

Populism and the death of Liberal Democracy by Lisa Nandy MP

Things fall apart

If I've learnt anything in the last three years, it's that progress is not inevitable. We have watched as things fall apart. The centre cannot hold. With political violence, rising hate crime and the assassination of an MP it has felt, at times, that we are heading for that memorable Yeats' prophecy: "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".

Six weeks ago when the Prime Minister stood in Downing Street a line was crossed that felt like a point of no return.

"You, the public, have had enough" she said. "You're tired of the infighting, you're tired of the political games and the arcane procedural rows, tired of MPs talking about nothing else but Brexit when you have real concerns about our children's schools, our National Health Service, knife crime. You want this stage of the Brexit process to be over and done with. I agree. I am on your side. It is now time for MPs to decide."

This is an age of populism: from the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street in the USA, to Le Front Nationale, the AFD, Syriza, Podemos and the Indignados in Europe. In just a few years populism has leapt from fringe protest to shaping, even dominating, the mainstream. Politics is operating on new set of rules and we are floundering.

This is particularly true in Britain where populism is largely alien to our recent history. Where attempts by politicians, like May – often themselves part of the elite - to frame their interest as the interest of the people, blocked by a privileged elite has spread like wildfire in a relatively short space of time.

This is, as Cas Mudde puts it, "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'.

And thin-centred is a good way to describe it because populism is given meaning only when it is attached to an ideology. There is a tendency in Britain to misunderstand this, and to conflate populism with right wing nationalist, sometimes authoritarian, movements. It means we are blind to the left-wing populism that has emerged and had a profound influence on our political debate in recent years. Our left-wing leaders employing populist techniques seemingly inspired by Latin American socialists and the social protests that have emerged in Europe and the USA.

And by seeing it only as a version of far-right ideology, we have missed the paradox of populism. History is littered with examples of how populism has been the means by which millions of people mobilise to change the world. At the same time there are plenty of examples of how populist sentiments of 'us' and 'them' have poisoned our political discourse.

Before 2015 I don't remember ever hearing the term traitor, or betrayal, outside of far-right rallies. Now it is regularly used by politicians in every major party and reflected back to us outside the gates of Westminster.

Consider this tweet:

These sick Asian paedophiles are finally facing justice. I want to commend the bravery of the victims. For too long, they were ignored. Not on my watch. There will be no no-go areas

Does this sound like a far-right leader? It was the Home Secretary late last year. The them, Asian Paedophiles and presumably the 'elites' who 'support' them. "Not on my watch".

And what about this?

Unforgivable that 610 MPs skipped yesterday's debate on climate change. Young people on #schoolstrike4climate are showing leadership, while truant politicians shirk responsibility.

The leader of the Green Party – using language of betrayal to describe what was in fact an oversubscribed debate in which many MPs couldn't get in to speak.

Why does it matter? Because this kind of extreme language obscures rather than enlightens. It offers no explanation about how change is made in politics. It shuts people out of the process. It shakes our faith in each other and the system. It ignites rage and provokes blame but misdirects that energy, and in doing so prevents much-needed change.

The two major Brexit campaigns – Vote Leave and the People's Vote are examples of how the willingness to embrace populist rhetoric ultimately ends up wrecking democratic debate. They offer simplistic solutions – just leave with no deal or hold a referendum in which remain inevitably wins – on the promise the question is settled and we can easily move on. They admit of just one right and one wrong answer. But the problem of a deeply divided nation and the many heartfelt views on Brexit, and all the things Brexit has come to symbolise, are not going to vanish. They are complex, demanding of nuance and will not be wished – or voted - away.

These are complicated problems, but we should have known this was coming. 80 years ago – in a moment of similar rupture - Michael Young warned about the challenges we would face in a globally interdependent world. He called his pamphlet *Small Man, Big World* to reflect the tension between the nature of the modern world and the very human need for a sense of grounding, belonging and agency. Instead of heeding these warnings and grappling with how to deal with and communicate complexity our leaders across the political spectrum have taken an "if you can't beat them, join them" approach. It has allowed a political discourse to develop that simplifies almost everything into questions of right and wrong, good and bad, for and against - best summed up for me in the question: Churchill: Hero or Villain? This binary is surely just nonsense. It is stupid. We deserve a better debate than this.

