

# Civitas Online Publication

TRUST IN ME:

Politicians and why we hate them

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## Introduction

*“Trust in me, just in me  
Shut your eyes and trust in me  
You can sleep safe and sound  
Knowing I am around*

*Slip into silent slumber  
Sail on a silver mist  
Slowly and surely your senses  
Will cease to resist*

*Trust in me, just in me  
Shut your eyes and trust in me”.*

Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman ( from the film “The Jungle Book” )

*“The British people have put their trust in us. It is a moving and humbling experience.  
. ...I feel a deep sense of responsibility and humility. You put your trust in me and I  
intend to repay that trust. I will not let you down”.*

Tony Blair, Festival Hall, May 2nd 1997.

In June 2001 the Labour party was returned to office with 2.8 million fewer votes than when it first came to power four years earlier. The actual percentage of those who voted was 59.4, a drop of over 12 points. This was the biggest percentage loss in history, though the trend in the UK since 1950 has all been downwards. Then the turnout was 83%. Not that any of this materially mattered to the victors: the Labour majority crumbled to 167, from its previous high of 179. Altogether there were five million fewer voters<sup>1</sup>.

The purpose of this paper is to find out why people are becoming less inclined to vote; whether this is connected to anything other than the usual sexual and financial scandals, hypocrisies, exaggerations, lies, hotly-disputed foreign adventures and policy u-turns that all governments tend to engage in; and whether this has anything to do with the overreach of government responsibility; in particular, whether it is at all linked to government failings in health, education, and crime.

And, if the decline in voter turnout is related to any of these things, what, if anything, can be done about it.

# Health

*"The very simple choice that people have in this next 24 hours is this. It is 24 hours to save our National Health Service".*

Tony Blair, Trimdon Labour Club, 30th April 1997

In December 2004 Peter Herbert, a 41-year-old father of four, was refused a treatment that could have saved his life. Then, as soon as the story made the newspapers<sup>ii</sup>, Exeter Primary Care Trust ordered a review, and, quite miraculously perhaps, the ten thousand pounds per year for the cancer drug temozolomide was found, and Mr. Herbert can live a little longer<sup>iii</sup>. So all's well that ends well. Except, of course, one can wonder where the money came from. Perhaps someone less high profile didn't get the money, and was thereby condemned to an earlier death.

So is this how things work in the NHS? Corners are cut, programmes are slashed, and then, when one hard luck story or another makes the papers, suddenly someone in charge panics, finds the cash, and then hopes the story goes away for another day? Or maybe John Hutton<sup>iv</sup>, the health minister, was painting a more accurate picture when he claimed eight months earlier:

*"The world has a lot to learn from the NHS. The NHS is one of the most efficient healthcare systems in the world. Its focus on public health has been immensely important. Its primary care services, led by Britain's family doctors, are the envy of the world. Huge investment in the NHS means there are now more staff working in the NHS than ever before, treatment activity has increased, and more people are being treated more quickly".*

It's true enough that there has been a huge investment in the NHS in the last four years. The latest OECD figures for 2002 show that UK spending is now 7.7% of GDP. However, France, at 9.7% and Germany at 10.9% spend more. Indeed, of thirty developed nations only Ireland, Mexico, Turkey, South Korea, and Luxembourg actually spend less<sup>v</sup>. Whether this is a good thing or not is debatable: would you want to live in a country where health spending was 20% of GDP, say? There is after all a thin line between reasonable investment and national neurosis. Still, whether it's enough or not, perhaps the more pertinent issue is that of value for money. Is all this money being spent wisely, and efficiently?

Waiting lists, for example, have gone down significantly. Indeed, by September 2004, the overall NHS waiting list had fallen from 1,158,000 in 1997 to 857,000. Unsurprisingly, given that this has become such a hotly trumpeted means of judging success, the government tends to crow a lot about this. As does the opposition, with Tory leader Michael Howard making the startling promise that, should his party win the next election, “Waiting lists will become a thing of the past”<sup>vi</sup>. But waiting lists are just one part of the equation: what about productivity? The Office for National Statistics found that, although the NHS input between 1995 to 2003 had grown by 32% on one measure, and 39% on another, the output had only increased by 28%. In other words, productivity has actually decreased<sup>vii</sup>.

Other figures are similarly unpromising. The National Audit Office compared the UK with nine other advanced countries (USA, France, New Zealand, Germany, Canada, Australia, Italy, Japan and Sweden) based largely on the 2002 OECD data. For life expectancy at birth the UK came 9th out of ten.<sup>viii</sup> The NAO has also noted that: “the prevalence of obesity in England had tripled over the last 20 years and continues to rise. Most adults in England are now overweight, and one in five is obese”.

Heart disease? The UK came bottom of the league for deaths from the main circulatory diseases<sup>ix</sup>. Infant mortality is another way of making a comparison. Again, the UK came last.

In January 2002 the World Health Organisation reported that around 10,000 British people died avoidable deaths from cancer every year, and the UK had the most cancer deaths in the whole of Europe<sup>x</sup>. The same year, the BMJ announced that Britain has the most cold weather deaths in the whole of Europe (including Siberia!)<sup>xi</sup>.

For those who think Britain’s teenagers ought to be studying Shakespeare and Euclid there are no grounds for complacency either, as the UK’s teenage pregnancy rate is the highest in Europe<sup>xii</sup>. (Maybe they’re all just wrapping up warm to avoid the hypothermia).

In 2003 the Royal College of Nurses reported the highest prevalence of allergies in Europe<sup>xiii</sup>. In the same year the UK topped the charts in terms of lung death in the EU<sup>xiv</sup>.

The American caricature of the snaggle-tooth Englishman is also, alas, not too wide of the mark: we have the fewest number of dentists per capita in Europe<sup>xv</sup>.

And for all those socially aware types who find all this rather trifling, taking comfort in the fact that, however incompetent, at least our doctors mean well, consider this: in 2004 the BMA admitted that there was “widespread discrimination against women doctors and those who are gay or disabled”<sup>xvi</sup>.

Psychologically we’re also up the creek as, according to a 2001 report in the British Journal of Psychiatry, Britain and Ireland have the highest depression rates in Europe<sup>xvii</sup>. Time to reach for the Prozac, isn’t it?

So what’s the solution? Foundation hospitals? Elected hospital governors? Appoint a Health Tsar, and give him draconian powers to sack as many people as he sees fit? Send the whole nation to a health farm? Put a tax on salt, sugar, hamburgers, and unprotected sex? What about health insurance, compulsory or otherwise? Or maybe I’m just being mischievous. Not am I not only ignoring any genuine improvements, but I am also dwelling on the negatives. Somebody, after all, has got to have the worst teeth in Europe. Somebody’s got to be the most obese. And whose responsibility is it that the British teenager is having all that sex? Suppose, also, that all that investment hadn’t been made: imagine how much worse things would be.

Still, it’s a measure of the collapse in public confidence - or perhaps the desperation that the Conservative party had fallen into - that in 2002 Dr. Liam Fox, the party’s health spokesman, was prepared to tell a conference that:

*"It is over-centralised, it is over-politicised. It is over-bureaucratised yet under-managed. It is obsessed with targets, but failing to meet clinical need. It is wasteful and ... only the dedication of its staff keeps it afloat”<sup>xviii</sup>.*

We haven’t heard much of that kind of bravado in the two years since. As so often is the case these days, the Tories stared into the abyss and blinked. One recalls the more freewheeling days of Margaret Thatcher, when, contemplating further use of the internal market, she was advised that this would be too much of a hot potato, and once the rumours had started she back-pedalled, making a speech claiming that the “NHS was safe in our hands”. Since then they’ve all been at it, bending over backwards to claim how much they just love it, how it epitomises all things British, and how only a lunatic would actually choose to waste money going private. Yet the MMR crisis indicates that perhaps this could be a misreading. Before the introduction of the MMR triple vaccine in 1988 there were roughly 76,000 cases of measles every year, with 16 deaths. Since 1992 there were only one hundred cases per year, and no

deaths<sup>xix</sup>. Yet one maverick doctor suggests there is a link between the immunisation and contracting autism, and the take up for the vaccination falls from 92% in 1995-96, to 82% in 2002-3, to 80% in 2003-4<sup>xx</sup>. Is this a symptom of declining trust in doctors and politicians, or is it with the NHS itself? Well, according to a poll by Mori, doctors top the trustworthiness league among the professions with 91% of the public thinking they tell the truth, so we can't blame them<sup>xxi</sup>. So maybe it's the system. Maybe the public doesn't love the NHS, after all. Maybe it's the fact that politicians - who come second bottom only to journalists of that very same poll - run the system that calls it all into question.

It all seems a long way away from the extravagant claims of 1998, when the new health secretary, Frank Dobson, told us within a year of taking office:

*“that access to high quality NHS care and treatment will be guaranteed whoever you are, wherever you live, and whatever your sex, your income or the colour of your skin”<sup>xxii</sup>.*

I suppose for some people it may have been reassuring to know the health secretary wasn't planning on introducing apartheid into the NHS. Dobson was careful to use a phrase like 'high quality', too. He did hedge his bets somewhat. But what exactly did he mean? Obviously, it wasn't *literally* a guarantee. But then if it wasn't a literal one, what was it? A metaphorical one? So what did it cost Dobson to say it? He isn't even in the job now, so he can't resign from it. Moreover, now that he's on the backbenches he can feel free to make a speech beginning:

*“The Labour Government's health policies will mean the end of the NHS. It makes me sad to say so, but it's true”<sup>xxiii</sup>.*

Well here's hoping. This is pretty standard, though. Politicians are forever announcing laws and introducing regulations only to claim a couple of years later, usually when they've been banished to the relative safety of the House of Lords, after some particular interpretation or change to the policies that they had brought in, that this was never their intention.

