

Post-election reflections from June 2001



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

This Bulletin is based on a Listening Post which took place between 10 members and Associates of OPUS on 10th June 2001.

Hypothesis

Our anxiety about the level of complexity of the societal issues facing us has led to a collusion between the government and the electorate to deny this complexity. This is leading to:

- passive anger at a failure of political leadership
- a political process that can only relate to special interests
- a punitive and moral response to attempts to question and understand

The anxiety might be that real dialogue would challenge the political process that we have.

Feelings about the election seem to fluctuate between apathy and rage, between recognising progress made by the government and abandonment and betrayal. There was a marked lack of a dialogue between the government (and all politicians) and the people, as though we cannot be trusted to deal thoughtfully with the difficulties facing our society. This feels like a failure of nerve by politicians, an unwillingness to take risks by asking the electorate to think. Focus groups, which could have been a positive way of opening up reflection and not pushing ideology down people's throats, have become a patronising method of finding simple messages, devoid of any real meaning. The experience of someone who had been canvassing in working class areas was that politicians were experienced as being all the same and doing nothing for ordinary people.

Things are being simplified to the point where issues disappear. The case of the father who killed his depressed and suicidal daughter was seen as being about the failure of the health service, whereas in reality she had been offered a place in hospital which she refused. It was a tragedy, but much more complex than how it was presented in most of the media. People who address complexity have to go, e.g. David Ramsbottom who tried to address the problems of the prison service. Even current affairs TV programmes now only seem to be able to deal with a few simple ideas, where presentation is more important than content.

This labour government has had to govern under conditions of global complexity totally different from any previous labour government, but we still somehow feel constantly

disappointed. It is easy to have an idealised government in the mind, but this leads to disillusionment when they are in power.

What did Prescott's punch signify? It did him very little damage - was seen as something spontaneous in the midst of spin, but it was an outrageous act and Prescott himself would quickly condemn a mob culture. Maybe it highlighted the general lack of passion in the political process. Heckling at open political meetings used to be a normal part of electioneering. Now politicians only address the faithful. Politicians are forgetting how to deal with conflict, or think they should not have to. It is difficult to think about the meaning of the punch without taking up a moral position.

Maybe the real rage was expressed in Oldham, which was virtually abandoned by leading politicians of all parties, who did not visit there during the election campaign. Here complex and difficult issues are reduced to frightening simplicity by the BNP, who picked up 11,000 votes across the town's two constituencies. Maybe Oldham is carrying for all of us the terrifying consequences of not thinking about and trying to understand complex problems, and therefore cannot be visited, either in reality or in our minds.

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