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Paul Twivy photographed by *The Times* commenting on the UK riots in 2011.

## Introduction: Why it's time for a new kind of politics, business and volunteering

**W**HEN YOU STAND BACK and draw breath, there is little real democracy in the United Kingdom, despite a long and vibrant democratic tradition.

The 'mother of all parliaments' is neglecting her children.

The theory is that the UK Parliament is the coming together

of 650 MPs representing, on average, almost 100,000 constituents each. Issues and solutions should therefore be able to rise bottom-up as well as top-down.

The reality is that MPs aren't representative: only twenty-seven MPs are from ethnic minority backgrounds and only 147 are women. Many are career politicians with little experience of the working-day world about which they make decisions.

Political strategy for the 2015 general election seems to already be focusing on fourteen marginal seats and as few as 220,000 swing voters who might determine the outcome of a complex, four- or five-party contest.

The major political parties reduce the ability of MPs to genuinely represent the views of their local constituents, with the whip system forcing them to toe the line on so many issues. No longer is Parliament an aggregate of local needs debated at national level.

Most people in the UK feel most of the time as if they are watching the spectacle of a small body of powerful people or organisations make the real decisions behind closed doors. They have lost the knowledge of how to influence and the habit of trying. They need to re-develop a sense of how their individual actions make a difference.

Voting once every five years is not the same as democracy. 'Interactive, responsive government' is an aspiration cherished by many, promised by a number of political leaders, including our last three prime ministers, but definitely not yet a reality.

In 2010/11, according to the Citizenship Survey by the Department for Communities and Local Government

(DCLG), fewer than four in ten people – 38 per cent – felt they could influence decisions in their local area, despite three-quarters of them – 74 per cent – saying it was important. Forty-four per cent want to be more involved in decisions made by their council.

Only one in three people – 34 per cent – participated in civic life in the last twelve months. Participation includes simply contacting an elected representative such as a councillor or MP; two-thirds of people had no contact.<sup>1</sup>

Only 3 per cent of people attend public meetings, although this tells you as much about how they are conducted and publicised as much as anything else.

So there is a widespread thirst for participation in democracy – and it isn't being quenched.

Thinking about the other end of the telescope, many have talked about the lack of real power even at the centre of political life. Rory Stewart has said that being an MP is the most powerless position he has ever held and wrote memorably:

This is the age of *The Wizard of Oz*, you know. In the end you get behind the curtain and you finally meet the wizard – and there's this tiny, frightened figure. I think

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1 As an interesting footnote, Eric Pickles, supposedly one of the champions of the Big Society, cancelled the citizenship survey from which these facts derive. This was supposedly because it was complex – so complex that it had already run very smoothly for ten years! Perhaps Mr Pickles was worried about what it might show in relation to the Big Society's effects, or lack thereof, which it was perfectly equipped to measure.

every prime minister has sort of said this since Blair. You get there and you pull the lever, and nothing happens.

So this system is not working for anyone: neither the tiny minority apparently in power nor the powerless majority. It's time to tear down the Berlin Wall between politicians and citizens and reconnect. The United Kingdom invented modern parliamentary democracy. We now need to reinvent it.

The Tories created the rhetoric of the Big Society without delivering on the substance or enabling mechanisms. It sounded very welcome, for example, that a petition with 100,000 signatures could trigger a parliamentary debate. In reality, these debates are usually staged on a Friday when most MPs are in their constituencies.

Participatory budgeting doesn't happen nearly enough, and when it does it's often confined to a single area of spending, such as childcare. The demands on councils to publish all their spending has often simply resulted in laundry lists that even the most time-rich and determined citizen activist would struggle to build into a coherent picture of priorities.

In an age where people can interrogate most companies and products online as well as elsewhere, government still remains largely remote and inscrutable. We need to create new links between individuals and government.

This is akin to retraining the neural pathways or muscles in a damaged human body so that the brain can once again move the hands.