Of course, Dobson's defenders will say it's only rhetoric. All politicians talk like that, so why pick on him? But if that's true, then why not say so? Why not say that the NHS isn't perfect, never will be perfect, and that means that some people will

die who otherwise might not if this were run on different terms, but these things happen? Presumably they think we just can't handle it. Promise the earth, get elected, then get hated. Is that the policy?

So why isn't the NHS up to scratch? With all this money pouring in, it can't all be going on salaries and bureaucrats. Some of it will be being spent on new and more sophisticated, and sometimes more expensive treatments, and the better healthcare gets, the more it can do, and that in itself raises demand. This, I guess, is what people mean when they refer to the NHS as a bottomless pit. And it is perfectly possible that thousands of people have been dying of hospital infections for years without people noticing. Consider how many patients Harold Shipman managed to murder before he got found out. Increasing medical knowledge will not only have increased public expectation, it will also have increased knowledge of what has going wrong as well. New diseases too, will be costing money. Thirty years ago, nobody was dying of Aids. Tattoo removal, and sex change operations are far more frequent now than then. These, certainly, are all factors.

The opposition parties, and even the government, currently talk a lot about increasing choice, with the Tories particularly keen on giving patients the option of going private, by subsidising the costs to the tune of 50%, paid for, inevitably of course, by the tax-payer. These changes, if implemented, would certainly free up capacity, and may even improve the quality at the top end of the market (which in turn may improve the quality at the bottom end simply by showing what else can be done) but it won't necessarily promote equality of care. And why would that be a problem? Because good healthcare is, it is largely assumed, a right. But it's not just any old right, like the right to climb Everest, but a right, as in an entitlement, which must reach a standard such that it doesn't matter how poor we are, how ill we are, how rich we are, and how much we may have contributed to our own ill health: each and every last one of us is entitled to have the best healthcare that anyone could expect. Given this state of affairs, then you can't have a decentralised, depoliticised health system, with hospital managers and doctors being trusted to make the best decisions as they see fit, whatever Liam Fox might wish for. How long, realistically, would it be, if the Tories ever did get the chance to introduce this policy, before the new health secretary would soon find himself jumping in with emergency action once it becomes clear that some hospitals are doing far better than others, that there are

major geographical and class differences in what kind of healthcare people are getting. The “postcode lottery” in healthcare gets a lot of headlines.

Of course, one alternative would be to change the purpose of the NHS. Simply reduce it to a safety net service for the poor, with perhaps some emergency provisions for immediate, vital treatment and for socially undesirable diseases like the plague, leaving the rest of us to make our own way. I wouldn't fancy being the politician entrusted with making that argument, however. Trying to define 'vital treatment' is going to be fun, and the accusations of a lack of compassion, and an indifference to suffering would be deafening. “High quality NHS care and treatment” is “guaranteed”, remember. So why bother? Far easier, I suppose, to let it wither on the vine. Pour a lot of cash into some aspects of it to negate the charge of privatisation by stealth, and then... privatise by stealth.

What would I do? I'd just privatise the whole damn thing and have done with it. But that, apparently, would be far too simplistic.



# Education

*"Line one of the contract in the next manifesto will be a promise to increase the share of our national wealth spent on education in the next parliament".*

Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference, 2000

*"Five pledges for the next five years*

*Economic pledge*

*I Mortgages as low as possible, low inflation and sound public finances.*

*As we deliver economic stability not return the economy to Tory boom and bust".*

Line One, Labour Manifesto, 2001 general election

One of the great traditions of the late British Summer is the announcement of the A level results. The day they come out, some hapless schools minister – usually a junior one as it is a job too embarrassing for somebody senior to do it – comes on the radio and breathlessly enthuses about another record-breaking year, while firmly denouncing anyone who dares to suggest that the results tell us more about the laughable nature of the exam process than about those lucky little geniuses the schools are churning out by the bucket load. It's a tradition established by the previous Tory government, and has been snapped up with enthusiasm by New Labour with, until recently, the only sceptics in the political establishment being the Liberal Democrats. I say 'until recently', as the Tories have somewhat belatedly joined the bandwagon of those pleading for the replacement of the A levels by a diploma. The government itself commissioned the Tomlinson report, which took a look at education for 14-19 year olds, and Tomlinson suggested their scrapping, as do virtually all the teachers' unions, and virtually all the universities. Needless to say that he and all the others have been ignored: A levels are staying.

So what's all the fuss about? In essence, the critics seem to think that the marking of A levels have become debased to the point that they barely mean anything. Could this be true? Let's look at the evidence compiled by the Engineering Council in 1999, which compared A level grades against a standard diagnostic test devised by the University of Coventry. The same test was applied between 1991 and 1998. In 1991 those with a grade B at A level in 1991 scored 40.5/50 on the diagnostic test. In 1998 those with a B scored 36.8/50. At grade C the gap slipped from 39.9 in 1991 to 32.1 in 1998. As the report points out, the score of 32.1 in 1998 was 2.3 marks (4.6%) lower than the N grade achievement in the same year<sup>xxiv</sup>.

By contrast there was another report from the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), which backed the government. This report found that the proportion of pupils obtaining two or more 'A' level passes between 1975 and 1995 had increased from 12.1% to 19.9%. However, Dr Robert Coe of Durham University compared actual achievements between 1988 and 1998 using the International Test of Developed Abilities (ITDA). The test is applied voluntarily in a minority of schools, so perhaps the results may not be representative of all schools. Yet across six subjects (biology, English, French, geography, history and mathematics) achievements fell steadily. The average ITDA score for maths in 1988 was 72.3 and 59.3 in 1998, and for English Literature 57.0 in 1988 and 51.5 in 1998. Nonetheless the average 'A' level grade increased over the same period from 4.59 in 1988 to 5.96 in 1998 and in maths from 3.78 in 1988 to 5.69 in 1998<sup>xxv</sup>.

So, unless there is some sort of mad conspiracy on behalf of the entire educational establishment, it seems safe to assume that there is something wrong, and that something looks very much like "grade inflation". That is to say, the pressure to achieve better results, and to hit government targets has resulted in a lowering of standards. But if this is the case, does this necessarily mean that the exam should be scrapped? Surely the problem is one of the marking of the exams, not the exam itself? What would prevent a new system facing a similar risk?

The crisis is not just one facing children taking A levels. As Tony Blair himself admitted in 2001: "A quarter of eleven-year-olds fail their basic tests and almost half of sixteen-year-olds don't get five decent GCSEs". There doesn't seem to have been much of an improvement since. At Key Stage 2 (age 11) level 4 represents the expected standard of literacy for children of that age. In 1996 48% reached level 4 and in 2002 it was 75%. Unsurprisingly, the government was pleased. But then the

University of Durham's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre applied the same test of reading ability between 1997 and 2002 in 122 schools involving about 5,000 pupils. It found no increase<sup>xxvi</sup>.

In the face of mounting public scepticism the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) commissioned a report into the claim that standards had been lowered. It compared 1996 and 2000 and claimed that, overall, their evidence 'gives the lie to any theory of conspiracy to undermine' standards<sup>xxvii</sup>. However, when the report compared English at Key Stage 2 between 1996 and 1999 it found that reading standards had fallen. Reading (and total marks) for the 1999 test were, on average only 4 marks lower, but the overall 1999 cut-scores for levels 4 and 5 were nine marks below those in 1996, overcompensating for the harder 1999 reading test by 5 marks<sup>xxviii</sup>.

What about those out of school? Here things look just as bleak. In 1998 the DfES established a working group on adult literacy under the chairmanship of Sir Claus Moser. It reported in 2002 with Sir Claus remarking that 'people are staggered when one confronts them with the basic facts about literacy and numeracy, and rightly so'. Roughly 20% of adults, perhaps 7 million people, have severe problems with basic skills, particularly 'functional literacy' and 'functional numeracy'. To illustrate the meaning of the term 'functional literacy' the working group said that one in five adults, if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, could not locate the page reference for plumbers.<sup>xxix</sup>

This remarkable statistic, that twenty percent of the population are functionally illiterate, was confirmed by a report from the National Audit Office (NAO) in December 2004, which found that in spite of government efforts to get 750,000 adults enrolled on reading and writing courses this year, almost eight out of 10 adults aged between 20 and 65 would fail to get a good GCSE pass in maths and 60% of this age group were not at the level of GCSE grade C or above in literacy. In total, about 26 million people of working age "have levels of literacy or numeracy below those expected of school leavers", it said<sup>xxx</sup>.

The evidence provided by the industrial world doesn't exactly suggest that we are all about to herald a new intellectual renaissance either. As a CBI survey from August 2004 of over 500 firms revealed: 37% were not satisfied with the basic literacy and numeracy of school leavers, **up from 34% in the 2003 survey**. During the previous 12 months, 33% of firms had to give school leavers basic training in literacy

and numeracy<sup>xxx</sup>.

There are other initiatives that do not exactly suggest a government brimming with confidence, resting on its laurels. During the summer of 2004 we were promised US-style summer camps being offered up for all schoolchildren. A few months later came a 'Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners' plan, whereby every school would have the opportunity to be an independent, specialist school “with new freedoms to run their own affairs”<sup>xxxii</sup>. Then, in February 2005, the new education secretary Ruth Kelly promised that school should be relaxed about excluding pupils, which was a complete switch from its previous policy that not only should schools use exclusion as a last resort but that they would all have to take a quota of badly-behaved pupils. A couple of weeks later, schools were also being told to take pupils on school trips (a trend that was dying owing to fear of prosecution for any accidents that might take place during the trips), with the assurance that, provided guidelines were being followed, then they would have nothing to worry about (as though Ms Kelly could stop a lawsuit from ever happening)<sup>0</sup>. Indeed, there has been a veritable blizzard of shake-ups, crackdowns, zero tolerance campaigns, blitzes and initiatives over the last eight years. Did you know that dotted throughout the country, there are nine bullying tsars?

