

IN NEED OF A SLAP

An off-the-cuff remark revealed far more about the state of British politics than one conference delegate probably realised, says Simon Titley

You know how it is. You're watching the telly when suddenly you hear someone say something so stupid that you want to reach through the screen and give the offending person a good slap. That's how I felt watching a voxpop of Liberal Democrat delegates leaving the conference hall in Liverpool after Nick Clegg's speech.

Asked what she thought, one delegate replied, "Well I think we should just ask people what they want and then give it to them." Sadly, she is not unique. Her view is now commonplace across the political spectrum, demonstrating how far the rot has gone in British politics. But, hang on (as our Dear Leader is wont to say); what is wrong with asking people what they want and then giving it to them?

It first begs the question, which people? "The people" are individuals, remember? They comprise an infinite variety of subjective values and objective interests. This creates continual conflict about what is right and wrong, how scarce resources should be allocated and which direction society should take. Politics is the means by which we resolve those conflicts peacefully; indeed, it is the whole point of politics.

To complicate matters, conflict exists not only between people but also within them. Most people are a mass of contradictions. They want more and better public services but to pay less tax. They want somebody to do something about climate change but have no intention of driving or flying less. They want more prisons but don't want them built anywhere near where they live.

You can "ask the people" all you want. It will reveal a range of opinions and interests, and the process of consultation may create a superficial sense of involvement. But inviting people to "get it off your chest" will not settle the conflicts even within one person, never mind between all the people. It will not obviate the need to have arguments or to take decisions.

To govern is to choose. Sometimes you can resolve conflicts by arriving at a consensus, but eventually politicians must make choices. And invariably, a choice that benefits one group of people will disadvantage another. One cannot please all the people all the time and it is hopeless to try.

Paradoxically, trying to make everybody happy only earns people's contempt. In our daily lives, we all know individuals who want to be liked by everybody. The more such people attempt to ingratiate themselves with everyone, the more they come across as insincere and untrustworthy. Well that's how the electorate feels about politicians who won't come down off the fence.

At the micro level of local ward politics, you can get away with purely consensus positions. Everyone wants the

dog shit cleaned up and the drains unblocked. Once you move to a more macro level, it's no longer much use asking people to fill in a grumble sheet.

Ducking moral choices is only part of the problem. Reliance on "asking people what they want" also reduces politics to a matter of narrow consumer choice. It reduces participation to the level of "press the red button now". It isn't empowering because it fails to give people genuine agency (the ability to influence and change the world in which one lives). Instead, it turns the electorate into dependent supplicants. And we can see how people respond to this treatment through changed attitudes towards public services.

Take policing, for example. Until recently, most people understood that tackling crime was a duty that all of us had as members of society. Now the prevailing attitude seems to be, "I pay my taxes. If there's crime in my neighbourhood, that's the police's job. Nothing to do with me, gov." Instead of confronting the real problem – a loss of social solidarity – politicians of all parties respond by recruiting record numbers of police officers and then wonder why crime doesn't go down.

This change has taken place in the context of a social revolution. As I described in my essay in *Reinventing the State*, since the 1960s society has undergone a process of infantilisation. People have lost the adult capacity for deferred gratification. The childish desire for instant gratification has led to a political culture that is devoted to satisfying and sanctifying that desire.

Yet no matter how hard politicians try, it is simply impossible to satisfy millions of self-centred wants simultaneously. There is neither the time nor the resources and, even if there were, people's individualised wants are often mutually incompatible. Voters perceive this inability as impotence or dishonesty, and a vicious cycle of disillusionment and alienation sets in.

In a society based on instant gratification, politicians dare not risk communicating uncomfortable information to the public because they fear it will be rejected. So they try to tell the public what they think the public wants to hear. It is fashionable to knock 'spin' but the political culture of spin is simply a logical outcome of the belief that all communication must be attractive.

The desire for instant gratification has combined with other factors to move politicians from leadership to followership. Globalisation has reduced politicians' freedom of manoeuvre. The alleged 'end of ideology' has reduced the range of ideas. Cultural relativism says there are no enduring values anyway. And the culture of 'cool', affecting an air of ironic detachment, pokes fun at anyone who begs to differ.

As a result, politicians have lost their way. They lack a moral compass or the imagination to develop new ideas. The political process has been emptied of meaning and instead we get a litany of banal, robotic, message-tested slogans. Politics, which implies the existence of alternatives, has been replaced by managerialism, with its talk of ‘targets’ and ‘delivery’. The argument within the political mainstream is confined to a debate about nuances or replaced by personality issues.

