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Election Day and Britain's Existential Crisis

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Abstract

In this Spotlight article for Election Day in the UK, David Robinson discusses how the past forty years of Britain's economic and social history have led to a divided nation and a present day existential crisis, which no main political party seems willing to discuss.

Across the UK, local elections are being held today, May 6th. The electorate can be forgiven if they hadn't noticed. There has been little in the way of campaigning. This was, perhaps, to be expected. The opposition parties may have felt somewhat encumbered by a perceived duty not to interrupt the ongoing vaccine roll-out, whilst the lack of oppositional challenge suits the incumbent Conservatives, so why say anything when saying nothing may well preserve the status quo?

Yet, there is so much that remains unresolved from the politics of the past few years. The rise of European populism, the election of Donald Trump, and Brexit are understood to have been more than electoral choices in the normal sense. They were also expressions of anger and frustration by swathes of people who feel a lack of dignity in insecure and unfulfilling work that leaves them economically disadvantaged, left out of mainstream society, and [looked down upon by university-educated](#), home-owning 'elites' with emotionally satisfying and financially rewarding careers. As I will argue, even had they campaigned hard, there is little that any of the main parties would have said that would have gone any way to addressing these problems.

Was it not ever thus? The 'haves' and 'have nots'? Well, yes, but the less advantaged have, traditionally, at least had some political representation. Today, many feel that it is not they who have deserted the parties they have traditionally supported, but the latter who have deserted them in moving towards a form of

identity politics and attempting to appeal more to the 'liberal elite' than the traditional 'working class'.

Alongside this, the workplace has fundamentally changed. Over forty years, workers have had to exchange occupations that might not have paid as well as others but were secure. These were jobs which came with a justified sense of dignity, a sense that one was contributing meaningfully to society in comparison to the menial, insecure and poorly paid work in warehouses and call centres. In contemporary Britain, there is a sense in which half the population are the working poor, engaged in administrating, collating, and delivering consumer goods to the other half. The result is the anger and vitriol that has split the UK and other democracies and has come as a shock and surprise to those who had not even realised the extent of this disaffection.

The Brexit vote and Trump's Presidential campaign fully understood and leveraged these feelings. Rather than the conventional political strategy of trying to unite the electorate behind a set of ideas, the cracks in society were deliberately and crudely crowbarred open more widely, encouraging the view that the nation was divided into two, diametrically opposed halves. This strategy, combined with the anger and hopelessness of so many, is nothing short of an existential threat to society and democracy. While the existential nature of this threat may have been subsumed beneath the emergency of the pandemic, it remains ready to remerge in full force as restrictions are lifted and the gap between the haves and the have-nots becomes visible once more.

But how did we get to this position of disaffection and division? What are the political forces and ideological concepts which brought us here?

In the late 1970s, there was a fundamental shift in ideas about how economies ought to function. More than a decade of stagnant growth, labour conflicts, and high unemployment opened the door to a set of ideas, long-held by some but

rejected up to that point by governments of all stripes. Since the inter-war years, economists such as Friedrich Hayek and, later, Milton Friedman, had argued for less central decision-making and planning by governments, in favour of 'the market'. The mechanisms of supply and demand, and competition between profit-motivated companies would, they argued, provide what people wanted far more efficiently than traditional government planning and control.

Furthermore, the idea of governments and civil servants working for the 'public good' was rejected. Instead, it was maintained, such public offices were used by their occupants to build their own careers and operate in their own self-interest.

All this would be swept away. By liberalising money markets, companies and entrepreneurs would have easier access to capital with which to supply a wider range of goods and services that society demanded and from which they would be free to choose.

The role of governments and central banks was now...to do nothing! The market was a more efficient arbiter of what society wanted than government bureaucracy and would provide higher quality at a lower cost.

This idea has been, over the past forty years or so, extended from consumer goods and services to public services traditionally provided through taxation by government. Whether it be the products of the steel industry, or care for the elderly the market would now provide, not government.