Perhaps the recent enthusiasm for Sure Start Centres, promising free education for the under-fives, can be explained in this context. Its greatest advocates are mainly 70s feminists and New Labour aficionados who have more or less given up on the universities and schools as means of ushering in the compassionate and caring society they have long craved. Now, having read a few studies that suggest that the early years are more critical than the later ones, they have belatedly decided that maybe it would be more cost-effective to focus spending on the kiddies when they're young, instead of later on when it's all too late. It will all no doubt go wrong like pretty much all these grand social experiments do, but I'm sure a lot of time and money will get wasted trying to make it work before it joins the long list of discredited government activities. Indeed, just in case it does all go wrong, the new education secretary now wants to raise the school leaving age, “effectively” to 18<sup>xxxiii</sup>. No harm in hedging your bets, is there?

So, what would I do? Privatise the universities? Abolish the national curriculum? Well, obviously. I can see why the curriculum was introduced – to bring all schools into some kind of uniform, baseline standard by which no single school

could get away with its uselessness not being noticed – but that’s pretty much the same reason it should be done away with. As with so many socialist institutions, the centralisation of standards is driving quality down, not up.

And so, as ever, we come back to the issues of competition versus centralisation, equality versus diversity, and equality of outcome versus equality of opportunity. It doesn’t help when there is little clarity as to the reasoning behind the state’s involvement in education in the first place. Is it to provide a basic level which all ought to have access to, as a basic human right? Is it for equality of outcome purposes, Old Labour ones if you will, which by definition has to be hostile to selection, competition and choice? Or is it for equality of opportunity, which, under its current definition means a similar start for everyone, but which allows differences along the way, preferably on grounds of ability, rather than other factors, like how rich or clever one’s parents are? Or is it a moral duty on behalf of the state to impose a social conscience on its citizens in the interests of the state itself? Or is it a crudely selfish duty on behalf of the state, to help us, as a nation, compete in the global marketplace? New Labour tries to ride all these tigers. Fair enough, that’s politics. Sometimes, not always, some of these reasons can co-exist. But often they conflict. You can’t have both diversity and equality, however much some like to think otherwise, and if everyone is supposed to have equal opportunities you can’t have - unless you really do think everyone has exactly the same potential - equality of outcome. In the mean time we have a repeat of the health mishmash, whereby the government taxes the public and provides a service that is just about tolerable enough to keep getting it elected, if little else.

Some lucky people have ducked out of the system altogether, exploiting the two-word loophole in the education act “or otherwise” which allows people to educate their children at home. A bit rough on them to have to pay their taxes, given that they aren’t given rebates, let alone compensated for the inadequacy of their children’s state-provided education. Presumably, also, they don’t even have the consolation of being wealthy; otherwise they’d be offloading them into the nearest private school.

The Tories have come up with a policy of allowing good schools to expand and bad schools to go to the wall. All well and good, but this means, inevitably, that some children will be getting a worse education than others. As they do now anyway, of course, but this won’t necessarily close the gap between the well-educated and the badly, which will annoy the egalitarians.

Naturally, in an ideal world, I'd privatise it all. The way I see it, education is far too important an issue for it to be run by politicians. However, once again I acknowledge that I'm in a minority on this, as the opposite is usually held to be the case: some things are just too important to be left to the vagaries of the market, goes the refrain. It's the same reason I am sceptical of vouchers, which are usually the solution free market radicals tend to espouse when trying to prove their credentials as members of the 'basic human rights' brigade. Frankly, I regard vouchers with as much enthusiasm as I would a return to ration books. My problem is that if you give parents vouchers, then you're still going to have some government apparatchik involved in deciding what and what does not constitute a school, and what does or does not constitute an education. Would home schooling be tolerated, for example? What about schools of dance, schools of rock, and schools dedicated to a particular religion? This problem of course would still be the case even if they were all privatised. In the UK private companies have been encouraged by government to start building their own schools, and buying up bad state ones, trying to turn them into cut-price functioning organisations. Sooner or later, these schools will no doubt achieve better results than do the state ones, simply by creaming off children from backgrounds rich enough to send them there, but not rich enough to send them to the more established private schools. No doubt the government in turn will further encourage them to take over other state schools. One day perhaps they will start being allowed to charge for their services: top-up fees at first, I expect, and then pretty much the full rate. It's one way of doing it, I suppose. But there's no point in raising all our hopes. Even if all the state schools were privatised, there'd still be an Education Minister issuing guidelines, setting targets, determining strategies, prioritising goals, and generally buzzing around hoping that next year's statistics are better than this year's. With privatisation, equality of opportunity would obviously, assuming the schools are allowed to select their pupils, get knocked into touch, and bang goes equality of outcome too. With all those different schools teaching different things, then that's going to skyrocket. What Education Secretary is going to tolerate that for long?

# Crime

*“Labour is the party of law and order in Britain today”.*

Labour Manifesto, 1997 general election.

In 2004 a ten-year-old child at Waterloo Primary School in Manchester dismantled a pencil sharpener and slashed a fellow pupil with the blade. The victim was promptly sent to hospital where he had to have butterfly stitches on his neck. In response to this outrage the headmaster took firm and decisive action: the little munchkin was suspended for two days. The head also ensured that it could never happen again by banning pencil sharpeners from the school<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

Still, what else could he do? As a letter sent to all parents from the school helpfully explained:

*“The school, like every other school, has a duty to promote ‘inclusion’ of all pupils. The emphasis of the (DfES) guidance is that a permanent exclusion is discouraged and to be considered as a last resort in very extreme circumstances. A fixed period exclusion was entirely appropriate for the circumstances.”*

So this was not the last resort. Still, at least the little ne’er-do-well was excluded for “a fixed period”. Makes it sound almost severe, doesn’t it? Of course, if schools were taken out of government control, and freedom of contract and association became fashionable once again, our nameless assailant could have been banished. As it is, well I suppose the school could appoint a pencil tsar to whom all the children go whenever they want their pencils sharpened. Or perhaps the new education secretary could institute an across the board Zero Tolerance scheme for pencil sharpeners, with a month long amnesty at the local police station where concerned parents could drop them off on a “no questions asked” basis. If it saves one life...

Or maybe I’m being unfair. Maybe this isn’t representative of the current orthodoxy on crime prevention. After all, children are different. Perhaps it’s fairer to see how New Labour reacts to crimes committed by adults.

According to the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) England and Wales has more crime per capita than any other country of the 17 countries it

surveyed in 2000: 54.5 crimes per 100 inhabitants compared with an average of 35.2 per 100. We also face the second highest risk of being a victim of crime, second only to Australia. We top the chart for the 'very serious' offences too. Yet we also install more burglar alarms than anyone else. Contact crime, which is defined as robbery, sexual assault, and assault with force, was second highest in England and Wales (3.6% of those surveyed). In the USA it was 1.9% and Japan, 0.4%<sup>xxxv</sup>.

The Home Office always goes into denial mode when confronted with figures like these, usually saying that crime has either been declining since 1981, or even, if it's feeling particularly boisterous, since records began. By records what they mean is the latest figures from the British Crime Survey, rather than since 1857, when records did indeed begin<sup>xxxvi</sup>. But given that murder, sex offences, fraud, drug offences, crime against commercial premises, and crimes against children under 16 aren't actually included in the BCS, one could be forgiven for wondering how useful it is. The problem child with his pencil sharpener would not have even been considered.

If you make comparisons within the UK itself, rather than with abroad, and set the current situation against the not so dim and distant past, this doesn't help the government's case much either. Crime now is nearly ten times the rate it was in 1950. Then there were 1,048 recorded crimes per 100,000 population. From the late 1950s crime rose to a peak of 10,905 per 100,000 in 1992 and then fell to a low of 8,739 in 1997-98. Since then it has increased to 11,327 per 100,000 (partly as a result of the National Crime Recording Standard, which was brought in during 2002).

Again, the Government tends to shrug its shoulders on this. Either it isn't happening at all, it's only the perception of crime that has increased (they haven't yet tried the line that it's only our perception that healthcare and education are collapsing, but I dare say it's a matter of time); or it claims that at least crime has fallen steadily since 1995 (according to the BCS, at any rate). They're reluctant to wheel that one out too often though, as that runs the risk of handing all the credit over to the Tories, as the marginal decline began in the last two years of Tory rule.

So what's changed since 1995? Is it a trickle down from the compassionate example given by our leaders? Or is just that more of the crooks are in prison? To claim that increasing the use of prison reduces crime is, for people who don't believe in cause and effect (i.e.. 'Liberals') rather controversial. Yet between 1993 and 2004 the average number of people in prison rose from 45,633 to 75,000, an increase of over 60%.



What happened to crime over this period? According even to the BCS crime fell from 19.1 million in 1995 to 11.7 million in 2003/04. Was it just a coincidence?

The Home Office report, *Making Punishments Work*, estimated that the average offender carried out 140 offences per year, with the more dedicated ones carrying out 257 per year. If each of the 29,000 additional prisoners carried out the average number of offences then about four million offences against the public would have been prevented by 12 months in jail<sup>xxxvii</sup>.

On the Government's own admission, only 15,000 of the 100,000 persistent offenders, who commit half of all crime, are in prison. Indeed, only 33% of males over 21 were sentenced to immediate custody when they had ten or more previous convictions. Moreover, if they had 3-9 previous convictions, only 21% were sent to jail. Even for serious offences like burglary, males over 18 received a custodial sentence in only 70% of cases when they had ten or more previous convictions. As for theft, the government has recently decided that if a thief steals anything priced under £200 from a shop he will not automatically be arrested. Instead, he can be handed an £80 fine. If he pays up, he won't even get a criminal record<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

Yet prison does work. By definition - the fewer criminals there are out there, the fewer crimes they can commit. Unfortunately, New Labour does not really want to believe this. Of course, they often talk big. We're all used by now to successive Home Secretaries announcing another crackdown, more zero tolerance, and another crime bill for the next session of Parliament. Big deal. If they aren't prepared to build more prisons, what is the point of all these laws?

