

# CREATING THE SPACE FOR CHANGE

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*Zoe Williams*

**S**ometimes this looks like a uniquely inopportune moment to expect parties to cooperate with one another, when they have never been more divided among themselves. And yet, the interne-cine battles are the latest and surest sign that the old parliamentary truisms are no longer true.

In the past, politics came in two blocs, and ‘the people’ sat somewhere in the middle. Whichever bloc gave the best account of itself to the people would smash the other bloc. Traditionally, a successful right gave an account that appealed to sound economic sense, and a successful left appealed to something a bit more hopeful and nebulous, working together to build a better society. Smaller parties existed mainly to force some difference in the larger ones, rather than for any direct influence of their own. This approach actively excludes party members: when both sides are fighting for the centre, their own members are by definition, since most people do not join parties, atypical, unrepresentative, useful for leafletting

but fundamentally not to be taken seriously. So a crucial – perhaps *the* crucial – democratic pathway has been closed off. The way to get your voice heard, by this rationale, is not to engage but to disengage. This drives people away from parties, which then lose legitimacy. But it also creates these implacable tensions within the major parties – Corbynites versus Blairites in the Labour Party, Remainers versus Brexiteers in the Conservative Party – as they all try to enforce their vision of what ‘the people’ want by bare assertion. The adversarialism allows no input from any actual people, let alone any other parties, and the debates are shorn of meaning. In order for grass roots politics to re-enter the conversation, that understanding of politics as warfare must change.

I have been in many meetings about vertical versus horizontal politics, and have never until this moment taken the time to figure out exactly what those terms mean. There is a fluidity to these ideas that is sometimes useful and sometimes obstructive.

‘Vertical’ often means ‘the kind of politics I don’t like’. I know that’s how I use it. Top-down, hierarchical command structures, in which ideas are brokered and manicured rather than fought over and fought for, participants are from a political class and not the ‘real world’, and the institutions exist to do the exact opposite of what a parliamentary democracy was conceived to do: represent the state to the people rather than the people to the state. There is, however, a lot to be said for vertical politics; it has solid institutions, it is extremely organised. It understands the structures that surround it, where they are porous and where they aren’t. It is disciplined and knows how to create concrete actions from discussion, or at least move through or past the discursive phase so that action can be taken. There is something dispiriting about listing the advantages, since they are so conspicuously absent from horizontal politics, and

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on a dark day, everyone involved in grass roots anything must have thought that only vertical politics can achieve those things; the very act of inviting infinite participation itself militates against the practical business of making stuff happen.

Which brings us to the definition of horizontal politics. It is a more spontaneous affair, arising out of an issue or belief, rather than defining itself as ‘politics’ and then deciding where to position itself on an issue-by-issue basis. It is inclusive and non-hierarchical. It prides itself (or should) on its openness, and on treating all its participants equally. This means taking active measures to ensure that everyone feels equally able to speak, rather than simply asserting that they may if they wish. Many of the practices people mock about progressive grass roots politics spring from the attempt to create a genuinely warm and inclusive discursive space; waving your hands about rather than actively opposing, saying ‘yes, and’ rather than ‘no, but’, trying at all times to observe and be sensitive to the constellations of disadvantage that might silence people.

A lot of procedural detail has changed between, say, the Greenham Common CND camp of the early 1980s and the Balcombe anti-fracking protests of 2013; an inclusive and warm space sometimes used to mean ‘no men’, and it would be unlikely to mean that now. Yet the kinds of practices that earn horizontal politics a reputation for being faintly ridiculous, while at the same time orthodox to the point of being alienating – even an aerobics class becomes exclusive when there are too many unspoken rules – are rooted in meaningful and essential desires: to forge a movement in which everybody believes they have the power to change things; are heeded; are valuable; and are in the business of real solidarity, not just a talking shop in which a handful of the garrulous need a (diverse!) roomful of the silent in order to feel legitimate.

## THE RECENT FAILURE OF HORIZONTAL POLITICS

Too often, those beliefs just don't stand up, and people start to trickle away. Thinking of the 1980s, there was a huge amount of passionate, meaningful community politics, from the miners' strike to CND, from local Labour Party activism to LGBT rights campaigning. Only the last could be counted as a success, and there is a separate discussion we could have – probably quite briskly – about why identity politics was so much more successful than industrial and class-based power struggles. The fact is, if you were a kid in that era as I was, the 1990s came as a phenomenal relief. The problem with socialism, as the saying goes, is that it takes a lot of evenings. Activism took a lot of time, and the most concrete, indeed, the only concrete success of it was in raising money, which could then be spent on more activism, or funnelled towards other activists, who weren't winning either.