I can't help but think that the man in whose memory this lecture is held every year would have been appalled by where we are now. Writing in 1980, Jim Callaghan said: *"If Attlee were alive today his virtues would not be fashionable in some quarters...He would place as much emphasis on ethical principles as on detailed programmes; on the bounden duty we owe one another as much as our rights; that radical change needs to be made persuasive if it is to be acceptable and become permanent; and that party members have an obligation to work as a team and have no right to insist on the last drop of their particular sectarianism to the exclusion of all else."*

Which bit of modern politics could be described like this?

Attlee understood that *"the foundation of democratic liberty is a willingness to believe that other people may perhaps be wiser than oneself"*. And so, he was able to build a socialist consensus that lasted across political parties for decades. How impossible to imagine this emerging from our political culture today. Because populist politics with its notion of *the* homogenous *people*, seeks to shut down dissent. It reduces democracy to a tug of war in which might is right, where different views, priorities and experiences can be erased and where minority views can be silenced. This is the poison that's been injected into our public life. It threatens a political system that has long recognised the power struggle inherent in politics and evolved over hundreds of years in order to incorporate a plurality of preferences and allow us to negotiate our way through shared challenges in the interests of the common good.

No wonder then that populist attacks on those liberal democratic institutions, built to embody these ideals and to mediate difference, have stepped up in recent years - and from the widest range of quarters. The Daily Mail labels the judiciary 'enemies of the people' while Eurosceptic Tories single out individual civil servants and seek to make them targets of public anger. The Tories have long claimed trade unions subvert democracy but have moved into attacking, even legislating to silence charities. And this problem is not confined to the right.

Some supporters of the Labour leader seek to undermine any institution that is critical of him or the Party he leads. When the EHRC announced it was investigating anti-Semitism in the Labour Party it was suggested by a senior elected Labour official that it should be abolished. And Labour shadow cabinet members rail against the mainstream media and fake news, while the BBC comes under fire from all quarters.

These sentiments are echoed on the far right by violent Islamaphobes like Stephen Yaxley Lennon (who goes by the name of "Tommy Robinson" or Milkshake as he's known up North). He and his friends mobilise supporters in rallies outside the BBC and Parliament by peddling conspiracy theories about the "elites" inside. Even before the Prime Minister echoed their efforts to pit Parliament against the people there had been a split in the Labour Party which pitted the will of MPs against Labour Party Members, and in the ensuing battle the Parliamentary Party not only lost but was successfully portrayed by some of the most senior figures in the party in precisely those populist terms of the corrupt elite who subvert the will of the people.

Our institutions will not survive this onslaught. Should we care? There are parts of the left, now in the ascendancy in Britain that see these institutions as part of a rigged system established to dupe the people, which must be erased. There are – as Matt Bolton and Harry Pitts put it – parts of the left and right who “luxuriate in the flames licking at the sides of liberal society”.

They are wrong. Because *“the survival of a vital center”* as Michael Walzer says *“is also the precondition of an active left. Never think that “the blood-dimmed tide” is a threat only to immigrants and minorities. It is a threat to all of us...We all need constitutional protection; we all need a center that holds. We have to stand in the center and on the left at the same time. That may be complicated, but it is our historical task.”*

Those who “believe in civil discourse, who respect the truth” must be willing to find common cause. This is a battle against the tide of the partisan rhetoric that dominates both my own party as well as the Conservatives and much of modern politics. But there is no other option.

Because for hundreds of years our liberal democratic institutions have provided the objective space on which common ground can be built. The specific strength of our unwritten constitution has been its ability to adapt to and contain political conflict. The early decades of the industrial revolution, poor law reform, the Reform Act of 1832 and growing class conflict were far more violent in word and deed than today. The decades following the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, marginalised religious extremism and laid the foundations of a modern political system which sought moderation through the balance of power and protection from tyranny and bigotry. Our democracy can no longer contain these political conflicts that have been growing over recent decades, and as a result we are living through a period of profound disruption.

But populism is a symptom, not the cause, of that disruption. It feeds on and seeks to amplify division but it is giving voice to grievances that already exist and have not found resolution through our existing institutions. And the question that too few of us who believe in the liberal democracy are asking is what are those grievances that have enabled populists to find such fertile ground, and why haven't our institutions allowed them to be resolved?

Some argue that populism is driven by a backlash against liberal culture. Others that it is a reaction against globalisation. It's not too complicated. Populist support is largely strongest in those areas where industries have been lost and populations are in decline. In Germany, the USA, Australia, Austria, it is outside of the big urban centres where people are more distant from power, where the loss of trust in politics is felt most acutely, where decades of relative decline has seen young people moving away for lack of good jobs, that fertile ground is found. It is an economic problem but it's also a problem of a political system that has failed to give representation to those affected. We have shrugged our shoulders and said “this is progress” while our social fabric unravels.