The obvious thing to do, if Tony Blair wanted to be tough on crime and tough on the causes, as he so often used to claim (though I must confess I haven't heard it lately) was to build a few more prisons. But that would be too simple, wouldn't it? Indeed, in 2003, the Home Office rather charmingly decided that there were quite enough people in prison, and when the figure reached 80,000, then that would be that. Magistrates and judges would have to think of other means of punishing people<sup>xxxix</sup>.

Why? Why would they do this, when all the evidence points otherwise? They've got a big enough majority, and it's not like there would be much of a rebellion even if a few backbenchers did get all hot under the collar about it. No, the answer must be something embedded in their psyches: it just goes against their self-image. New Labour are nice people, and the only people who want to build more prisons are authoritarians, nasty, insensitive people; in other words, Tories. Also,

punishing people can only be justified by acknowledging that the punished have free will, and if you acknowledge that, then where is the opportunity for interfering? Neosocialist instincts are much more attuned to concerns about root causes: poverty, unemployment, discrimination, drugs, homelessness, child abuse, and all the rest of it.

So, instead of sending people to prison, our leaders are much more inclined to embark on a stern campaign of treating us like Pavlov's dogs and creating a caring, civilised society so that all our criminal tendencies can be nipped in the bud. That is much more fun for a politician, especially one who fancies himself to be compassionate and sophisticated. It even explains the other current vogue for tinkering with the justice system itself, preparing to curtail the rules on double jeopardy, habeas corpus, and the presumption of innocence, maybe doing away with juries for certain offences. This won't lead to better justice, but it will certainly lead to fuller prisons, which are quite full to bursting as it is. According to the Howard League, "Of the 139 prisons which make up the prison estate in England and Wales, 76 are over-crowded"<sup>x1</sup>. In pure logical terms, it doesn't make much sense. Whatever happened to joined-up government?

Compare this with attitude with that of the Taleban in Afghanistan. Say what you like about them, but at least they had a greater grasp of solving criminal behaviour. For five years, up until the liberation of 2002, playing chess was illegal. There were none of the compassionate pieties about the root causes of chess playing. No government plans to either suppress gateway games such as backgammon or draughts. No programmes either to wean people off chess by making them play kerplunk. No, they just took the line that this was wrong and if you do it and get caught, you'll be breaking rocks in the hot sun for a couple of years. Whatever else it is, it's a lot less patronising than our system. Give the criminals the benefit of the doubt, then throw them in prison anyway, but only once they've committed the crime so many times it's become second nature.

So, aside from building some more prisons, what else should be done? You could, of course, privatise the police force. I know the standard conservative argument is to give them more money, increase sentencing, and talk tough to the judiciary. But will this help? I find it hard to believe that by adding to the number of policemen there would be a corresponding reduction in serious crime. On the contrary, all the neophyte coppers will just waste their time arresting speeding drivers and fox-hunters.

Given the choice between hunting down burglars and hunting down cigarette smokers, what would you do?

We could even leave the system as it was. There is nothing wrong with jury trials, habeas corpus and the like. We don't need any more crimes, if anything we could do with quite a few repealed. Let the police worry about the serious stuff like burglary and violence, and leave the morally and socially doubtful stuff to the moralists. There does, after all, have to be some leeway in a free society.

The Tories have recently announced plans for the public to be allowed to vote for police chiefs; this actually strikes me as a good idea. It might sharpen up their attitude at the very least. I'm a bit wary of voting for judges, as that might well politicise them all the more, but some kind of answerability might be nice. At the moment they're given too much discretion. I appreciate that having discretion is part of what being a judge is all about. But the way the Human Rights Act has been brought in entitles them to draw pretty much any conclusion they like about any act ever passed by Parliament. This not only brings all laws into disrepute, it also brings Parliament into disrepute. What is the point of it, if judges are more important than law-makers?

So how will things work out the way things are? Prepare for the worst. With so many crimes and so many criminals and a political class whose only solution is a limp-wristed authoritarianism, we may as well all prepare ourselves for a culture where the police turn a blind eye to certain crimes, simply because they don't have the resources, other than in a few token, headline-friendly instances, to fight them. As Steve Green, the chief police constable for Nottingham has admitted, his force can't even cope with the number of murders happening under his watch, never mind the lesser stuff<sup>xli</sup>. Voting for police chiefs will in the short term actually exacerbate this, as they will have to respond to local needs more. We might well have some areas of the UK where fox-hunting is heavily policed, others where it is more or less tolerated. But with more and more laws, and a finite number of prison cells and policemen, that is going to happen anyway.

Or maybe technology will take over. Guns are getting cheaper. Soon, perhaps, you will be able to buy a small plastic handgun for a tenner. So perhaps gun ownership will end up like the laws on marijuana, and become unenforceable. Then, in ten years time earnest young couples will be whispering: *“Well, darling, do you think we should get a gun? Yes, I know it's against all our principles, but if the police*

*refuse to do anything to help us. And it's not their fault, it's that wretched government and all the underfunding..."*

I do wonder what will happen to our little pencil-sharpener-blade-wielding toerag, though. Perhaps those two days suspension from school will have taught him a lesson, and he will turn out to be a happy, tax-paying citizen, with an abiding interest in social justice. Not even his parents will be allowed to sort him out, as there is now a five-year penalty for smacking your own child if you leave any visible markings. Then again, maybe he'll end up being shot dead by some middle-class vigilante.

# Apathy

*"We have become the practical party, pursuing perfectly idealistic objectives in a measured and non-dogmatic way."*

Tony Blair, interviewed by the Guardian, May 21, 2001.

The question I began with remains: do these failings in health, crime and education explain the reduction in turnout over the last sixty years? Do they indeed, have anything to do with it? Before coming to that, it might be worth taking a look at the reasons people usually have for not voting, and see how much weight should be given to them. I think they can all be placed in one of these seven categories:

1. They just don't care who wins, and would rather spend their time thinking about other things.
2. They do care who wins but don't feel qualified to make a decision. They know that other people know more about the subject, and are happy enough to leave it to them.
3. They do care who wins but can't make up their minds.
4. They do care, if not about who wins in this specific instance, but about the political process in general, but think that it just isn't worth the time trying to decide this time.
5. They don't think it makes any difference who wins, either because all the parties are equally useless, or because they are equally good.
6. They have voted in the past, but feel so repulsed by what they regard as recent betrayals by all the major parties that they would rather send a message to the candidates that they hate them all, rather than vote and thereby risk

sending out the alternative message that they are in fact happy with the system.

7. They don't vote because they actively disapprove of the whole business.

There is clearly some overlap between them. All those in the first four categories are relatively harmless, and provided they aren't too many of them can be left to their own devices. On the other hand, there is a risk that if they get used to not voting, then they may end up in categories five, six, and seven, which is what political types refer to when they talk about voter apathy. That is a reasonable fear, I suppose. When things become habitual, the reasons for doing them may change, while the behaviour doesn't. Thus, those who start in category one may suddenly jump into categories five or seven with no intervening years of mild interest. But, like I say, so long as they are not actually voting, to the politician, this does not matter. Why is this? Because when political anoraks talk about voter apathy, actually what they're really worried about isn't apathy at all. Apathy, so long as it's consistent, persistent, and perennial is fine. It gives politicians a far greater hand to do what they like. So, what then, are they all worried about? Hostility. That is, their greatest fear is that the punters might crawl off their sofas and start thinking of voting for someone else. So really, when the traditional parties complain of voter apathy, what they are worried about is their own security. They're not worried about the public; they're worried about themselves.

Underlying this fear is the notion that a charismatic figure will suddenly barnstorm his way into the popular mind, just a couple of months before an election, and steal it away from under their noses. This has happened elsewhere. The media magnate Silvio Berlusconi in Italy came to power within weeks of forming his party, became President, lost an election, went to jail, got freed, and became President again. The deposed King of Bulgaria stood for election, and won with 43% of the vote, less than three months after forming his party. In Holland, an anti-immigration party came second with 17% of the electorate, even though its leader Pim Fortyn had just been assassinated.

Could this happen in the UK? Not with our voting system, I suspect. There have been flirtations with fourth parties over the last twenty-five years, but First Past the Post tends to get them in the end. Robert Kilroy-Silk stood and won a seat for the

UKIP in the European Parliamentary elections of 2004. He has since left them and formed his own party Veritas, which will almost certainly get slaughtered come the next election, diluting the anti-EU vote even further. The Referendum party took a million or so votes in 1997 before being dissolved without gaining a seat. And who could forget the Social Democrats, formed by a gang of disaffected Labour MPs in the early 1980s? For a few months after their creation they actually led in the polls, but got destroyed at their first general election, with a few survivors going off to merge with the Liberals. Still, even if they don't acquire power, minority parties can still wield influence. The Referendum Party left one long-lasting legacy, by making the idea of having referendums on the Euro and on the EU Constitution fashionable, if not downright politically inescapable. It would be quite hard now to envisage any British government changing our constitution without at least contemplating holding a referendum on the issue.

In any case the UK is hardly unique in having a diminishing turnout. Consider Portugal: operating on a party list system for its parliament, the turnout collapsed from the dizzy heights of 91.7% in 1975 to 62.8% in 2002 (though it went up again by five points in 2005). The Presidential turnout went down from 75.4% in 1976 to 50% in 2001. Similarly, in Switzerland the Parliamentary vote has fallen from 71.7% in 1947, to 43.2 in 1999. The Swedes, on the other hand, are riding high at 80.1%, with their lowest turnout since the war only four points lower. It has actually hit over 90% four times<sup>xlii</sup>.