Such radicalism was initially implemented by the centre-right governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but its full flowering, arguably, came under the centre-left governments of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Gerhard Schroeder. Importantly, the challenges we face as a result of such ideologies are not simple left-right debates. They have become ubiquitous across the political spectrum.

Have such policies worked? They have not. It is impossible to argue that there is now more equal access to high quality public services, health care, education, or

care for the vulnerable. Access to high quality services such as these is largely dependent on income. Even organisations such as the IMF, at the heart of driving such policies for the last five decades, agree that these ideas have been [‘oversold’](#).

The recently retired Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, has [pointed out the more subtle problem](#). There has been a separation of ‘moral sentiment’ from economics. We no longer debate what is ‘right’, there is no political discussion of what we think ought to be provided in society, regardless of increased costs, or the wider ‘value’ of something, [beyond its economic value](#); the value of everything has become the price of everything. If the market has not provided something, then it *cannot* be provided.

Once again, this is not a left-right debate. Prior to this turn to the market in the late-1970s, the importance of debating ethical questions as part of economic decision making was seen as a fundamental part of political action across the ideological divide and going back to the eighteenth century. Over the last few decades, however, governments of different political persuasions have justified inequalities and their own lack of action in remedying them, by resorting to the argument that the market is the arbiter and expression of democratic choice. That nothing can be done in the face of the free market.

More generally, the turn towards market outcomes over the past four decades has determined that ‘success’, one’s status and reward, is mainly measured by economic outputs. It is argued that those who earn the highest incomes are those who have demonstrated the talent and hard work to best satisfy the demands of the market and it is right, therefore, that larger and larger economic rewards and prestige are concentrated in their hands. The corollary is that those who have less, have proven themselves less able and hard working to have satisfied the same demands, are, thus, equally deserving of their lower economic and social status.

It has become ubiquitous for political leaders to claim they have, or at least are striving to, implement a ‘meritocracy’, a society in which one’s position, what might

broadly be termed one's 'success', is due to a combination of one's hard work and ability; in short, one's merit.[1]

Whilst leaders acknowledge that differences of class, gender, birth, race and so forth have and continue to present barriers to a level playing field on which all can compete, and 'compete' is relevant here, there is a general acceptance of a vision of the future in which such barriers continue to be dismantled. Once accomplished, it is argued, a 'just' society would finally be realised, in which one's place in society is what one 'deserves'. Certainly, such a society, politicians maintain, would be far 'fairer' than, say, an aristocracy or a class-bound society in which benefits are handed down from one generation to the next.

Indeed, so 'common sense' seems this argument, that it is hard to find many across the political spectrum, or [indeed members of the public, that would disagree](#) with its *prima facie* conclusions.

And yet, there is a dark side to this argument. We have become so used to the idea of 'competition' in society, for jobs, income, prestige and so on, that we have accepted the inevitable idea of 'winners' and 'losers', with all its accompanying, morally freighted baggage. To be a winner is a 'good thing'. But to be a 'loser' is to have one's efforts consigned to some kind of social dustbin in which one has 'failed'. If you have not achieved what you wanted to, that's your fault, the result of some kind of combination of a lack of ability and effort.

Of course, in a meritocracy, it might be argued that such conclusions are harsh, but fair. If one has 'won', one deserves the laurels. If you have not, well, it's a tough world out there. Next time, work harder, be smarter. And teach the lesson to your children.

If one's failure is due to the lack of a level playing field, the fact that public school pupils with parents who have connections in the professional world have a far better chance than those from a council estate, well, that only shows how important it is to remove such barriers and push headlong towards a true equality of opportunity.[2]

Again, so common sense does this seem, it is hard, on the surface, to argue against it. There will always be inequality to some degree. Let it be justified on the basis of hard work and ability, the merits of the individual.

But is this really the case? Are ability and effort really, entirely, self-earned merits? If I decide to encourage and extol the virtues of 'achievement' in my young children, good marks at school, self-sacrifice, hard work, a pathway towards higher education and a high-income and 'prestigious' career, are they not more likely to achieve these goals than children who are less so facilitated and encouraged? It would seem a positive outcome is, in fact, largely a combination of pre-disposed genetics and the environment in which they have, arbitrarily, found themselves.