The fundamental weakness was twofold: there was a lack of diversity, but I don't mean that in the way people mean it now, to strangle activism in its crib because it doesn't meet the strict criteria of perfect demographic representation that no fledgling movement could ever meet. Rather, people were distanced from the issues they were fighting for, so you would have middle-class Londoners meeting to fulminate about the industrial north, or affluent Home Counties sort-of hippies talking about poverty in Wales. There was no lack of sincerity, but there was, of course, a lack of fundamental emotional connection. It lacked the immersive quality of the early trade union movement for the very good reason that people were battling for rights and conditions in which they had no stake. Consequently, it lacked confidence – it was relatively easy to persuade people that they were irrelevant,

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they were dreamers, they believed things the rest of the country didn't believe.

Secondly, there was often a very profound sense of separation between the individual and the locus of power and decision-making. This was particularly marked in discussions about nuclear power, nuclear disarmament, globalisation and the environment (acid rain and the ozone layer were much more talked about than climate change, but the root sense – that profit and nature were vying in a cost-benefit analysis that nature would always lose – was established). It was extremely hard to believe that you could make a difference against these issues that towered like the Wall in *Game of Thrones*. I remember going to Greenham and seeing the barbed wire, the soldiers, that unapproachable, inaccessible greyness that characterises military bases the world over, and thinking: this is just extravagantly pointless. What threat could we ever pose to those people or the order they defend? They are carrying actual working weapons, and most of us aren't even wearing clean underwear.

It's in that diagnosis that I find my optimism about horizontal activism this century. On the matter of diversity, it is still a problem, indeed, it's a greater problem than ever. Even if you had a broad racial cross-section in a movement, which is extremely rare, and perfect parity between women and men, also still rare, you would instantly about the fact that time is a luxury. You will not see those who are truly struggling with low wages, insecure work and eroded workplace rights in a town hall on a Tuesday night. The chances are they are at work, or they are waiting for a call about work, or they are tired. You will not see the ultimate victims of the corroded welfare state because their disability living allowance has been cut and they can no longer run a car. And so on. The system is still –

if anything, more than ever – stacked against the civic engagement of the dispossessed, and then the failure of any given town hall to contain sufficient members of the underclass is taken as proof of its irrelevance. But, at root, that is just rhetorical bad faith.

Because underneath, something real has changed. Conditions have changed for everybody. All under-25s, excepting those from extremely wealthy families, emerge from education with a life-altering amount of debt. All under-forties, including those who have done everything right, from their hard educational graft to their excellent life choices, are facing housing insecurity and attendant financial pressure. A group like Generation Rent will include people from every class – though probably not every generation – not speaking on behalf of one another, but facing the same fundamental problem, viz that when one set of people wants to live off rents, that is, unavoidably, living off the labour of others. Economic rent is defined by Josh Ryan Collins from the New Economics Foundation as any unearned and untaxed profit above and beyond that which is necessary to maintain the upkeep of a property due to demand for the limited resources that are available. The key distinction between this and what we might term classic capitalist investment is that it produces nothing. No wealth is created, no tangible goods result. The upshot is merely one person living off the labour of another. There is room for many stances on whether this is ethical or not, but one thing is undeniable: practically speaking it means the second person is going to have to work much harder than the first, to end up with less. The second person will never own that house, will never have anything to show for their years of rent. As the relative inequality grows between the landlord and the tenant, the power balance shifts in favour of the landlord. We can see this already, with the rise in practices like revenge evictions.

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What you see in Generation Rent is not just a spontaneous grass roots group, in which everyone has skin in the game; it is also a discursive space in which people have different ideas. It can work and meld quite easily with smaller, more proximal housing movements like New Era 4 All and Focus E15 because it is not a manufactured group looking for a problem to solve. It is a problem that has brought together large segments of different people, who are de facto invited to find creative solutions. Some people believe in rent caps, some believe in increasing housing supply, some think the answer is in community housing projects, some in compulsory purchase orders so that the state retakes its role as landlord, some want to join forces with environmentalists so that responses to the housing crisis simultaneously answer the energy crisis. It's perfectly plausible that an affordable housing movement in Sussex could work with its anti-fracking group, who themselves – in real life and not just my *Pollyanna* imagination – had already joined forces with a solar energy campaign.

Successful movements are born when conditions, injustices, exigencies emerge that feed into one another and affect, if not everyone, sufficient people at least that the engagement is both communal and personal, not distant and by proxy. I believe that moment has arrived; not everybody uses a food bank or is on the minimum wage; but food poverty activists have enough in common with fuel poverty activists, who have enough in common with housing activists, who have enough in common with environmental activists, that they all start to look not diffuse but complementary.