So what does this prove? Simply that the more that's at stake the more likely people are to vote. Sweden is a socialist paradise/hellhole (depending on your point of view) where the government takes over 60% of GDP in tax revenue, compared to our miserly 40%. Clearly, voting in Sweden matters. As Madsen Pirie of the Adam Smith Institute once noted:

*“When the UK government provided houses and jobs for many of us, and ran the electricity, gas, oil and phone companies, together with steel, coal, ships and cars, it mattered who was in charge. With less coming from government and more from ourselves and the private sector, it is not as important. People tend to vote heavily in high tax countries such as Denmark, and less so in low tax countries such as the USA”<sup>xliii</sup>.*

Which might explain how things pan out in the socialist frozen tundra of northern Europe but hardly explains the disappearance of five million British voters

between 1997 and 2001. Tony Blair has been accused of many things, but slashing taxes isn't one of them. Were these missing millions especially exercised by government incompetence? Perhaps. Or maybe there's a simpler, more prosaic reason: it was a foregone conclusion to a lacklustre campaign. It was merely a blip, not part of a trend. Obviously there were a variety of reasons, but after eighteen years of Tory rule and a massive landslide New Labour would have had to have made some seriously calamitous mistakes for enough people to turn their back on them. Basically, enough people were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

In a way, though, Pirie might well be onto something. Just because some people don't vote, it doesn't mean they are somehow, necessarily disgusted with their politicians. It could be, but that's hardly a reason for not voting. Indeed, it's quite a compelling reason to vote to try to change things. Unless, of course, you don't think these things are improvable.

Or maybe it's both. Maybe a lot of people are disgusted, but can't see any way out, and maybe a lot of people are not at all disgusted, and think things are going rather well. Both types of people might have completely opposing views, but they might still be united in the one belief that it just isn't worth boning up on all the details of policy, and deciding which is best when the ramifications of their one, solitary vote are almost certainly negligible.

So what's all the fuss about? Indeed, let's return to this fear that people might start voting for mavericks and the inexperienced. For whom, exactly, is this a problem? If mainstream politicians aren't speaking on behalf of the public, they can hardly blame others for stepping into their shoes. The public who are voting for them know it's a risk, taking a chance on such inexperienced people with only the haziest of manifestos. It says a lot about the reputations of the other parties that they think it a risk worth taking. It isn't enough for them to castigate the newcomers as populist. All that tells you is that the mainstream parties, or one of them anyway, aren't being populist enough.

In fact, you could put a rather optimistic spin on things, and tender the idea that maybe people aren't at all disgusted with politics. Maybe, in fact, they're rather delighted with the way things are, leaving politics to the politicians, while they can get on with their own lives, working and spending their free time listening to music, reading books, and socialising. Who, really, would want to live in a highly politicised



society, with frenzied individuals all trying to impose their vision on one another, each convinced that he is right?

Unfortunately, the politicians themselves seldom look at things like this, and, bereft at not being the centre of attention, and ever convinced of their increasing unpopularity and increasing discomfort as they realise how little the voting process makes to our lives, both New Labour and the Liberal Democrats have tended to look to alternative ideas in order to shore up their vote, the most cherished of which is that there is something difficult about our voting procedure. Instead of less politics, what we needed was more, easier politics. Thus, in 1997, the Blair government introduced legislation for a London Assembly. London also had a referendum in which it decided to have a Mayor. Reform of the House of Lords has also been promised, and it is now at an interim stage with no sign of finish. Scotland now has a Parliament, and Wales has an assembly. Yet only 50% of the electorate voted for the Welsh assembly, and only just over 25% in favour of the winning party in its first election. Likewise, only 34% of Londoners voted for their mayor in his first. So if any of these innovations have been a rip-roaring success, the public has yet to be convinced. Indeed the backlash to all this happened early. The vote for a Northern Assembly was rejected four to one, and plans for other elected regional assemblies have been abandoned.

Another solution to this non-problem is to try to make it easier to vote, rather than to give us a better reason to do so, perhaps on the grounds that we've all forgotten where the polling booths are. And so we get high profile media campaigns like Get out the Vote and Rock the Vote.

Others have suggested turning election days into national holidays. Or making elections take place on Sundays. Or having a 'None of the Above' box so that voters can actually and positively register their disgust. Even, that each vote ought to entitle the voter to a ticket in the national lottery. All of these might make a difference. They might increase turnout. But, more crucially, would they increase the respect for the process?

With its uncanny knack for picking the clumsiest answer of all, New Labour has become very keen on postal voting. This has had some success in raising turnout, doubling the vote in some constituency local elections. However, given how few people vote in these, that's easy enough to do. It also has its drawbacks. The Electoral Commission came out against all-postal ballots after the 'irregularities' of the local and European elections of 2004. Ballots are easy to forge, and can easily get lost or

misaid. As I write, the police are currently investigating allegations of voter fraud in seven separate instances<sup>xliv</sup>. In March 2005 one councillor was convicted of fraud, and in May 2004 there were riots in the streets of Birmingham involving over two hundred people after one contentious incident<sup>xlv</sup>. There are also some questions of principle involved. One is the loss of the secret ballot, and the other is that it makes a mockery of the whole notion of campaigning, given that you can vote weeks in advance. If the government gets things wrong, this could be a factor that really clouds its victory in the next election.

There are a few enthusiasts for voting via the internet, digital television, mobile phones, and so on, but, once again, their cheerleaders all seem to work either for the government or for software companies. If you can't see your vote actually written down on a piece of paper, how do you know it has been registered? The US Presidential Election of 2004, still reeling from the chaos of the Florida recounts of 2000, used computers in numerous counties. The recounts and disputed counts were legion, and indeed, are still on-going.

How about changing the voting system? Labour Minister Peter Hain has pointed out that in 1997 the safest seat had the lowest turnout, and the closest seat had the highest. Indeed, the top hundred safest seats secured an average turnout of 54%, whereas the top hundred marginals clocked in at 64%<sup>xlvi</sup>. On the face of it this is a strong argument for making all constituencies marginal; but how would you do that? It's also likely that these seats benefited from higher media profiles, and more vigorous campaigning than the safer ones. Most supporters of PR tend to favour multimember systems, where discarded votes keep getting redistributed until candidates hit a certain threshold, a system I regard as even more cynical than First Past the Post. It does allow for smaller parties to get a stake in the system, but at the expense of directly saying yes or no to an individual candidate. I can't say I was too delighted when Defence Secretary Michael Portillo lost his seat in the 1997 general election, but there was something wonderfully demotic about it. The public voted and that was that. You don't get that kind of result as often in a multi-member constituency. On the other hand, it's hard to argue with the higher turnouts, if that's what you want, and countries with the Single Transferable Vote do, on average, tend to get a higher turnout than those with FPTP. So do those countries with compulsory voting, of course. But would we really want to go down that road? Both Polly Toynbee<sup>xlvii</sup> and Simon Jenkins<sup>xlviii</sup> have argued for it, which almost makes the case

for leaving things be. Do we really want to fill our prisons with anti-voting martyrs and the homeless?

Peter Hain himself is an enthusiast for the alternative vote system, which, though preferable to most PR systems, still has a self-evident unfairness at its heart. Why is it right to count some votes twice or three or more times, while those who favour the top two candidates only get one? Perhaps a version of AV, in which all the votes of the candidates still in the race get counted twice, along with all the second choices of those that have already been discarded, would be more reasonable. However, I've never seen this suggested.

There is an even more radical system, though, and that is Approval Voting. This has never been used in a civil election, though it has been in a number of scientific societies, and is even used in the UN to elect the secretary-general. (Is that an argument in its favour, I wonder?) The only, but major, difference that Approval Voting has from FPTP is that instead of each voter having one vote, he has as many as he likes: that is he can vote, though once only, for as many of the candidates as he wants. So if he likes one candidate a lot he can just vote for him. If he likes two equally he can vote for both, if he dislikes one more than the rest he can just vote for all the others. There's something so pure and simple about it that there's bound to be something wrong with it. Indeed, one of the best arguments for it is that it is so subtle that I think it would really undermine the credibility of opinion pollsters. To get an accurate poll would be so much more expensive than it is now, and I can well imagine people keeping an open mind on how they vote right up until the day of polling itself. It would certainly keep me interested.

But like I say, none of these is a panacea. After all, just because you vote for someone doesn't mean you trust him. And you can mess around with the voting system all you like, but no matter what you do you can hardly guarantee ever getting your own political opinion to prevail. It's a besetting sin of those who are fascinated by politics to think that there are more people out there who agree with him than the bare facts suggest. That is not necessarily the case, and changing the system will not make it so.

There is something else here that needs to be considered: whatever the system, nothing is going to prevent close elections. Nothing can prevent routes, either. And are the former more valid than the latter? So long as there is one vote in each constituency, that is all that is needed. Political victories, like sporting ones are

as final with a victory of 1, as a victory of 1000. Does anyone trust a politician more because he had a landslide victory, or one that went to several recounts, whether he voted for him or not? What difference does it make? Indeed, even if we had the best voting system possible (whatever that is) how would that improve the calibre, or trustworthiness of our politicians?

In defence of our leaders, and I haven't done much of that so you may as well enjoy it while it lasts, but there is one further point I'd like to make, and that is, if you are a politician rather than a starry-eyed idealist like myself, you will sooner or later ask yourself what the point is of having political principles if people won't vote for you. Do you stick with those principles, in the hope that those who didn't vote will come back to you, or do you change, hoping to convert people who voted for other parties last time? Do the former, and you risk staying out of power forever; do the latter and you risk alienating those who have voted for you previously, and want to vote for you again but are waiting for you to rediscover your earlier, original beliefs. Among the non-voting former voters who inhabit the UK, there are millions of former Tories who are reluctant to vote Tory until they become an authoritarian party of lower taxes, and there are millions of former Labour party supporters who are reluctant to vote Labour again until they rediscover nationalisation and higher taxation. But the less likely either side is to vote, the less likely the political parties are going to accommodate them. In a two party system, which is what FPTP in effect is, elections are usually going to be fought in the middle ground, with the one exception being when a party thinks it can get more votes from those who didn't vote in the previous election than from those who did but voted differently. In reality, of course, they will always, with varying degrees of subtlety, try to court both sets of people, but if this becomes too obvious it gets derided as trying to be all things to all people. Naturally, to the diehard politico with fixed views this can look very devious and crooked.