Austerity, cuts to public services and a constant state of stress and anxiety about the future have provided fertile ground for revolt. When I was campaigning in the EU referendum in towns across the UK this was a toxic mix of economic decline, loss of agency and dignity,

and a sense that people were being ignored by a political system, hundreds of miles away, that was not only unresponsive but deeply uninterested and at times downright disrespectful. It is what Will Jennings describes as two Englands with very different experiences of globalisation. One governs, the other is ruled. You find there a deep feeling of powerlessness and of a world spinning out of control, and it is a perfect storm. Those local institutions that anchor and connect us - high streets, local pubs, post offices, bus networks, and jobs that keep young people local and families together. This is the fabric of a community pulled apart. People are angry.

Our model of democracy is quite remarkable – a model in which we allow others to make judgments and decisions on our behalf. Trust is the glue that holds a representative democracy together and it is gone. This is an existential challenge to a representative system. Growing numbers of people no longer accept it.

They look to political parties, to Parliament, our town halls, civic organisations and the media and too often feel they work against them, not for them. They believe their function is to stop people from doing things, or take things away from them, rather than enable them to live richer, larger lives. They can find no expression of these feelings within the system. Who speaks for them? And given this, where does the legitimacy of our democracy come from? It is easy for populist leaders to come and tear it down, too easy, because we have allowed it to be.

Those institutions are meant to provide what Jonathan Rutherford describes as the tables around which we can gather to mediate difference. Tables bring people together but they also separate them. They allow people to work together but to retain their own distinctive identities and values. Instead, too often, these institutions provide only space for protest. Consider Brexit and the insults and slanging match that has characterised the debate across the media and Parliament, and within our political parties. Where are the spaces in those systems and institutions to bring people together? In Parliament our committee rooms are separated by barriers, our chamber by division lines. There aren't even physical spaces where people can sit together and thrash out the common ground.

They are meant to provide the bridges too. A bridge spans opposites and in doing so transforms them. They are both separate and different but connected. But today the connections have been broken and opposites are cut adrift. For years in towns like mine we had falling turnout because we couldn't hear "that roar", as George Eliot put it, "that lies on the other side of silence". A sudden and dramatic rise in support for a populist party, UKIP, didn't teach us that something was wrong. We told people they were racist but missed how - in towns like mine - people had consistently rejected the BNP and openly racist parties for years. Then we had Brexit – unanticipated by all of those institutions – Parliament, political parties and the media – because they had become deeply disconnected from the people they purport to represent. There is a strong sense amongst my neighbours and constituents that the national debate is completely and utterly irrelevant. In a time when geographical division has become much more marked, this is deeply serious. We have lost the ability to understand one another.

As Abraham Lincoln put it in no less a moment of historical rupture, our institutions, built on “the dogmas of a quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present”. And like a pressure cooker that has overheated, populism has provided the safety valve. This is what Jan Werner Muller calls “the shadow of representative democracy”. Populism, provides no answers. It subverts, distorts, divides. It is a threat to liberal democracy but it’s also essential to it because it shines a spotlight on a system that has gone badly wrong.

It seems to me we have understood the hollowness of populism, but not its importance. We have railed against the tide, but not even begun to consider how - or whether - we fix the system and its survival is in our hands. No democratic system can survive without legitimacy.

The stormy present

So (to steal a controversial phrase) what is to be done? The rules of the political game have changed. There are no obvious reference points we can use to navigate our way through this crisis. The government is not running the country. The governing class – politicians and civil servants have lost political authority. Our political parties are divided and making little attempt to bridge those divisions. There is a sense among the public that we’re all to blame, and, even if people have unrealistic expectations of the power and influence politicians have, they are right.

There is no serious strategy. There are only responses which have fallen short.

Attempting to shut out populist voices has helped to create the basis for grievance, and I think highlighted a tendency in our recent political culture – not unnoticed by those who feel aggrieved - to close down debate rather than embrace it.

Railing against the absurdity of privileged, wealthy individuals like Britain’s Nigel Farage attacking “the elites” has got us nowhere. Why? Because populists claim that representative democracy is not valid and they are, I think, winning that argument. And that is how individuals like Farage get away with it. Because they claim to stand outside of a rotten system and speak for nobody but themselves. It is why I think these charges of hypocrisy that we level console, but do not convince.