We need to consciously map out the concentric circles

of influence that spread outwards from the epicentre of our personal lives and flow inwards from the global effects of climate change, limited resources, international trade, so that we know how we can participate and influence again.

We now face the most unsatisfactory general election imaginable. UKIP is growing in popularity and has won its first parliamentary seat. Its potency is in saying no to political correctness ‘because it stifles free speech’ – epitomised by Nigel Farage, the man with the blunt opinions and a pint of beer surgically attached to one hand.

In an age that still adheres to Blair and Campbell’s inheritance of strict political whipping and sophisticated media training, never has nothing been said by so many politicians at such great length. So brevity and clarity and down-to-earth language such as UKIP’s shine, but how deceptively.

UKIP has some positive things to say, such as: ‘Teach children positive messages and pride in their country.’ They have some potentially sensible individual policies, such as the creation of new grammar schools, which could increase social mobility if handled properly, and locally elected county health boards to inspect hospitals. They also support regular, Swiss-style referenda that involve the public in key issues and open the window to the fresh air of public opinion in the stuffy, cloistered world of Parliament (and yes, I do realise that MPs hold surgeries with their constituents and visit factories and hospitals!) However, look at the hatred lurking within UKIP...

Look at the ignorance of wanting to scrap all green taxes;

the reactionary nimbyism of scrapping wind turbine subsidies because they are popularly viewed as an eyesore, doubtless from the pub window; yet the confident assertion that shale gas is perfectly fine.

UKIP preach for British workers to be given first crack at jobs that we all know many British workers already rejected and which we have all relied on immigrants to do. Worst of all is their desire to cut foreign aid, one of the defining things that stop this small island becoming just that. Of course it must be rigorously checked that it doesn't get wasted or mis-directed, but let's be realistic: UKIP is the face of xenophobia and protectionism.

Hang your heads in shame, Mr Farage & co., when you ask that immigrants must financially support themselves for five years with private education, private housing and private healthcare, with access to the UK denied unless there is evidence of private health insurance.

This is to deny the NHS (except, graciously, in emergencies) to immigrants, who form a large proportion of its staff. Is this what UKIP would have done to the waves of needy immigrants who have been welcomed to these shores and, as in the USA, have considerably enriched its culture and economic wealth?

Give me your tired, your poor,  
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:

BE YOUR OWN POLITICIAN

I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

– *Emma Lazarus, as inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York*

Dare send me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to rape our state,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,

Keep out, the homeless, EU-tossed to Britain Great.

I lift my pint beside the old saloon door.

– *Nigel Farage (imagined)*

Can Cameron, the great centre-right reformer, be seriously considering an electoral pact with UKIP? His uncoded tax cuts to the middle class whilst freezing the benefits of 8.5 million people who are poor certainly looks like pragmatism to win a majority of the right-leaning at all costs. It also looks foolish, as the deficit, despite good early progress, has not been cut at all this year.

How sad is it that Ed Miliband, sincere and brave though he has been in many fights he has taken on and individual policies he has promoted, should be retreating to a safe Old Labour heartland, hoping that the maths of smaller Labour constituencies will win him enough seats to scrape in or to form a coalition if needed?

The truth is that as left and right separate more and more, and the Liberal Democrats implode and simply hope to stay in power by holding its balance, politics needs to move beyond tribal loyalties.

Left and right are not the issue any more, just as Green should no longer be a party but rather a universal strategy. We need to re-dimensionalise and reinvent politics altogether.

If nothing else, irrefutable maths requires this. The irrefutable maths that we have a maximum of forty years to save the planet, the next ten being the most critical. The irrefutable maths that we need to actively engage the NHS staff and the public to resolve the funding gap for the NHS by being proactively involved in everything from better diets and more exercise to improve health; to constant improvement of care by pooling the observations and ideas of front-line staff; to deciding whether we charge for specific services or circumstances. Thirty per cent of people who turn up to A&E are there because of alcohol, for example. Should they be challenged to change their behaviour or face being charged or, at least, put at the back of the queue?