# Cynicism

*"There is nothing you could say to me that I could ever believe."*

Gordon Brown to Tony Blair, Summer 2004

Close your eyes and imagine: it's 2025, and New Labour is still in power. Have you any idea what the UK will look like then? Will we have the Euro? What about the House of Lords? Will our universities have been privatised? Will there really be a Sure Start centre in every town, or will some of them have been privatised? Will people be charged for seeing their GP? Will the monarchy have been abolished? Will everyone have a patient passport? Will the EU still exist? Will gays be allowed to get married? Will the entire shadow cabinet be under house arrest charged with... well nobody knows what exactly? Will everyone have to carry ID cards, with special exemptions for pensioners and religious minorities?

You don't know, do you? Me neither. Why is this? Is this just because Tony Blair is such a slippery character that he could do anything? Or am I such a cynic that I refuse to countenance the possibility that he is good man doing a difficult job in difficult circumstances?

We can talk this one over till the cows come home. The discussion about whether Thatcher "cared" or not was one of the more stultifying conversations that people had during the eighties, and we'll no doubt be discussing the same about Blair till he finally packs it in. But that, I reckon, is beside the point. The point is that so long as governments do so much they're bound to make mistakes, whatever their stripe, no matter how much they care or not. Moreover, and I hate to sound like a stuck record on this, but it seems to me that this problem is especially pronounced with the current government's conflicted commitments to equality.

In essence, and simplifying massively, there are two egalitarian notions prevalent in public life at the moment:

1. Equality under the law, which assumes that individuals are all, prima facie, at any rate, equally morally worthwhile. A white man is no better than a black man. A man is no better than a woman. An able-bodied person is no better than a disabled

person. This does not mean that everyone is the same, has the same talents, abilities and needs and so on, but that we are all nonetheless of similar moral worth. Consequently we must all obey the same basic rules of law, which in turn must operate without partiality. *Prima facie*, at least, we are all equal under the law.

2. “Equality”, which proclaims, pays lip service to, and often even practises the notion of equality before the law, as defined in 1. But it also, simultaneously, believes that although this is a state we should aspire to, we ought not behave like that, because so many other people don’t, and they are the majority. All good people, therefore, ought in fact to discriminate on behalf of certain particular types of people in order to compensate for the evil of the majority. This is often, usually disparagingly, called political correctness. Its practitioners rather grandly prefer the term ‘social justice’. Sometimes they even call it ‘real equality’, or even ‘true equality’.

Who believes version two? New Labour groupies, Tory modernisers, Church of England bigwigs, tofu-eating, sandal-wearing lesbian outreach facilitators from Islington (I like clichés as much as anyone), anyone who works for the EU and the UN, the Commission for Racial Equality, and the editorial staff of the Guardian. Who doesn’t? Everyone else. Of course, not many of them would put it like this. They still tend to think of themselves as left-wing or at very least, as having sophisticated social consciences, indeed they often laughably refer to themselves as ‘liberals’. They’d also take grave exception to my claim that everyone else believes in equality under the law: on the contrary, they would say, the masses are Daily Mail-reading morons who would have voted for Hitler if they’d been given the chance, and that’s why they believe in 2. It’s only a temporary moral position, after all. *“Once the majority have swung round to Version 1, then we will too”*.

Well, it’s pretty different from what I regard as traditional left-wing beliefs. Certainly, it’s very different from helping the poor. Helping the poor at least has, among other advantages, the significant fact that its aspirations are at least measurable. Differences in financial outcome are things that can be calculated, and the absolute poor, by definition, are suffering. But the redefining of the poor, the new poor, as it were, as a diffuse collection of blacks, gays, women, the old, the disabled, and pretty much everyone who isn’t white, male, and heterosexual is a lot less

plausible, and mercurial. Are rich, powerful women more oppressed than a white working-class man? Sometimes. And, sometimes too, a rich black man is more deserving of government concern than a white working-class man. Trying to figure out who comes bottom in the hierarchy of oppression can be a very complicated business.

This theory also requires its believers to switch between how he treats members of these ‘oppressed’ groups. Either, people are all the same and must be treated the same; or, we are all different and must be treated differently. Not surprisingly, the can cause some pretty nasty in-fighting, trying to decide what should be done in which particular instance. Not surprisingly too, this is a lousy way to run a government. One moment schools are supposed to be inclusive, the next they are supposed to have a zero tolerance policy on the disruptive. One moment hospitals are supposed to contain mixed-sex wards, the next they are supposed to be segregated. The same goes for the religious, the mentally ill, the disabled, and pretty much every minority. Either they’re different, and need to be treated differently, or they’re the same, and must be treated just like everybody else.

The argument about multiculturalism is a good illustration of the debate and how it meanders. For thirty years the Commission for Racial Equality has been celebrating diversity, on the grounds that whites and blacks are different. Then, lo and behold, in 2003, the Commission’s chairman Trevor Phillips blithely announces that this was a mistake: apparently we’re all the same after all. Consequently, he was now in favour of assimilation. Never mind all those people who had previously been arguing the case for assimilation and had been damned as racists. Now, apparently, integrationism was fashionable. What had previously been racist was now deemed to be politically correct<sup>xlix</sup>. Yet in March 2005 Phillips reverted to type, suggesting this time that black schoolboys should be educated away from white ones<sup>1</sup>. I suppose it would be naïve of anyone to think that he would be consistent on this issue. No other ‘liberal’ is. So why should he be?

How has it come to this? Largely, I think it was because the left overreached itself. Bored with fighting the class war, it turned its attention to gender, race, and cultural issues. In practical terms, however, this became far too ambitious a programme for day-to-day politics. New Labour soon realised that it never would be able to pay for all the cultural stuff without seriously raising tax, and if one thing unites the neosocialists more than anything it is their fervent belief that the Great

British Public don't like paying income tax. So instead of trying to make our health and education good enough for everyone, it has decided to target the special interest groups instead. This alienates Old Labour supporters who regard New Labour as a bunch of unprincipled political magpies. It also bemuses the rest of us, even those who have benefited from it, because they dislike the subterfuge. Also, they won't always benefit from it, and know it. One moment our minorities are the objects of obsequious hand wringing, the next, away goes the carrot, and out comes the censorious stick.

Of course, it isn't just New Labour. Most Old European governments have been at it for years, though they're really ratcheting things up right now. As an example, look at article 23 of the proposed EU Constitution, which explains that:

*"Equality between men and women must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work, and pay."*

You can't fault it for ambition. However, later on in the same article, we are told:

*"The principle of equality shall not prevent the maintenance or adoption of measures providing for specific advantages in favour of the under-represented sex."*

Whatever else this is, it is not equality before the law.

The trouble (although it's also great fun, if you're psychotic), policy-wise, with defining equality in this loose, self-cancelling, and contradictory way, is that it gives you carte blanche. It is so elastic that more or less anything goes. This is great news for those in power. For those out of it, or for those who aren't power-crazed it merely befuddles.

After all, if a political party can do a 180 degree u-turn and then say that nothing has changed it does tend to treat the voting public with a certain disdain, doesn't it? It doesn't exactly make us trust them, either, because trust requires a certain degree of predictability. People on the whole like to think that politicians stand for things, and have bottom lines beyond which they won't go. With such a quicksilver definition of equality, trust just disappears. This kind of equality can take you anywhere.

But then, does any of this matter? Indeed, let's be even more cynical and wonder, how much really, do politicians want to be trusted? After all, if people really



did trust politicians, then politicians would have to do what they said there were going to do in their manifestos. They'd have to be reliable. They couldn't change their minds so much. They'd have to be judged on their promises more. Consequently, they'd have to resign when things went wrong. How many of them would really want that?

You think I'm being unfair? Think, then of the politicians. I'm just writing about them. They're the ones slugging it out, day in day out, having to pretend that they really care all the time, that they think the world of their constituents, and that they can change their minds and that nothing has changed.

It's all very well for the ones at the top. They're the ones who have all the fun, inventing all the policies. But what about the non-entities, like former sports minister Tony Banks, who left this passing shot in 2004 as he prepared to leave the House of Commons:

*"I most certainly won't miss the constituency work. I've got to tell you that honestly.*

*"It's 22 years of the same cases, but just the faces and the people changing. I found it intellectually numbing, tedious in the extreme.*

*"It might sound a little disparaging to say this about people's lives and their problems and we did deal with them ... but I got no satisfaction from this at all. I really didn't.*

*"And all you were was a sort of high-powered social worker and perhaps not even a good one. So I won't miss that".<sup>li</sup>*

Well, my compassion for plight of suffering humanity is pretty much bottomless, but even this is a bit of a stretch for me. I wonder what Banks expected? A bunch of toga-clad greybeards all earnestly discussing the meaning of life? I thought that's what he wanted to be, a high-powered social worker.

Yet, as Banks dimly recognises, the relentless triviality of politicians does bring them into disrepute. Worrying about how much sugar, salt and fat we should have in our diet is demeaning. Considering we're supposed to be in the midst of a War on Terror, it does seem rather bizarre what preoccupies these people. Doesn't all this micro-management distract from other matters? There has got to be some aspect of our lives that is free from political concern. I'm just not clear with our current government where that exactly is.

Still, I do think there are some signs that all is not well within the political class. For all its enormous majority, the New Labour Elite seem remarkably paranoid.

