



Jeremy Pitt

It may be that “peak liberal democracy” occurred in the 30 years following the Second World War, characterized by significant international achievements such as, for example, the European Convention on Human Rights¹ (1953), the civil rights movement, and the welfare state, combined with mass participation in political parties, which reached their largest membership in this period. Widespread participation ensured that political representatives were proportional to opinions of the membership, whose critical mass tended to the center, not the extremes.²

This period was also characterized by two other features. Firstly, there was a broad-based agreement across the spectrum of opinion on a set of facts, i.e., there was an established core of socially-constructed knowledge that was generally (if not universally) accepted as “intersubjective agreement” (if not “objective truth”). Even if one could construct a different narrative or interpretation from the facts, the facts themselves were the same. Both educational institutions (under the responsibility of the state) and media organizations (under the remit of private corporations) respected this set of facts.

¹See <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/video/2016/apr/25/patrick-stewart-sketch-what-has-the-echr-ever-done-for-us-video>.

²By contrast, in 2018, the U.K. Conservative party has been labeled as a “Zombie Party,” although not just because its “activists” are aging, unrepresentative, and have thought processes buried in the past (colonialism, empire, and English exceptionalism), but also because the number of its donors who are dead outnumber the living (1).

Facts, Policies, and Values — The Democratic Triad

Technology for Restoring Civil Discourse and Civic Dignity

Secondly, there was a mutual agreement across the spectrum of opinion on a shared set of congruent values. This being liberal democracy, we suppose that “Western” democracies in the post-war period were implicitly or explicitly concerned with preserving and promoting the “national interest,” as well

as maintaining and expanding civil rights, achieving fairness in distributive justice, and the collective provision of health, education, and infrastructure (2). Liberal democrats tended to take for granted the fundamental capacity of basic democracy (3) to achieve three ends, namely security, prosperity, and the avoidance of



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tyranny (although basic democracy is neither committed to, nor opposed to, value neutrality).

This, then, characterized the essence of politics in this era: political power was a dashboard for social change, not an instrument for it; and so the primary objective of political parties, whether to the left or to the right of center, was to devise and enact a set of evidence-based (fact-driven) policies to maintain, achieve, or maximize the shared

secondly democratic processes that involved the transfer of power from one party to another according to the verifiable outcome of free, fair, and transparent elections involving a well-informed and widely-enfranchised electorate.⁵

In the U.K., at least, the situation changed (one generation later) in the late 1970s, as a decline in political party membership contributed to the two major parties becoming increasingly driven by ideology. The

right coalesced behind neoliberalism, as exemplified by *laissez faire* economics and the diminution of the size and role of the state. The left, by contrast, fragmented into different groups and factions bickering with each other, as much as (if not more than) the opposition, over particu-

lar nuances and interpretive purity of political theories and viewpoints.

As an example, perhaps, of Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy (6) (which states that any organization, no matter how democratically it is founded, is inevitably taken over by a clique, which rules for the benefit of the clique, not the whole), successive right-wing governments in the U.K. enacted policies intended to maximize the values of and benefits for one particular socio-economic group — all the while claiming these policies were for the benefit of all. This period was also marked by a diminished respect for the facts. The civil service was reoriented towards what was, in effect "policy-based evidence making," coupled with a bur-

geoning use of metrics (7) and a sly willingness to change the definitions (for example, of unemployment, or being in poverty) when the numbers did not suit the preferred "facts."

The consequence was that political argument and discourse increasingly revolved around whether or not the policies (for example, the grand larceny masquerading as a principled economic policy otherwise known as privatization) were or were not designed to realize the values of the clique, or of the nation. However, arguments over the effects of "trickle down economics" and the specious Laffer curve (8) to justify tax cuts, for example, are binary and belief-based, and not the foundations for negotiation and compromise.

In fact, by manipulating the Overton window (see (9)), the result was a broad agreement on the policies themselves, and only their parameters were open to debate. For example, in the U.K., the "post-Thatcher settlement"⁴ meant that whichever party was in power, the idea of "private is good, public is bad" was simply accepted as given, and the efficiency of state-provided or public service could necessarily be improved by relying on competitive principles of the private sector or a "market." Therefore, proposals for regulation and nationalization were politically off limits, and alternatives for funding state spending were sought — for example, the ruinous private finance initiative (PFI) as a way creating so-called "public-private partnerships" whereby private corporations manage public infrastructures (see also (11)). Disasters abound: from the collapse of Carillion (a global outsourcing company that collapsed with debts in region

⁵Even if the transfer of power between competing parties representing different shades on the political spectrum is not inevitable, as proposed by some (not widely accepted) historico-political theories, e.g., generational cyclic theory (4) and wave theory (5), its *possibility* should be accommodated — unless the intention is to create a one-party state or elective dictatorship.

⁴Margaret Thatcher: U.K. Prime Minister, 1979-1990, whose eponymous political style ("Thatcherism") explicitly rejected the post-war consensus. Her legacy remains controversial (10).



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set of congruent values. The objective was at once both moral and prudent, because liberal democracy functioned better (and certainly better than the authoritarian/planned political/economic alternative) for aligning bounded-rational political choices and decisions with moral preferences and outcomes (2). Politics itself was essentially nuanced: it required dialogue, deliberation, negotiation, and compromise, in particular with those who might have a different narrative with respect to the facts, different priorities with respect to the values, or different beliefs about the benefits of social change.