The irrefutable maths is that we have only reduced the budget deficit from a peak of £162.7 billion in 2009/10 to £102.3 billion in 2013/14, despite the promise by George Osborne to reduce it to £37 billion by 2015, thereby, in his mind, balancing the enormous books on sturdy Tory knees. In fact, the deficit is likely to be cut by only a further £5 billion in 2014/15 to a predicted £97 billion. Our cumulative government debt has risen now to the point where it is almost £24,000 per person, or £57,000 per household. That is our collective, national debt expressed in personal terms.

The numbers reflect not just the economic facts but also the lack of a powerful ideology to inspire people, to bind us

as citizens into a common purpose. No politicians try to raise our individual or national self-esteem. No politicians invite us to improve the delivery of services in the profession or sector in which we work, or give us the tools by which to achieve it. Yet the technology to enable all of us to be involved has never been more plentiful.

If you want to improve the traffic flow and road safety in any UK city, why not give 500 taxi drivers, bus drivers, cyclists and home delivery drivers the means of recording ideas, taking photos, feeding in live data via devices in their vehicles and a dedicated website? Why not balance this with the views of 500 able-bodied and disabled pedestrians/users of public transport? The same principle applies to all services and aspects of our public life.

Income tax revenue this year has barely increased since the previous year, despite one million more people being in employment and unemployment falling to its lowest level since 2008, because so much of that employment is low-paid work on zero-hour contracts.

This means that *all* businesses need to pay their proper taxes. It means all tax loopholes for the wealthy need to be shut. It means re-banding council tax even if it is complicated and labour-intensive to set up. It means businesses need to do much more than just pay lip-service via corporate social responsibility: they need to act as societies themselves and see their societal and commercial purpose as a unified whole.

It also means that we need to start supporting social entrepreneurs more, seeing charities and social enterprises as

intellectual property owners and cost-effective solvers of social problems as well as humane, not-for-profit organisations.

Finally, it means a radical reinvention of action-oriented politics.

Scotland has just rejected independence and re-embraced the union of the United Kingdom on new, more devolved terms promised solemnly by the three main UK party leaders, by a vote of 55 per cent to 45 per cent. The turnout, at almost 85 per cent, was the highest in any UK election since 1951 and demonstrates that when crucial issues that eclipse party politics and relate to fundamental identity and collective ambition are put to the vote, the electricity of true democracy returns.

It has been compelling and uplifting to see the passion, the soul- and fact-searching and the high and intelligent standard of debate. It was particularly moving to see many sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds asking incisive questions: reasons to be optimistic for years to come.

As we discovered in a much more modest way in our Your Square Mile communities across the UK, the importance and power of well-run public meetings and debates cannot be underestimated, and the Scottish referendum proved this. Issues become real when they come attached to people. Face-to-face assemblies are still the truest form of 'social media' for spreading, hearing and strengthening new ideas.

People in Scotland, as elsewhere, are utterly fed up with so many decisions being made remotely in Westminster. At an even more local level, the Scottish islands still feel that

Edinburgh is pretty remote as well, even if it is preferable to Westminster.

In other words, people are starting to declare very passionately the level at which they feel they can genuinely have a say and need to have an influence. It seems to have strong echoes of what the ancient Greeks felt about cradling democracy in Athens: that once you get beyond 15,000 to 20,000 people – the *polis* or city from which the name ‘politics’ is derived – it’s difficult for people to really feel they have influence.

We need many more mayors leading cities; much more participatory budgeting by local authorities; a north of England and a Midlands Assembly; citizens’ juries and regular votes and informed debates, both digitally and in public meetings, on issues as critical as immigration, food poverty, the housing crisis, care for the elderly and the future of the NHS. That way we can live up to what the Athenians created and held dear: true democracy.

This book is about how each and every one of us can change the UK. It is built on a rephrasing of John F. Kennedy: ‘Ask both what your country can do for you and what you can do for your country.’ The world thrives on mutual self-interest rather than pure selflessness. It is in the mutual self-interest of the state and the citizen to form a new relationship of collaboration.

