

A Supervote Circular offering some Food for Thought for Christmas:

The Curse of King of the Castle Politics

- and how to end it!

It seems like decades ago, but just four years have elapsed since Boris Johnson led the Conservative Party to victory in the December 2019 General Election, to be hailed as the nation's beloved leader who could do no wrong.

Incredibly, half a Parliamentary term was all it took to convince his colleagues that Boris could in fact do little right, precipitating his sudden departure, followed by an eight week hiatus in the governance of this country while the Conservatives took the entire summer to find a replacement: While the war in Ukraine raged, and the consequential energy crisis and rampant inflation demanded government action, we were told that nothing could be done without the election of a new Prime Minister, who was the only person who had the authority to steer the ship of state.

Let us leave aside that a party of government which after the war had boasted a membership of over two and a half million is now reduced to a mere 172,000 members, evidencing a worrying unraveling of our democratic fabric at the grass roots; leave aside that this pathetic residue took 6 weeks to decide on a replacement, only for that replacement to be replaced after a mere 50 days in office; leave aside that the second replacement's assumption of office then prompted demands for a general election on the grounds that the new Prime Minister's programme of Government ought to be endorsed by the electorate, which would have necessitated at least another five weeks of uncertainty before pressing matters could even be addressed, let alone resolved.

No, let us leave all this aside and ask ourselves why our system of government does not appear to be able to function without all-powerful leaders. Why is our democracy so addicted to King of the Castle politics?

The way we go about governance of our country is known in the trade as adversarial politics - one guy in the blue corner and an adversary in the red corner, forever sparring, in continual conflict, leading their like-minded supporters to victory or defeat, with the taking of sides by our popular press who lionize the victors one minute, only to bring them down the next. And of course, for every King of the Castle, there will be rivals conspiring to unseat them, as many to be found within the castle keep itself as those beyond the ramparts.

Outside of sport, no other profession appears so combative, with our politicians seemingly spending every waking hour plotting the downfall of their opponents, which may go some way to explaining why UK politics alienates most voters whose adult lives are spent trying to get along with family members, work colleagues and fellow citizens, even those they don't particularly like. Ordinary folk look askance at all the hate, all the negativity, all the posturing and the name calling, and wonder how the country can continue to afford the luxury of adversarial politics. The truth is, even if we could have afforded the endless party punch-ups of the past, we certainly can't afford it now.

It doesn't help that this is exactly how our popular press prefers it. King of the Castle politics is, after all, easy to report on, a gift to endless opinion and commentary, featuring easily identifiable "celebrities" who we can praise or vilify. The trouble is, this media circus requires a certain sort of politician; successful combatants must have "profile"; they must possess "charisma" and be "photogenic"; they must be able to strike poses, to grin and grimace in all the right places, to

address complex issues in under 280 characters of text and, above all, to be skilled in “pivoting away” from uncomfortable questions. Competence seems to be of secondary importance.

It is sobering to reflect that the giants of our political past such as Disraeli, Gladstone, Lloyd George and Churchill would not have lasted 5 minutes in today’s febrile political arena; the absence of all-pervading TV and social media gave these titans the headspace they needed to address fiendishly complex issues without having mikes thrust up their noses every five minutes by journalists demanding simplistic soundbites, only to have any ill-considered utterances played back to them after a situation sea change.

It’s not just all-powerful Prime Ministers who are fouling up our democracy; our governance is now infested with single-member concentrations of power: in addition to Members of Parliament, Police Commissioners, First Ministers of the Celtic Nations, county and many district councillors, we have recently been saddled with directly elected mayors to deliver dirt-cheap devolution in an increasing number of English communities.

But how on earth is one person expected to be across all the detail of all the issues? How can one person possibly be expected to be able to represent a community of different ages, genders, cultures, backgrounds and incomes, all of whom will have different opinions, aspirations and priorities? Of course, it’s not at all possible, which explains why our system of government seems to have little to recommend it at the moment, why voter participation is so low and why we are languishing near the bottom of the Economist’s annual league table of full democracies (we are now ranked below Taiwan!).

Good statecraft is the product of the best use of time, resources and money, but all these assets will go to waste unless they are accompanied by a well-thought out plan, with input from as many people as possible so that the road map is the very best available and enjoys the widest possible support. But long term planning in the UK seems to be entirely lacking because our politicians seem incapable of thinking beyond the next election: our disorderly response to COVID, the absence of any future-proofing of our energy, food and water supplies, our threadbare military, the critical state of the NHS and social care, all evidence an over-reliance on “just-in-time” logistics and chaotic ad hocery; all indicate a lamentable lack of resilience, of vision and of national organization.

What is to be done?

Well, perhaps we need to recognise that political parties as we know them breed adversarial “King of the Castle” politics and in any case may be no more than a passing phase in our political development, Victorian museum pieces from the steam age of politics when simplistic Christmas hampers of policies were required for a badly educated population which had just been given the vote. After all, philosophies fuel political parties but the battles of the “isms” were decided a long time ago and today’s British polity is now a fusion of philosophies, a liberal democracy with a social welfare programme resourced by a capitalist economy.

Perhaps this fusion of ideas requires a blended, less confrontational approach in the future development of our representative democracy, creating a softer environment where people with different opinions can talk to, rather than at, each other. The key to this is the abolition of single member representation, electing instead groups of individuals who are better able to represent diversity of representation and opinion than one person ever could. Preferential voting in newly-created multi-member wards and constituencies throughout the land would ensure that communities were more accurately represented, being the first step toward an era of more consensual and considered politics. As a consequence, British elections would morph into an

intelligent process worthy of voters' interest and participation, demanding in return from them a level of discernment not yet practiced in a British election, which would henceforth become an event with everything for everyone everywhere to play for.

Would we then need a Tony, a Dave, a Boris or a Rishi? Even if we do decide to stick with the post of Prime Minister, they should be no more than the Chair of a collegial Cabinet, the lead member of a ministerial team of the very best individuals we are able to elect in a new era for our representative democracy.

Certainly, we would have no need of a King of the Castle in No.10; leave that to the Monarchy!

Have an enjoyable Christmas and a rewarding New Year.

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