

The politics of discontent

“**BROKEN BRITAIN**” is the kind of alliteration, which Conservative Central Office really loves. After all, it does tap into a rich vein of non-specific, but ubiquitous resentment, which appears to be thoroughly classless; it’s not just something for the Tory Toffs, anybody can join in. This is why their election strategists calculate that appealing to a general sense of malaise is such a vote winner. No doubt, Labour will also play to similar strengths, by simultaneously focusing on the negative in order to accentuate the positive. Now that they’re all at it, there’s no telling just how miserably optimistic we can be. According to a Populus opinion poll for *The Times* 70 per cent of the sample thought that society in Britain is broken, 42 per cent want to emigrate, and 64 per cent think that Britain is “going off in the wrong direction”.

If this were a poll of workers on minimum wages it would be easy to understand. Unskilled jobs are disappearing with extraordinary speed, and most of the dreadful jobs have already been taken by immigrants of one sort or another, working as night cleaners, kitchen porters, lifting root vegetables in Lincolnshire, security guards; you name it, any bloody awful job you can think of and it is almost a dead certainty that newcomers to the country will be doing it. This, of course, has had the effect of strengthening “wage stagnation”.

What, in Marxist circles, used to be called “the reserve army of labour” is increasing in size in relation to the jobs available. This is what the capitalists call a “loose”, as opposed to a “tight” labour market: unskilled workers are ten a penny. Wages have either fallen or have stagnated at around £3.57 an hour until 18, £4.83 an hour until 22, and £5.80 for everybody else. In some places, depending on circumstances the

actual minimum will rise slightly above this, in other places people working 'cash in hand', either because they are attempting to supplement benefit payments, or because they are immigrants without work permits, will take considerably lower sums.

It is easy to understand why somebody earning around £12,000 a year before deductions thinks that 'Britain is Broken'. Especially, if they live in an area bereft of facilities, with lousy schools, no dentists, extremely scarce nurseries, neighbourhoods which are often dominated by 'layabouts' and louts who seem to live, rent free, on £12,000 a year for doing absolutely nothing at all, by claiming every benefit in the book. It is easy to understand why the poor think that things are awry.

More difficult to grasp is the general sense of malaise in the country. The well heeled, with second homes, complain bitterly about taxes. Bankers are apparently feeling persecuted and ground down as their bonuses are eked out in surreptitious instalments, or camouflaged as shares or other emoluments. Highly skilled, well paid workers are infuriated by "uncontrolled immigration", while well-established university lecturers on £35,000 grumble about how 'hard done by' they are, how disregarded, and oppressed by numskull managers and philistine ministers. One is tempted to say, if they're really so unhappy, why don't they retrain as comprehensive schoolteachers, and see how they like that?

Of course, we are just teetering out of recession and the job losses and deep cuts in public services are only just beginning; we are also at war with a perplexingly illusive enemy, so millions of people can be forgiven for feeling somewhat uneasy about their prospects. But, the general air of complaint does appear to be entirely independent of people's actual circumstances. In my *direct experience*, people from bar staff on £6 an hour to consultants on £100,000 a year, and everybody else in between; people in rock solid jobs and those who really do have to contemplate the prospect of unemployment and ruin

every day of the week, believe that local councillors are all crooks, that there are too many immigrants, that the workshy are too well rewarded, that prisons are holiday camps, that “Life” should mean “Life”, that “political correctness has gone mad”, that the Health and Safety Executive has lost its marbles, and that we live in a ‘compensation culture’ where people are encouraged to start actions by shyster lawyers on the make.

The list could easily be expanded; each item could be given added nuance and multiple meanings, until we had composed, like Flaubert, a new *Dictionnaire de idées reçues*, a new *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. This would be a genuinely classless enterprise, common complaints and prejudices appear to know no social boundaries, they are just as popular in the drawing room as in the front room, just as common in the fast-food joint as in a classy restaurant, just as common in an Oxford senior common room as in the canteen at the local Uni. Lazy journalists, whether they are in Kuala Lumpur or Atlanta, routinely cast around for local colour and instant authenticity by reporting the views of their taxi drivers. In modern Britain they needn’t bother, they could ask more or less anybody and be regaled with a wealth of received opinions.

Last week I had an awful experience confronting a number of extremely cool and sceptical students as I tried to convince them that there is a vitally important difference between political conspiracies, which are susceptible to proper investigation and analysis, and conspiracy ‘theories’, which are not, because nothing which contradicts the ‘theory’ is admissible as evidence, since it is immediately regarded by the ‘theorists’ as the mendacious product of the conspirators, and is hence said to be an integral part of the conspiracy. Needless to say I failed; a significant number of my political science students evidently share the same baleful suspicion of those in authority as everybody from my academic colleagues to the porters, and the ladies washing up in the canteen. Nothing can be said to dislodge these opinions

because they have become a visceral expression of the generalised discontent in which we live.

Consequently, everybody from government ministers, civil servants, and employers, public officials and councillors, are thought to be involved in a general non-specific sort of conspiracy against 'hardworking people and their families'. In such circumstances it is relatively easy to say the first thing that comes into your head about almost anything in the country, as long as it is negative, and expect to be believed.

What is most unnerving is reading accounts of opinion surveys and analysis in the USA, or in many places in Europe, which come up with eerily similar findings. There appears to be a widespread belief, throughout the modern democracies, that our public institutions, our public policies, are simply not fit for purpose. In the States even the Republican Party leadership is being sidestepped and outflanked by the Tea Party movement as millions of ordinary working people campaign against public health insurance and what they choose to call "the liberal elite".

While, here at home, in Broken Britain, both the major parties will vie with each other to address the widespread belief that nothing works properly despite the very obvious fact that quite a lot of things actually work fairly well, and some things work very well indeed. There is however, a real foundation to this dismay and distrust, and it has nothing to do with MPs fiddling their expenses.

It has to do with the absolute failure of the political class to set the political agenda. We have politicians who simply trail along after our baleful public opinion. In these circumstances can there be any wonder that this country, like most of Europe and North America, is drifting inexorably to the right? There is nothing democratic about simply *reflecting* popular discontents and suspicions. We need politicians that will openly stand up to the public and fight for positive ideas, politicians who will try to persuade, convince, and lead, rather than wheedle and surrender to resentful opinions and common prejudices.