Equally, my daughter may find herself with fame, fortune, and prestige as a top professional footballer. But, again, this is only because she happens to live in a society that extolls the virtues of playing football well. Had she happened to have found herself by accident of birth in the thirteenth century, her ability to curl a ball accurately with the outside of either foot, whether by genetic predisposition or the effects of her environment, would have stood for little. Even the hard work she puts in to develop these skills is, to a significant extent, a factor of an environment that encourages such effort; one in which not all children are lucky to find themselves, regardless of their intrinsic 'talent'.

To a significant extent therefore, meritocratic success is the result of unearned genetics, environment, and a set of skills, either naturally acquired, or encouraged and taught, that happen to be desirable and rewarded by society at a particular point in time. One might say, a morally arbitrary accident of birth.

Even worse, those who 'fail' to achieve 'success' are told this is the position they deserve. Had they, in a meritocracy, worked harder and been smarter, they would have done better. It was not always thus. Prior to the turn towards market outcomes as the designator of 'success', labour that may not have accrued substantial economic rewards was still considered as valuable and as contributing

to the common good. Coal miners and steel workers knew that barriers of class and arbitrary birth hindered their progression towards higher income professions, but they also knew this was not their fault or due to their own lack of worth and merit. The dignity inherent in their labour, their contribution and value to society, was apparent and they rightly proclaimed it thus. And they were supported in this belief by representative political and labour organisations.

For unrepresented workers today, whose traditional jobs have been overtaken by technology, and who find themselves valued by the market in terms of insecure, minimum wage, zero hours contracts, such dignity and self-respect is harder to assert.

It is this combination of the turn to market outcomes as the arbiter of all value, and an apparent 'meritocracy' in which one's position, for good or ill, is what one 'deserves', which is the cause of the anger and resentment in society. This has been exacerbated by the lack of political representation for people who are told the cause of their disaffection is actually their own lack of hard work and ability.

Importantly, these market-governed judgements are completely uninterested in questions of 'right or wrong'.

Milton Friedman, for example, one of the Nobel Prize-winning architects of free market ideology accepts that the market should conform to the '[basic rules of the society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in *ethical custom*](#)' (my emphasis).

The question is, of course, how do we decide what is classed as an 'ethical custom'? Surely, the basis of this is through political discourse and debate. But the intertwined ideologies of the market and meritocracy are like the air we breathe; invisible and so accepted as facts of everyday life that they require no debate.

The answer to the anger and division in society is not a question of 'policies'. It is one of understanding how we got to this place and the structural ideologies that

paved the way. Fundamentally, there is a need for robust public and political debate about the society we want. Only then can we decide on the policies that will get us there.

The public's views on [public ownership](#) , [inequality](#), and [higher taxes](#), particularly for the top 1% of earners, show that the UK is, broadly, ready for reform and change. Perhaps it's time to be angry, but together rather than factionally. It's certainly well past time to engage politically and demand that what we want as a society should not be solely determined by 'the market', but by discussion.

Depressingly, this is not a debate that will intrude on today's elections.

[1] In the following sections, I draw heavily on M. J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's become of the Common Good?* (London, 2020). Other works on a similar theme include: D. Goodhart, *Head, Heart, Hand: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century* (London, 2020); J. Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power, and Myths of Mobility* (Abingdon, 2018); M. A. P. Bovens & A. C. Wille, *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy* (Oxford, 2017).

[2] What is interesting is how elite children use meritocratic language to obscure their origins. LSE's new study shows how our fetishisation of meritocracy makes privileged people frame their lives as an uphill struggle:(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/18/why-professional-middle-class-brits-insist-working-class>). However, as Friedman and Laurison point out, 'People from working-class origins do sometimes make it into elite jobs, but it is rare; only about 10% of people from working-class backgrounds (3.3% of people overall) traverse the steepest upward mobility path...Origins, in other words, remain strongly associated with destinations in contemporary Britain.': (S. Friedman & D. Laurison, *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* (Bristol, 2020),p. 13.)