The Occupy movement has drawn much attention to vital, democratic causes and inequalities in London, New York, Hong Kong and elsewhere. I am interested in the 64.1 million of us who do occupy the UK in becoming Occupy UK: a

collective movement to improve our lives and society for all. This might be naïve and ambitious, but how do we ever progress without naïve, ambitious ideas?

Part One of this book is my experience of how to successfully conduct public campaigns and start social movements. This draws on my experience as an advisor to Comic Relief for twenty-five years; as one of the founders of TimeBank; as the editor and collator of *Change the World for a Fiver*; as the co-founder of The Big Lunch with Tim Smit; as the founder of Your Square Mile; and as the one-time CEO of the ill-fated but instructive Big Society Network.

I have visited 10 Downing Street some thirty-five to forty times over three decades, but I have picked out ten visits that have been significant and revealing: *Ten to Ten*. I have tried to describe the centre of power in this country from the point of view of someone who has never run for, or held, political office.

My journey behind the shiny, terrorist-proof, steel black door with the distinctive squashed oval ‘o’ in ‘10’ stretches from tackling Margaret Thatcher on the NHS, to working extensively with Gordon Brown on tackling tough societal issues, to being asked by David Cameron to help lead the Big Society.

I have told the unvarnished and often complex truth, and part of this truth is that if I can fight for causes with prime ministers and sometimes win, anyone can. I have had the privilege of an excellent education, but I do not come from a particularly privileged or influential background.

My father was from a working-class part of Leeds and became a GP in the NHS, working hard and dedicating himself to the public for forty years, refusing to ever have private patients. His father, in turn, was an accountant who worked all hours to balance the books of a modest firm, and his mother was a piano teacher.

My mother came from a large, loving family in Essex and she trained as a nurse, raised my sisters and me, gave Red Cross classes and helped run the NSPCC, eventually at county level. Her mother was Irish and sadly died young and her father was a successful surveyor and engineer.

My parents gave me love and values but not privilege. They were both dedicated to public service. My parents voted Tory because they were royalist, patriotic, believed in hard work and thrift and associated the Conservatives with their beloved Church of England. Their politics were a set of visceral reactions, a culture.

This had a powerful effect on me and has made my political journey unusual. The stereotype is that if you're not left-wing when you're young you've got no heart and if you're not right-wing when you're older you've got no sense. This statement is uniquely ageist in two different directions. I have progressively moved further left the older I've got, but my main interest is going beyond left and right to a new, modern kind of democracy.

I have experienced a lot of success but also much failure in my professional life. I have often had to rely on stamina, a degree of cunning and sheer bloody-mindedness to get things

done. I have met people from far tougher backgrounds than mine who have achieved far greater things and in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the UK. They are the real heroes. They have tackled problems which threatened to engulf them, against the odds. I have told a few of their stories, which I hope will inspire you to make change in your neighbourhood, city or even country.

In Part One, I also want to show how, after the harsh economics of Thatcher, there has been a golden thread of ideology, of good intents, running from Blair through Brown to Cameron. This thread – stretching from Blair’s ‘Giving Age’ through Brown’s ‘Council on Social Action’ to Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ – has been about a new kind of relationship between citizens and politics. Yet the dream has never quite become a reality.

In Part Two, I describe how a better UK can come to fruition but how politics needs to change for that to happen; how we need to transform our outdated views on charities and social entrepreneurs; how businesses need to go well beyond the platitudes of corporate social responsibility, becoming societies in and of themselves that contribute to society, as did their Victorian forerunners. They will paradoxically become more commercially successful in the process. I have also suggested an idea for a People’s Parliament, parallel to Parliament itself, in which we vote for 650 of the UK’s best problem-solvers who match and shadow our 650 MPs.

If that all sounds a little heavy, then fear not, for there are jokes, gossip, anecdotes, scandals and colourful characters in

BE YOUR OWN POLITICIAN

abundance. Why would one want to do anything unless there is a large dollop of fun involved?