Collapse is part of its recurring nightmare, I suppose. What goes up must come down, and the Labour party could suffer an electoral wipeout much like the one they inflicted on the Tories. After all, it may be part of their strategy to create a paranoid society, but that is only because they are even more paranoid than the rest of us. Why are they so paranoid? Because there is at least a part of them that realises that their firmly-held beliefs aren't worth anything. This isn't just a paranoia borne of self-seeking and careering, this is a paranoia borne of intellectual paralysis.

The cracks are beginning to appear. Do the leftists really think that a 16 year old paper boy should get the same pay as a 65 year old captain of industry? Do they really think the government knows how best to educate a child than does that child's parents? Put like that, no, and I'm caricaturing, but seeing as I haven't seen it expressed better, I'll stick with the caricature, because it illustrates my somewhat uneasy feeling that this ill-defined concept of equality, as a state-imposed, centralised template for everyone, far from being an idea so discredited that all it needs is a little nudge before it falls by the wayside, has actually become a glue that keeps society together. It may not be rational, it may be capricious, unpredictable, and unjust, but in a way that is seen to be a good thing. If it all came too easy, there might be something selfish about it. To this extent, the quality of what the public gets doesn't really matter. Equality matters more. In spite of all the historical evidence it is a remarkably resilience notion, and only sustains, I suspect, because without it, the fear is that we are just a bunch of arbitrarily-collected individuals who just happen to share the same geography. After all, how many people in ancient Sparta thought the idea of shared mealtimes actually guaranteed the people the best food in the world? That wasn't the issue. It was the same food that was important to them, because sharing the same food gave them a shared identity, a shared community. Neal Lawson, chair of the left-wing pressure group Compass puts it well:

*“It is not just our individual experience of the service that matters, but the very fact that we are all treated the same, have equal worth and equal value. It is the benefit derived from points of common experience, where the values of equality and collectivism take precedent over those of competition and greed”<sup>lii</sup>.*

This yearning for community presumably explains the rancour with which they tend to greet people who opt out of state-controlled health and education. It's all a bit like sailing on the Titanic. It may not be the best ship in the ocean, it may not get

their quicker, but at least we're going together, and if we all pool our resources, or better, are forced to pool our resources, then it's kind of unlikely that we will actually hit the iceberg. Far better that way, then if we all go to sea in our own privately-owned sloops, speedboats, and canoes. Who knows where that could lead us.

But what happens when the Titanic does hit the iceberg? When, for example, was the last time you heard anyone claim that the NHS was the envy of the world? Or that we had the best police force in the world?

After all, political ideals are not very complicated. It takes two minutes to explain classical liberalism to people, another two to explain socialism. Each side gets the other sides arguments, and if they don't, they're just being obtuse. What largely settles it is that they don't like them *emotionally*. People just weigh them up and decide which ones they like the more. People do get classical liberal ideals; they just aren't particularly fashionable right now. The statist who reject them do know that part of the deal is that you have to rely on politicians more: you need more politicians, you need more rules and laws. These are inevitable. But it's when the defects seriously and obviously outweigh the benefits that the political class ought to start worrying. For many that hasn't yet happened. But so long as the statist carry on bungling things the more likely and sooner the whole edifice will crumble. Who knows, perhaps libertarian capitalism will suddenly appear cool among the young. Perhaps it will be their teenage rebellion against their NHS-loving, pension-hungry parents. "*State control? That was just so twentieth century*".

So, forgetting all the moral/political/philosophical arguments for free markets, maybe the practical argument will prove the most compelling. There's no way of knowing, but I suspect so much of the hostility against liberalism is because it appears to benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. So maybe things will just have to get worse before they get better *for the poor*. Maybe schools will have to pump out 40% illiterates before the tide turns and they get privatised. Likewise, maybe we will have to look forward to a few thousand more patients being killed every year by MRSA before the political class own up and admit that state control of healthcare isn't the only way, let alone the best way. Maybe the political elite which currently defends the status quo will only give up on it when it's the poor who turn against it.

## Conclusions

*"It is often said people feel disengaged from politics - I don't believe that's true. There is no shortage of interest, and in some cases passionate concern, about the issues of the day.*

*"People aren't disengaged - but they do feel disempowered. They no longer want or expect government to solve all their problems.*

*"They want the means in their hands to lead their own lives, make their own choices, develop their own potential.*

*"People don't want a minimalist state, but nor do they want the old centralised state. Instead, they want the state to empower them, to give them the means to make the most of their own lives."*

Tony Blair, Napier University, December 2004.

The trouble, of course, with my analysis, is that, for all my bellyaching, the government (as I write, it's March 2005) is remarkably popular. And my subtitle, *Politicians and why we hate them* should therefore be interpreted with some irony. Clearly, a lot of people don't hate them at all. And that 'we' is a bit problematic. There are a lot of different people collected under that umbrella term. Moreover, even I don't so much as hate them as regard them much as they seem to regard us, as recalcitrant children who don't know any better. And if people (that's a better term) disliked them as much as opinion polls regularly profess they do, then why do they keep placing their hope in them? Why do they want more of them? And why do they want them to have even more power than they already have?

It's all very well for me to quote the more rumbustious rhetoric flowing from Tony Blair. I could have found similarly overblown language emanating from Margaret Thatcher too ("Where there is discord may we bring harmony", anyone?). She won three elections in a row, in spite of being far more hated than Blair has ever managed. As for my statistics and examples, well they can be mangled anyway you want them. I dare say there are some people who could stare at the same ones as I have and conclude that in fact this is a spectacularly successful government.

So, to return again to the original question - do the failings in health, education and crime affect the way people trust their politicians - then it seems to me the answer is in fact, a resounding "no". At least, not specifically. Obviously,

whenever a politician makes a mistake, fails, or otherwise is not the paragon of perfection he affects to be it will undermine trust, but usually the response is a simple shrug of the shoulders and a request for more of the same. *“These things happen. What exactly did you expect, anyway? Politicians, they’re all hopeless”*. How many people, save for a few eccentrics like me, actually think it’s the system itself that is at fault, rather than the individual moral failings of the people themselves? When you look at the oddball political parties that occasionally do threaten the establishment, they are invariably big government types: Kilroy-Silk, the former Labour MP who now runs Veritas, UKIP, which wants to renationalise the railways, and the BNP, which is very big on the NHS and state education (albeit only for those of a certain racial extraction). These guys do not sing from the Milton Friedman songbook.

Sometimes you do just have to hand it to Tony Blair. The quote at the top of this chapter sums up so well what so many want to hear. His philosophy justifies state interference in everything, whilst at the same time gives him the option of throwing his hands in the air and proclaiming that it’s not his fault: it’s nothing to do with him. It does take a kind of genius. I’m not now at this late stage going to start backtracking and say how great New Labour have been, and I know that this paper might have tended to appear to be slightly partisan, tending as it has to focus on its deficiencies rather than those of its predecessors. But New Labour is the party that’s been in power the last eight years, and look to be so for another few yet. Let’s be clear, there was even a part of me that celebrated the demise of the Tories back in 1997. Having to defend John Major was becoming quite a chore, and when Labour got in on a thumping landslide I was rather pleased on one score anyway. At least Blair could do what he liked without blaming his backbenchers and his wafer-thin majority.

Still, if I were a New Labour adviser (not something that’s likely to happen for a couple of years yet, I would have thought) I’d nonetheless tell them to ease up on the bossiness. There’s bound to be a backlash against all this, so they may as well be the one to reap the electoral dividend. Or maybe Blair is planning to leave that one as a parting present for Gordon Brown, so that when he finally gets his hands on the prize he has been craving all these years, he can twitter on about how *“Perhaps our only mistake was talking down to people, not giving them enough leeway, not allowing them to make enough decisions for themselves. The British people do not want to live in a nanny state”*.

Of course, what New Labour have twigged, and it's something I have finally got used to as I reach my twilight years, is that a lot of people do indeed want to live in a nanny state. However, they just don't want to admit to it because it makes them sound dependent and pathetic, so they dress it up with words like compassion and start making appeal to their rights, and make fanciful claims that the only reason they go along with this stuff is because they want to help the poor, rather than (heaven forbid) themselves. But a nanny state – and I defy anyone who thinks that a government which doesn't include within its remit the duty to look after its citizens from cradle to the grave to argue that it isn't one – is what we are lumbered with.

You could, of course, argue that within that remit, there are different types of nanny state. True enough, I suppose. Certainly, the one we've got now doesn't seem to me to offer much. I don't see how any system can work, or can even be improved that extols both excellence and equality of outcome as twin goals. You could have a relatively liberal welfare system provided it didn't venerate equality of outcome. You could have a relatively egalitarian system provided it didn't venerate excellence. But both?

Still, that's only me, and I've only got one vote. But to believe in New Labour, you do have to swallow an awful lot of.... Let's call them contradictions. For a start, you must never acknowledge that inequality of both opportunity and outcome is a necessary corollary of freedom. You must also believe that fighting inequality and fighting poverty are identical aims. Also, you have to seriously believe that not everyone dreams of untold riches, save perhaps for a few eccentrics like the monks on Caldey Island.

The startling truth that inequality is the price you pay for freedom, that there's nothing wrong with it anyway, and that in a free society people ought to be able to choose their own lifestyles, and if that means some people choose paths that don't make them rich, well that's way too adventurous: it sounds uncaring.

So, we're lumbered. Maybe the counterarguments will one day spring up. Maybe the penny will drop, and our political leaders will one day acknowledge that not everyone wants a plasma screen television or to have a holiday home in Tuscany. Some people want to be gypsies and bohemians. Like the religious cults of yesteryear, they have chosen a non-materialistic way of life that differs from others and ought to be respected, not shunned because they don't conform to the narrow social norms demanded by egalitarianism.

The trouble with this admitting this, though, is that it would take half the fun out of being a politician. Ordering people around, setting targets and seeing if they can reach them or not, that's what gets them out of bed in the morning. On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 we were told by UNICEF that there are seven million children currently growing up in poverty in the UK<sup>liii</sup>. Well, you can believe that if you want to. But imagine what would happen if politicians decided to define poverty more credibly. Imagine what would happen if it said that there were only seven hundred thousand. How long could they go on justifying their control of our health and education if that came to pass, do you think? How much more likely too, that they could actually do something about it?