On the second issue, then – the weakness of horizontal politics caused by activists being too far removed from the people or entities making the decisions – the forces of real power haven't become any less faceless. You don't look at shadow finance or the globalised

energy market or the Troika or the drivers of TTIP and think, these are easy targets, always open and reactive to the demands of the citizen. But we are starting to tell a different story in the way we approach apparently omnipotent foes and immutable situations. It's hard to describe except by example.

### THE LESSON OF POSITIVE MONEY

Positive Money was established as a campaigning movement 'to democratise money and banking so that it works for society and not against it'. It was set up to ask questions about how money is created, on the basis that most people didn't know. This turned out to be correct; nine out of ten MPs surveyed didn't know how money came into being. Since it is a democratic resource, and they are our democratic representatives, this is a pretty serious short-coming. Yet more important still would be if they were typical of the level of understanding among the general population, and there's no reason to suppose they aren't.

Money is created by private banks, in the form of debt. Every time GDP goes up by £100, that is because £100 worth of credit has been extended by a bank. It doesn't exist in any real sense, but I have no problem with that; the problem is that debt has to be a two-way street. The creditor must take a risk on the debtor going bankrupt. If the creditor bears no risk, and the debt simply becomes more and more onerous until some other – probably indebted – citizen has to step in, in the form of a bail-out, then that isn't a debt so much as a racket.

Even that isn't the most destabilising thing about the way money is created. Eighty-five per cent of it is extended in loans on

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existing residential property; in other words, it doesn't generate new property, still less ferment innovation, manufacture, creativity or anything you could hold or use. It simply increases the price of property. Indeed, house prices become theoretically limitless, as they are not related, except very indirectly, to wages, and are governed instead by the interests of a banking cadre that bears very little risk. Even if some natural restraint were in place that meant this hadn't affected house prices very much – which there isn't, and it has – it would still be undemocratic.

If we accept that money is merely credit and has no material value, there is no reason for its creation to be in the sole care of a very small number, acting in their own interest. It's a social resource and needs to be decided by society; we might well decide that banks are the best people to do it, because they're numerate and regulated and perhaps, in dialogue with the wider society, could do it more creatively. But these are discussions we all need to be in, and we can't be in until we understand. Hence Positive Money.

Now, it seems slightly preposterous, to have a local group, meeting like a book group or a basketball circle, in about the same numbers, to talk about the creation of money. It takes a long time to make an impact that way, and longer still to demonstrate your impact. Yet I started to look at it from the counter-factual: what if no one ever set up this group? What if no one ever met in a pub to discuss money? What if no more than 10 per cent of people ever understood how it worked? What if nobody ever talked about the way it affects society? We know what that looks like, because we live in it. The point of grass roots activism is not what change it can instantly bring about, but that, without it, nothing ever changes: or, rather, things do change, but not in the interests of the grass roots.

As Positive Money gained traction, it garnered some allies that

you might call the internal critics of the status quo – Martin Wolf, on the *Financial Times*, and Adair Turner, former chair of the Financial Services Authority. And as they variously supported and critiqued its agenda, another thing revealed itself: there are many people, perhaps a majority of people, who work to create the system as it is without necessarily fully supporting it. There is a huge amount of anxiety, within very establishment sectors, like banking, about social purpose, not just for reputational reasons – though these are stronger than ever – but because a vanishingly small number of people actively want a world in which we’re all, to quote Thomas Piketty, ‘paying rent to the Emir of Qatar’. But doing things differently involves more than ceaselessly castigating the way they’re currently being done. In order for institutional changes to come about, informal groups demanding change must create the pathways of possibility. Otherwise the way things are done takes on a quality of inevitability; it must be the right way to do it, because that’s what we do.

Finally, and crucially, I believe in a kind of Keynesianism of human energy. The exchange of ideas, hope, vision and ambition generates them afresh since, like money, they have no concrete value – they are merely promises of trust in one another so that we can get on and build. Activism as nourishment is the second footfall, irrespective of the issue that drove the first: to be in a room with people who share not your views but your optimism.

If we believe in a new progressive politics, it has to integrate horizontal politics where it makes sense to do so. It’s easy to dismiss the horizontal politics of the past as unsuitable for today, but then the politics of the past is unsuitable for today. There must be space created for those who seek genuine change based on their own experiences, not just because they have chosen to engage with the party political process.

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ZOE WILLIAMS is a writer, reviewer and political commentator, mainly for *The Guardian* and *New Statesman*. A graduate in modern history from Lincoln College, Oxford, she has written a number of books, notably *Get it Together: Why We Deserve Better Politics* (Hutchinson, 2015). She is a supporter of the British Humanist Association, and lives with her husband and two children in London.