And blaming the technology has become fashionable in Westminster– twitter perhaps the best example - that amplifies emotions, encourages extremes, and rewards oversimplification. It has had a significant impact. But technology has always been a disruptive force and now, as in every moment in history, from the birth of the printing press to the invention of television, it can be used as a force for good or ill. It’s up to us how we respond.

In relation to my own party, which has had its own populist surge in recent years, the reaction has been largely to assume that this will pass, that the energy, dynamism and anger that has emerged can be put back in its box and we can go back to business as usual. This is I think why Change UK, which should have been such a significant rupture, feels like such a hollow response to such profound disruption.

The past is an unreliable guide to the stormy present. I often joke I've given up making predictions about politics. But the current anxiety playing out across the political system and the country is because I think unusually and for the first time in my lifetime, the future is entirely unknown. We are living in a state of complete, radical uncertainty.

This is what Gramsci called the "interregnum" – a moment of historical rupture where the old is dying and the new cannot be born. The forces that support the status quo are battling to save it from incurable contradictions. The forces challenging the status quo are not strong enough, nor developed enough, to win. In this situation there are all kinds of morbid symptoms - waves of anger, the breakdown of our institutions, the rise of nationalism, racism, protectionism, the appearance of strong-man, cultish leaders - that appear in these moments of total change.

There have been other moments like this. Post-war, and again in 1979, there emerged new settlements based on the collapse of old assumptions after years of upheaval. We lived again through one of the most moments in 2008, when the global financial crash sounded the death knell for the neo-liberal settlement that has held good for all of my lifetime. What is unusual, even extraordinary, about this moment is that in the decade since the crash no new settlement has even begun to emerge.

It is though, perhaps a moment to be hopeful, because the future is up for grabs in a way that it hasn't been for forty years. The anger out there in the public is not apathy. People want change.

When hope and history rhyme

But change towards what? And that is the key question.

There are two antidotes to populism: elitism or pluralism. And in this age of anger, only pluralism will do. Why? Because the loss of power, and the clamour for more of it, can only be met with power. More voice, more agency, more ability to shape the circumstances of your own life.

This is the democratic politics of the future and it will be built on institutions that represent the whole country and their values, not just a self-appointed few - that can bring together those different views, experiences and outlooks, mediate between them, and help us build common ground.

It means breaking open those institutions - across politics, the media, technology companies and business so that the top echelons of society - what C. Wright-Mills called the power elite – cannot hoard wealth, power, connections and voice to the exclusion of others. Where we set limits on the power of money and what it can buy. Where we stop railing at the individuals in finance, or the media, or the owners of tech companies, and tackle the systemic nature of the problem. When we stop asking how we can create a more diverse yet still elite group to make decisions on our behalf, and start to break open those spaces, to scatter and disperse power and restore it to those who rightfully own it. Putting the tools

people need to change the world into more hands – data, is the most obvious example. How can it be that we have allowed knowledge to be hoarded, for private gain, by a small few?

This is where I think my own party has somewhat lost its way, coming wrongly to believe during our time in government that our purpose was to take wealth from those at the top and redistribute it, with conditions, to those at the bottom while leaving the existing power structures undisturbed. This technocratic approach is what accounts, I think, for the basic irrelevance of modern politics. Populism of course leaves those power relations intact too, but by pushing others down it provides the illusion of lifting others up.

To genuinely change power structures takes a commitment to building a new political culture in which democratic argument is central. The Ancient Greeks thought of as politics as agonistic where conflict and difference are ever present and choices are made through negotiation and compromise. It can be argumentative and angry. Consensus takes work. But just as populism and its reliance on “the people” closes down debate, our political culture shies away dissent. At times it tries to close it down by drawing the parameters tightly based on rules that are not explicit. People are nervous to speak and so millions go unrepresented. Fundamentally it is the politics that is missing from our political culture.

As Will Davies argues compellingly in his book *Nervous States*, our political system is built on the enlightenment values that elevated reason above emotion. But the inability to feel the power of emotion in politics has become one of the major shortcomings of our democratic system. How people feel about political parties and their values, not just the policies that are on offer. Why there is often such a disconnect between what people want and decisions that are made – why do people want neighbourhood policing even though it doesn't cut crime? Because it makes us feel safer. And a more confident, empowered society – one in which people feel safe to go outside, know their neighbours and walk the streets - is as important as crime statistics. These are the disconnections populists exploit because behind them are real and valid concerns that are not able to find expression in the system.