Opposition parties aren't yet prepared to make the case themselves, and so are just left on the sidelines, pleading in their lacklustre, ineffectual way that they'll make things better by tinkering with the system. Thus they promise a new broom, to cut down on waste, to sweep away red tape, to give more autonomy to local people etc. If things are too centralised, then they ought to be localised. If things are too local, the new minister promises centralisation, standards and targets. Then, when they have decided that centralisation causes more problems than it solves they announce that we can't have a "one size fits all policy" and what we need is more autonomy. And so the merry-go-round starts again.

I realise, of course, that I am on dangerous ground here, running perilously close to saying that the masses are completely stupid and selfish. If only. Actually, it's more complicated than that. Rather, what I think is that most people are not idealists, and do not spend their waking hours worrying about civil liberties, freedom, responsibility and the role of the state. Instead they start from where we are. The government has all these powers. Very well: how do we make the most of it?

So they've accepted the system. It isn't going to change, so we may as well get used to it. But there is a price to be paid for this. The state must control, the state must order, and the people must obey. So whatever else statism is, it is not a very optimistic theory. It is not a 'live and let live' view of the world. It assumes that we need to be protected, and therefore, we need to be policed. Above all, we must all believe that we ourselves are stand-up regular guys; it's just everybody else who isn't. Paranoia is a natural human state, I suppose. It's unfortunate, to say the least, when it is encouraged by politicians.

So, what, in an ideal world, what should we do? Or rather, what, exactly, would I do? Well, just for starters, I'd start by leaving the UN, the EU, and renounce our membership of the ECHR. Alternatively, if that is too much to stomach, then we may as well plunge straight in. The EU is more important than any EU national government now, so we may as well stop deluding ourselves that this is not the case. Either leave it, or embrace it. If we do leave, though, I wouldn't stop trading with them. If we could trade with South Africa throughout apartheid, I don't see why we couldn't carry on trading with France and Germany. The sad, irrefutable truth is that our current European partners are even more committed to state-control than we are. Anyone who prices liberty above equality, and anyone who favours minimum government and self-reliance would try to have as little as possible to do with those guys for the foreseeable future.

I know there are some who have a rather romantic hope that all the Eastern European nations who have just joined will somehow dilute the egalitarian cravings of Old Europe. Having cast off the yoke of Communism they wouldn't want to join another totalitarian agglomeration so goes the argument. For example, at the moment, according to the Human Rights Act, we all have a right to life (How very generous of them, we might think). At the moment this means that capital punishment is off limits, abortion is justifiable, and euthanasia... well who knows. But that's not to say that in twenty years' time this will still be the case. Perhaps capital punishment will have been restored and abortion illegalised. Human rights can be interpreted every which way, can't they? Remember, these people are flexible, and if the people want social conservatism, in big enough numbers, they will give it. Once you start thinking that say, there aren't enough black people in Parliament, it doesn't take much to start thinking that in fact there are too many. Ordering people about is addictive, and they won't give that up without a fight. So perhaps it will all swing the other way, and the EU will in ten years' time announce that we need another constitution, another tidying up exercise which will be even more totalitarian than the new one but with some more overt social authoritarianism thrown into the mix. But I won't be holding my breath for it, and I certainly won't be looking forward to it either. I like my social conservatism mixed with a large dose of indifference, and I can't see the EU doing anything in an indifferent manner. It just isn't its style.

In the mean time, solely as damage limitation, I think we should also abolish the Commission for Equality and Human Rights; this commission hasn't actually



started operating yet, which is at least an advantage. It intends to be an amalgam of all the other anti-discrimination bodies forced into one happy family, but it surely won't be long before its constituent parts start squabbling among themselves, each victim group trying to claim that they are more oppressed than the other. We could I suppose, replace the whole body with a new one, and call it the Liberal Opportunity Commission, whose duty it would be to hunt down any government ministry or quango that puts equality of opportunity or equality of outcome ahead of equality under the law. A system of advice, fines, and threats of closure ought to do the trick. Again, it should only operate in the public sector. Private companies should be free to do what they like on this score: if they want to promote equality then that is their lookout. Perhaps Roger Scruton or Peter Hitchens should be offered the job as chairman, with the prospect of a massive salary, pension and keys to the executive bathroom as bait. The risk, of course, is that it would soon get invaded by the egalitarians and become as entrenched and corrupt as all the others, so perhaps it should only be given a remit to operate for ten years before it self-destructs.

Or perhaps none of this will be necessary, and there will be an 1848 style series of revolutions across Europe, as discredited socialist governments collapse one by one as people watch with envy the rise of India and China, with thousands of 'liberals' taking to the hills shouting: "*Hey, we really were liberals. We'd have given you small government. We'd have rolled back the frontiers of the state, if that's what you'd wanted. Honest*". The rolling out of democracy in the Middle East right now is a thing to behold. Maybe Iraq and the Lebanon will soon become free market utopias to which Old Europe looks with envy and confusion.

I suppose it is possible that I am being unduly pessimistic. Maybe the EU will rally round around the Constitution, and become a delightful, Swedish-style liberal democracy, with the most compassionate welfare state in the world, the highest taxes, and the happiest people all realising their own potential, with oodles and oodles of equality, sexual, racial, and otherwise. We doomsayers have, after all, been at it for years, predicting the total financial, cultural, and moral collapse of the West. It hasn't happened yet, or if it has, we're still surviving, and we British can at least console ourselves that the UK, at any rate, is far better off than the rest of Europe. Moreover, they're used to it. They fight each other, they have a history of mass unemployment and political turmoil that just doesn't happen in Britain, so in comparison we're okay.

Sure, Germany is smouldering with mass unemployment right now, but it has these moments every generation or so, with no lasting harm.

Still, problems remain. Among the political class lies the taboo, though pertinent and quite pressing question as how do we get to wind down the welfare state without anyone noticing. I can't see it happening overnight even if we aren't in the EU, and I don't suppose it's a regular issue at cabinet, but I imagine it soon will be. Perhaps a gradual wasting away over ten or fifteen years ought not prove too scary. How we get from A to B is the big question. From socialism to liberalism with as little pain as possible has been the big private debate on-going in Tory circles the past 25 years, and probably takes place in the more *recherché* pastures of the Labour Party. They're doing a pretty brilliant job of killing it with kindness at the moment, but sooner or later a politician will come along and admit what the rest of us will by then have already figured out: that it can't be saved, and shouldn't perhaps be saved. Then the question will be: should any of it remain?

Perhaps there ought to be a poor law just for the incapable – meaning just the mentally ill and the physically ill. I appreciate that this would be exploited much as incapacity benefit has over the last eight years. It also gives the state a ghastly power over those who need help. We know how demeaning means tested benefit is to its recipients. If we have to have state involvement in welfare, far better to err on the side of profligacy and give to the undeserving than to have people prostrate themselves before the benefit officials. I know Hayek and other libertarian philosophers have attempted to justify state interference in welfare matters, but he'd never spent ten hours waiting on a hospital trolley. Frankly, I'd close the whole thing down. The free market is just so good at distributing goods to where it is needed, and the state so bad, that I'm sure it would do it better. It does everything else better, after all.

How about privatising education? Clearly, the health service is hopeless, but it doesn't seem quite such a basket case yet. With 20% of the population being illiterate, that is the more urgent priority. Of course, if 20% of patients visiting their GPs or going into hospital never came back alive, then I'd certainly want to pull the plug on the NHS as well. But hey, Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither will be the Capitalist Paradise. There might even be a happy side-effect of privatisation. The schools might start to teach interesting subjects again, and so the children who attend them might become less bored. This, in turn, might even reduce the crime rate: few

people who have spent over ten years in a state school without even learning to read can be particularly intimidated by a couple of years in a prison cell.

The compensation culture, when aimed at the public sector, should be encouraged. Given that the state has decided to oversee the individual's freedom, it really ought to pay up when it fails. A few class actions on behalf of the illiterate against the ministry of education might stir things up a bit. Perhaps they could be brought under the Human Rights Act. In the private sector, however, it must be squashed. This is why it would be a good idea if freedom of contract returned as a worthwhile political goal. If the contract fails, then sue. If it's fulfilled, then you have no grounds for complaint. And freedom of association? That's the whole bedrock of a free society, and if that means freedom to discriminate then so be it. They are the same thing after all, and there's little point in pretending otherwise.

Yes. It's a long shot I know. But if anyone in power actually put any of these things into practice I have little doubt that respect and trust for our political processes would increase. Even if you regard this as demented idealism, and think that the state really ought to be in the schools and hospitals business, you do at least have to accept that by giving them all this control trust becomes a bigger issue than it otherwise ought. If say, the government were solely in control of crime and foreign policy, then it would only be on these matters that it would be judged. Then, with fewer things to concern it, it's vaguely possible the government might find it easier to concentrate on the more important stuff. As things stand, and given that our current government is only too keen to be involved in education, health, pensions, broadcasting, even how much salt we have with our chips, then the greater we need to trust it. It's the difference between putting a fiver on the Grand National and half your life savings. The way things are now, we're forced into, if not trusting them, at least wanting to trust them, a lot more than should be necessary.

For some of us, of course, it may well be the case that we get a worse service out of the deal. We might have a very good school nearby, and the closest hospital might not be a hotbed of MRSA. We would, of course, be paying less tax, but the end product we would now be paying directly for might conceivably be worse. Still, at least we can always console ourselves with the simple fact that if they didn't like the school our child goes to, we can just take him out of it. We wouldn't have to justify ourselves to some social worker, some school governor or some headmaster, any

more than I have to explain myself to anyone if I decide to frequent a different Indian restaurant. We can't change a Prime Minister like that.

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