Lacking any moral clarity or moral courage, and with no ideas of their own, it is little wonder that politicians resort in desperation to asking people what they want. Most politicians fatalistically assume that public opinion is fixed and have lost confidence in their ability to persuade people to change their minds. They have stopped engaging in ideological argument with one another and instead compete to agree with public opinion. To this end, they have borrowed the technique of focus groups from the world of marketing. But it never seems to occur to most politicians that each party’s focus groups will tell them more or less the same thing.

This is why the public thinks that all politicians sound the same. Just as most modern cars look the same because every car manufacturer’s wind tunnel tests produce the same results, so politicians sound the same when they derive their policies from artificial forms of interaction such as opinion polls and focus groups.

Trying to please everyone is also a strategy that comes back to bite you. It is why the Liberal Democrats are in such a mess over the issue of a referendum on the EU Lisbon Treaty. The original commitment to hold a referendum was conceived primarily as a device to enable the party to face both ways on Europe. It allowed MPs in more urban, cosmopolitan seats to sound pro-European while permitting MPs in the south-west to pacify local eurosceptic opinion.

For a while, this fudge worked but it has unravelling horribly (in a way that only fudge can). Nick Clegg was criticised for his decision to enforce an abstention, but his party’s short-sighted commitment limited him to a choice of unpalatable options. The basic problem is that the party is afraid to come out of the pro-European closet and say what it really believes.

Many Lib Dem MPs will come to regret their cowardice on Europe. Lord Ashcroft’s money is being used to put them on the spot and, torn between their liberal and populist instincts, some of them will be lucky to hold their seats.

But if you think this pusillanimity on Europe is bad, consider the ideological vacuum surrounding the looming recession, identified recently by Matthew Parris (The Times, 22 March 2008):

“Who knows what’s happening? Perhaps nothing, after all. Perhaps this will all blow over. But what unsettles me goes deeper than a sense of mystery about the future. At most junctures in history there arises the feeling of a lull before a possible storm. Heck, we were in a worse state in 1945, or 1979. Danger was more imminent in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 posited bigger unknowns for the future. But at these crossroads the air was full of ideas: strong ideas, competing ideas, confident philosophies, angry dissent. People had

policies. Ideologies clashed. Politicians and thinkers jostled to present their plans. Leaders led.

“But what distinguishes this hiatus in 2008 from those earlier forks in the road is the impassivity of our politics, and the idleness of political debate, as we wait. There is a sense of vacuum.

“There was not in 1979, as there is now, this curious hollowness in the air. Where today is the bold advocacy, the impatience to persuade, the urgency of argument? Where are the shouts of “Here’s how!”? It is as though the stage were set for some kind of theatrical climax, but peopled only with stage hands and the rattle and murmur of the scene-shift. Where are the leading actors, the big voices, the great thoughts?”

Where indeed? A few politicians have provided a hint of what is possible. Vince Cable’s moral clarity on the debt mountain, the housing bubble and Northern Rock is an example his parliamentary colleagues could follow, if only they had the balls. Ken Livingstone’s dogged pursuit of his congestion charge policy, despite the unpopularity and criticism it attracted, ultimately paid dividends and won widespread respect. Or consider the 2007 presidential election in France. For once, the mainstream parties offered people a real choice and the turnout soared to 85 per cent, while the vote for fringe parties dropped.

There is no such thing as ‘voter apathy’. If you want to increase the turnout, forget gimmicks like postal ballots, e-voting or relocating the polling booths to Tesco’s. The answer is to treat people as adults and give them real and meaningful choices. You achieve that by standing up for what you believe in, not by offering voters small and insignificant choices analogous to those faced by consumers in the supermarket, between differently branded packages of the same bland product.

My scepticism about “asking the people what they want” is not contempt for democracy. Far from it. I believe that political leaders should be elected by the people, accountable to the people and removable by the people. More than that, I want to see those choices made in the context of a healthy civil society, in which people are genuinely empowered.

But our political leaders have to stand for something, not blow with the wind. Their job is to lead, not follow; to persuade, not accept public opinion as a given. This does not mean adopting an arrogant posture. Politicians should engage in debate and connect with people’s concerns. But they can do this effectively only if they have a clear sense of right and wrong, and they should not be afraid to communicate that moral clarity to the electorate. The people have the right to elect or reject them on that basis. But any politician who has no idea of what he stands for and instead can only ask “you tell me” is unfit for office.

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