

Some Reflections from June 2000



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Do you have examples in your experience of 'social rage', as result of a lack of containment in society - as argued in this bulletin? If so - or if you disagree with the hypothesis - we would like to hear from you.

Hypothesis:

The Government and others in positions of authority, for example, police, church leaders, are not providing sufficient containment at this difficult time. A result is that society is left with a feeling of being out of control.

There are examples of what we may call 'social rage', most obviously in the recent football hooliganism, with its reference back to a fabled war-like nation. It is demonstrated also in the support for the maverick and opportunist leadership of Ken Livingstone in London. Also in the May Day riots and the reaction to them. The response to the Tony Martin case is further illustration of the phenomenon.

What is the relationship of government to society? Previous bulletins commented on government, but is that a way to thinking about what is going on in our society? What is the containment that we demand of government?

We hear a lot about liberalism but not about socialism. Why is this? The government may be filled with good intentions but the way they talk is experienced as simplistic, offering know-it-all solutions. We see the pre-occupations of government as giving an insight to pre-occupations in society as a whole. Of course one of the debates is whether government is in touch with the people. 'In touch' suggests a magical or 'divine right' fantasy of curing society's ills.

Someone who has been a member and also a donor to the Labour Party is now becoming a floater. Without containment there is persecutory anxiety, expressed as stress at work. The impact of audit takes away integrity at work. So people attend useless meetings in order to avoid being punished. Although they work extra hours, they begin not to see their work as a vocation. They keep to the letter of their job description. What can't be assessed goes unrewarded. This is a waste both of material and human resources. If you are both the child of economic migrants and also an NHS consultant, you feel doubly under attack.

Stress is not coming from working with difficult and vulnerable patients but from working in a hostile managerial culture. The effect is to drive some professionals into early retirement.

There is some evidence of higher levels of stress-related illness in Eastern Europe, which has been linked to the loss of a powerful state organisation. They have also become second-class citizens of the new Europe. There has been a lot of research to show people experience higher levels of stress the lower they are in the hierarchy. There is a delegation of stress downwards.

There is a growing pre-occupation with an alienated 'underclass'. This underclass may, though, have a surprising membership. In part, this was symbolised recently by the demonstrators at the May Bank Holiday demonstrations, which included an Etonian. The football hooligans include married men, employed, in their thirties. The Tony Martin case has highlighted the breakdown in 'law and order', and, 'morality' in rural areas, and, the ineffectiveness of a society that relies solely upon police to enforce law and order. With the breakdown of 'local communities', with no village Bobby, no vicar, no paternalistic gentry, no school, there is a sense that no-one is responsible, and blame is projected into a distant and ineffective police absence. The dot.com society, which has added to the wealth of those fortunate enough to participate, and the global economy, have opened doors for many dramatically to accumulate personal fortunes. Those who are part of this growing number are able to live like the gentry of the last century in estates with secure boundaries.

Others, such as Martin, cannot afford such lavish personal security boundaries and are left to rely upon self-defence. The Martin case and the feelings it has evoked clearly demonstrate the fears and desires of a large part of society. This failure is experienced acutely in rural communities: easier access and video surveillance have gone some way to alleviating or hiding the problem in urban communities. Yet we also hear that there is a crisis of police recruitment in London.

At a time when many are experiencing threats from within (the underclass) they experience the arrival of immigrants as an external threat. There have been economic migrants since the beginning of time; when did this become something illegitimate?

Three weeks later after Livingstone's election in London, Tony Blair was humiliated by the countrywomen of the WI. We may enjoy his discomfort or we may frown, but who predicted? To have such a disaster the day he comes back from paternity leave is surely extraordinary.

Most interpretations are variations on the theme of the emperor's new clothes. New Labour is thought not to have substance in its intellectual tradition, tacking this way and that in trying to hold a course.

So we may ask why the Labour spin is not working. Have they become suddenly incompetent at the thing they were supposed to be rather good at. Or has the world that they have thought to support their enterprise gone topsy-turvy on them, unpredictable beyond their fabled powers of control freakery.

'When you are in the middle of a revolution, how do you know where you are going?' (A paper by Lionel Stapley in 1999?) We are undoubtedly in the middle of a revolution and all the signs are that we really don't know where we are going. Not being able to predict where we shall be, or want to be in makes life difficult for societal and political leaders of all kinds.

One of the effects of the revolution is that a whole lot of established and unchallenged thinking is now being re-thought and challenged. Is there a market for Rover cars in Britain, or psychotherapy in the USA?

The decline of traditional industries is a part of evolution. The future success of the NHS may appear to lie in pharmaceutical programmes as opposed to surgical treatment of patients. Hospital-based medicine may be less crucial to the welfare of citizens, and the political concern with waiting lists will then become less obsessive. But not yet, say those caught in the waiting lists or those waiting to be put on waiting lists.

One proposition is that the best that leaders can do in such circumstances is to provide containment for society to develop in whatever direction the revolution takes it.

Tim Dartington

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