' as corrupt and incapable of reform. This tactic too has a long history. Oswald Mosley perfected it in the 1930s when he set up the New Party which eventually morphed into the British Union of Fascists. But this second form of anti-politics still assumes that voting makes a difference, that there are some politicians (the populists) who are deserving of the people's trust. Populist anti-politics relies on awakening political passions, and could not succeed without mastering at least this aspect of modern politics. Populist parties do what all opposition parties with no hope of being in government do. They make extravagant electoral promises to rally support, doing so with impunity because they know they will never be responsible for putting these policies into effect. When a party of permanent opposition, like the Liberal Democrats, or a populist party like Syriza in Greece suddenly find themselves in government, they face difficult choices. The Liberal Democrats had retained a memory of themselves

as a party of government so they were able to make the transition in 2010 relatively easily, although the breaking of some of their electoral promises, particularly student fees, still rebounded on them and they lost two thirds of their support in 2015. The Conservatives, as an established party of government, were much less harshly judged when they broke their promises.

The authors are on strong ground in rejecting the idea that the growth of informal politics can compensate for the decline of trust in formal politics. There is no convincing evidence that this is happening. A healthy democracy requires a vigorous civil society which allows constant articulation of new interests and new values. But given the complex and interdependent societies which we now inhabit there remains a need for political parties to aggregate interests so that voters can make broad judgements about the direction of public policy. If political parties with all their faults do not do it, then it will be done by technocrats. Often voters say they prefer rule by technocrats or generals, because they see them as disinterested servants of the public good. This preference rarely survives the experience of being ruled by technocrats. The problem, again, is that as citizens we want contradictory things. We want our representatives to be independent-minded, honest, and wise people to whom we can safely entrust the business of governing while we pursue our private concerns. But at the same time we want our representatives to be delegates, who only act in accordance with our expressed wishes and interests. Since as citizens we do not all speak with one voice but with many, the opportunities for misunderstandings between citizens and their representatives are endless. Politicians become the scapegoat for this frustration which is built into the structure of our democracies.

Should we despair? There are great dangers for democracies, as the authors suggest, if anti-politics becomes too strong. Many of the reforms they identify are sensible and should be adopted. But they are unlikely to cure the underlying condition, which is inherent in the nature of democracy itself. The people is sovereign, but does not want to rule directly, handing that responsibility to others whom it elects. But these representatives can never satisfy the contradictory demands of the demos, and frequently pursue interests of their own, leading to a breakdown in trust. If we are aware of the problem we can do what we can to mitigate it, even if we cannot hope to remove it altogether. Patient puncturing of some of the claims and pretensions of anti-politics is a good place to start.

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