Populists have found ways to connect people in common cause, using hate and fear. What is our response? To find the ties that bind – confidence, attachment, loyalty, generosity and kindness. There is power in these sentiments. This is Orwell's 'invisible chain' that binds the nation together. And where is it found? Mostly in the many and varied examples of people coming together in their communities to create change the only way it lasts – together. Whether it's the East Marsh Estate in Grimsby coming together to tackle huge deprivation and the conditions that have enabled hate to thrive, the energy co-op set up by council tenants in Hackney to cut energy bills, create apprenticeships for kids on the estate and save the planet, or my own Council in Wigan responding to austerity by putting people in the driving seat of our scarce resources . It's saved valued public assets like our libraries, and sparked a rise in civic activism that has meant we haven't just survived austerity, but at times we have thrived. This 45 degree politics as the pressure group Compass puts it, is the future and is bubbling up across the country. The key to change was the recognition that their difficulties were not theirs alone.

Building a new settlement takes a movement. Or as Ernest Hemingway's hero, Harry Morgan put it, “one man alone ain't got no bloody chance”.

And within these small local movements are the seeds from which the democratic institutions for the new era will grow. Take Ireland, where Citizen's Assemblies have brought together people with deeply held conflicting views on issues as contentious as abortion and equal marriage. These are issues that go to the heart of people's identities and have divided a nation for decades, providing fertile ground for angry populism. But providing the shared spaces to bring people together has brought to the fore the best of what human beings have to offer. Across the political parties MPs, including me, have pressed for these new democratic tools to help the country in our current malaise. We have been told it cannot be done. But look at Ireland:

*History says don't hope
On this side of the grave
But then once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave of justice rises up
And hope and history rhyme.*

We have allowed our institutions – parliament, political parties, the media, technology – to encourage the worst of humanity. But there in Ireland, as Seamus Heaney captures in those short lines, is hope flickering back to life.

For all the signs we have reached the end of representative politics, I think we have merely reached the limits.

We need power, more accountable, and much closer to home. Electoral systems that bring in new voices rather than just shut them out. New democratic tools, like citizen's assemblies, that create both tables and bridges. Power in the media dispersed across the country – not just the ability to make programmes or write stories but the commissioning power dispersed from a small centre, so the agenda is no longer set by a narrow few who live and work together in similar experiences and with similar backgrounds.

Even those tools that seem at present to divide us, offer hope. Social media has brought a range of voices to the fore but in that roar of noise people are encouraged to move to extremes to be heard. Our traditional media has followed suit. We have mistaken the debate online for a real debate anchored out there in our communities, and become adrift from the voices, grievances and potential in those places.

But it could be different.

It needs regulation, as Adrian Pabst forcefully argues, and to revolutionise a system in which technology is developed by a small number of private individuals, who can direct its ends. It should be a national priority. Because the potential it offers is enormous. In 1985, long before much of our modern technology was even dreamt of, the broadcaster and scientist James Burke offered a compelling account of its possibilities:

“You might be able to give everybody unhindered, untested access to knowledge because a computer would do the day-to-day work for which we once qualified the select few in an educational system designed for a world in which only the few could be taught.

“You might end the regimentation of people working in vast unmanageable cities, uniting them instead in an electronic community where the Himalayas and Manhattan were only a split second apart.

“You might with that and much more break the mould that has held us back since the beginning, in a future world that we would describe as balanced anarchy and they will describe as an open society, tolerant of every view and where there is no single privileged way of doing things.

“Above all, able to do away with the greatest tragedy of our era. The centuries old waste of human talent that we wouldn’t or couldn’t use. Utopia? Why? If as I’ve said all along the universe is at any time what you say it is, then say.”

This is the new settlement of which I think might start to live up to an Attlee settlement for this next era. Because “socialists” he said “are not concerned solely with material things. They do not think of human beings as a herd to be fed and watered and kept in security. They think of them as individuals co-operating together to make a fine collective life. For this reason socialism is a more exacting creed than that of its competitors. It does not demand submission and acquiescence, but active and constant participation in common activities.”

And this is where the hope lies. For all of the anxiety, anger, and despair that characterises modern times out there is better, if we seek build it. For all the efforts to divide us those values of tolerance and decency, that point to a plural, diverse, open country, are alive and well. We feel that we are greater than we know. We have learnt in recent years that progress is not inevitable and that the arc of history does not always bend to the left. If we want a hopeful, open, confident country we must build the institutions that allow us to create it the only way we can - together. In the end, our best hope is each other.

Lisa Nandy MP