Underpinning political discourse, or dialectics, there was (more or less explicitly) an agreement on what these facts and values were, and a basic respect for various important processes: firstly institutional processes that facilitated knowledge in action (2), making "correct" and "useful" information available for socially productive purposes; and

of £150M), through asset-stripping by academy “trusts” supposedly managing educational establishments (12), to the distortion of the justice system, e.g., in the U.S., where private prison operators with a vested financial interest in prolonged incarceration lobby legislators for harsher sentencing policies and sign contracts with inverted financial incentives for high incarceration rates (13).

Move forward another generation, and there is no longer just a dispute over the values (or rather whether policies prioritize the values of the collective or of the clique) but now there is a dispute over *the facts themselves*. While this genuinely used to be a matter of presumptive “western” superiority over the Soviet bloc (e.g., consider the scorn for publications like *Pravda* and *Izvestia*), some less scrupulous political operatives were already considering the opportunities presented by the social construction of reality (14). Hence the notorious 2004 comment, attributed to a highly-placed source in U.S. President George W. Bush’s administration:

(The ‘reality-based community’ believes) “that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. ... That’s not the way the world really works anymore. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too.”⁵

Another decade later witnesses a far blunter instrument hammering the effectiveness of repeating “the big lie” to an audience pro-

cessed through an educational system that had been forced to target measurable outcomes rather than encourage qualitative capabilities like critical thinking, leading to gaslighting on an industrial, or national, scale. It is an appalling undermining of civic dignity, which is diminished if a population is deceived into selecting policy options or taking risks that, had it been in full possession of the facts, it would not have taken (3).

Moreover, there is well-documented evidence of systematic attempts to use the scientific method against itself, by using “doubt” as a tool to create distraction and confusion (15). For example, one specific tactic was to set up an “astroturf” institute (i.e., it had the appearance of a respectable grassroots academic institute, but its funding all originated from individuals or organizations with some vested interest) with a grand and objective-sounding title, publish a paper advancing some contentious claim, which would then be dutifully reported by the mainstream press, owned, completely coincidentally, by the same individuals or organizations funding the astroturf institute. A responsible scientist would then diligently debunk the original paper, and publish her results in a reputable academic journal — but these findings would be dutifully ignored by the mainstream press. No matter: the original misdirection was already in the public realm (and halfway round the world before the truth had its boots on).

These political machinations have, of course, been compounded by the revelations that social media platforms have not only been manipulating their users by psychologically effective means of creating addiction, by data aggregation,

and by advertising — there is also significant evidence of interference in electoral processes by targeted political messaging, which cannot be verified or costed (16). This interference, though, seems to originate not only from within the system, but to also be an intended outcome of disruption from without. It would be an irony indeed if the technological advances that produced an open computer network designed to maintain functioning American political governance in the event of a nuclear missile attack, converged with an economic credo that facilitated the greed of some companies whose business model ruthlessly exploits the openness of



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that network. How ironic that these should together be the self-inflicted Achilles’ Heel of the entire capitalist political-economic system — that a building full of trolls each armed with no more than a cheap computer should wreak more damage to, despair in, and dysfunction within the world’s strongest liberal democracies than all the military firepower and warheads combined.

However, this disruption and dysfunction would not be nearly so ruinous were it not for (in particular) the right wing’s disrespect for the democratic process and both the prospect, and eventuality, of the alternation of political power. Hence on top of gerrymandering to ensure a super-majority in state legislatures, some Republicans in the U.S. are using the transition period — the time sensibly allowed for the

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality-based_community.

seamless exchange of political authority — to enact laws that arrogate power from elected offices (which they have just lost) to the state legislatures (which they still control) (17).

Moreover, on a national level, it does seem that a political regime-type has emerged that could be classified as a klepto-kakistocracy (government by the least well-qualified, using power to appropriate public resources for personal gain). These are perhaps the most deceitful,



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duplicitous, mendacious, venal, and shameless individuals ever to be voted into power in a country in the “developed world,” and who simply do not experience the same cognitive dissonance in lying or cheating as normal people. These are a new brand of neo-colonialists (people who are in the place and ruling it, but not of it (18), hence they seek to appropriate and/or expropriate the citizens’ own resources), and they have no sense of belonging to, or empathy with, the civic society of those they purport to govern. It follows that all of their own accusations of malfeasance by the previous administration is projection, while moralizing about values and the “national interest” is simply misdirection and obfuscation designed to create a pretext for the pretense that governance is about society, ethics, and justice.

In fact, in a klepto-kakistocracy, executive and legislative power are

simply tools to be used in the pursuit of profit, i.e., accumulating sufficient wealth and power to manipulate markets, control resources, and exploit national infrastructure in a way that diminishes each locked-in “customer” to no more than a revenue stream. Perhaps most importantly, through private ownership of both the media and the means of social coordination, their power is used to dominate information dissemination. In this way, klepto-kakistocrats create an entrenched establishment and compliant media that frames politics and opinion in such a way that they can accumulate greater wealth, more power, rig markets with greater impunity, and so on.

However: *this too will pass*. It will either end in tears or in jail terms, but in the aftermath, restoring respect for the facts, values, and dialogues in policy formation and decision-making will be a significant, but necessary challenge to address. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, technology has an important — perhaps essential — part to play: not just in preventing the collapse of the agreements over facts, values, and the graceful loss of political authority, but also in the restoration of civil discourse, civic dignity, and citizenship education.

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