

LIVED POLITICS

The Ordinary Person's Guide to Political Labels

By

"Mrs. Average"

Introduction

This is not an academic treatise on the origins and philosophy of different political ideologies. I am neither a politician nor an academic. I am just someone who has tried to live all my 60+ years as a responsible citizen of the UK. I've always voted. Never for my MP. Seldom for the councillors that got elected. Politics has been done to me.

I remember sitting on the landing listening to the television news reports of John F. Kennedy's assassination. I remember John Lennon getting shot. Martin Luther King. And I remember Peace marches, Woodstock, and protests against the Vietnam War. Against apartheid. I had a poster of Che Guavara on my bedroom wall. I remember hope, and a vision of a better world.

I was a child when Harold Wilson was the Labour Prime Minister of this country. All my childhood memories of UK politics are about industrial unrest and strikes by miners and dockers and others in industries far away from the inhabitants of a south London suburb. I remember the Winter of Discontent, rubbish lying uncollected in the streets. I experienced my fair share of rail strikes, battling up to work in London and back each day.

I remember my parents, both Liberal voters, discussing whether they should vote to join the European Common Market.

WW2 broke out on my father's 15th birthday. My parents sacrificed their teenage years to war in Europe, but they lived at a time when there was no such thing as a teenager anyway - Dad left school at 14 and went straight into a clerical job. It was an age when children did as they were told, and respect for authority was the dominant narrative - my parents' generation automatically deferred to teachers, doctors, ministers of religion, bank managers and public officials of all sorts from police officers to park keepers. They Kept Britain Tidy.

I remember Enoch Powell, and the Rivers of Blood.

My parents were what I would call naïve racists. On an individual level, they made no distinction - they treated everyone with reserve, black white or indifferent. But they didn't like anyone who was loud or brash, which put them at odds with much of both British working class culture and West Indian culture. My father in particular was a very private, sensitive man who was ill at ease outside a small, close family circle.

They loved their country - they'd fought for their country - and they didn't like being confronted by different cultural norms in their own neighbourhood. But Enoch Powell's politics crossed the line. They were an affront to the decent, pragmatic, British way of doing things, the British sense of decency and fair play. My parents had just gone through a war against a ranting demagogue. They knew one when they saw one. They knew right from wrong.

Fifty years on, it seems we don't.

The first General Election I voted in, Margaret Thatcher came to power. I watched on the TV as she stood outside 10 Downing Street and quoted St. Francis of Assisi¹:

'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope'

Although I hadn't voted for her, Mum and I were quite pleased that we had a woman PM.

I was quite appalled by what she went on to do to my country.

I have watched so much that I grew up believing was securely sewn into that British fair-play, pragmatic way of doing things cynically extinguished from public life by arrogance, corruption and greed.

The rights of workers to get together to counter the power of the bosses.

¹ She claimed they were the words of St. Francis of Assisi, but I understand they weren't.

Social housing. Social welfare. The NHS.

Civic pride. I grew up in a world inhabited by Park Keepers and Lavatory Attendants. Parks were free of vandalism and public toilets were clean. We had libraries with librarians, and free school milk. Bin collections meant a man came into the garden and actually collected the bin, emptied it and put it back. Every week. Police didn't race around estates in cars with sirens screaming – that was America. We had Bobbies on the beat and police phoneboxes that looked like the Tardis.

I grew up with the political thinking that brought us Garden Cities and public open spaces. We had grants for further education, and Adult Education classes. The Open University opened its doors in 1969. My parents were avid supporters of the National Trust. We had public art galleries, museums, national parks and national theatres.

We had the National Health Service.

These were things held in common ownership. Just because we had more road-sweepers didn't mean you dropped litter in the street any more than you chucked it on your living room floor. You hardly saw any litter when I was a young child. You hardly saw graffiti, except on the occasional toilet door.

You hardly saw any homeless people. We called them “tramps” and they were mostly alcoholics who had lost their way in life.

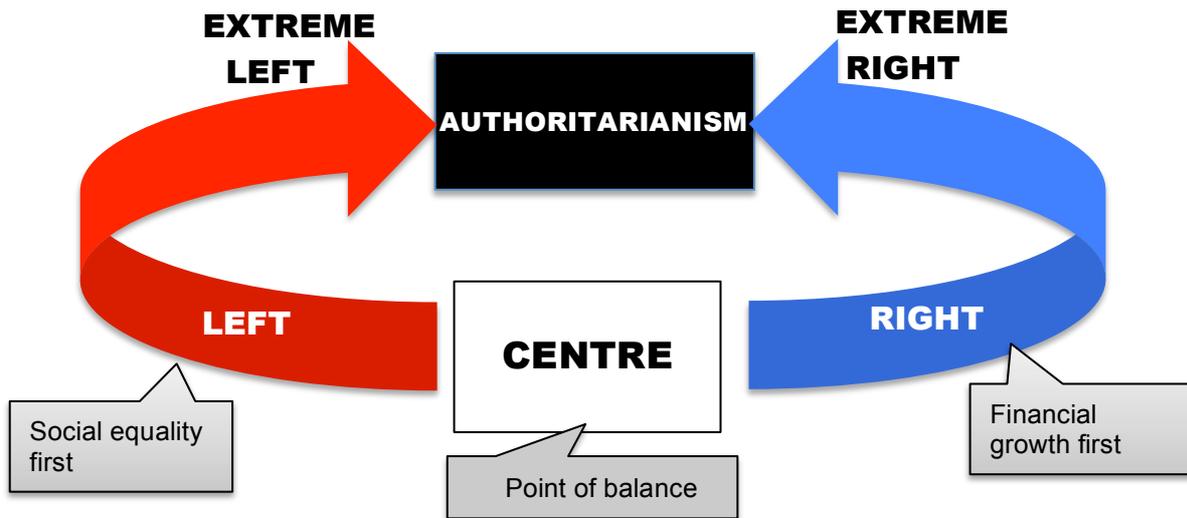
I personally prospered under Thatcher economics, but I do not like what has happened to my country.

There are many reasons for the huge changes in society I've seen over my lifetime. This pamphlet is designed to try and peel off the political labels and show us what we should really be thinking about when we vote for the political thinking that will shape our tomorrow.

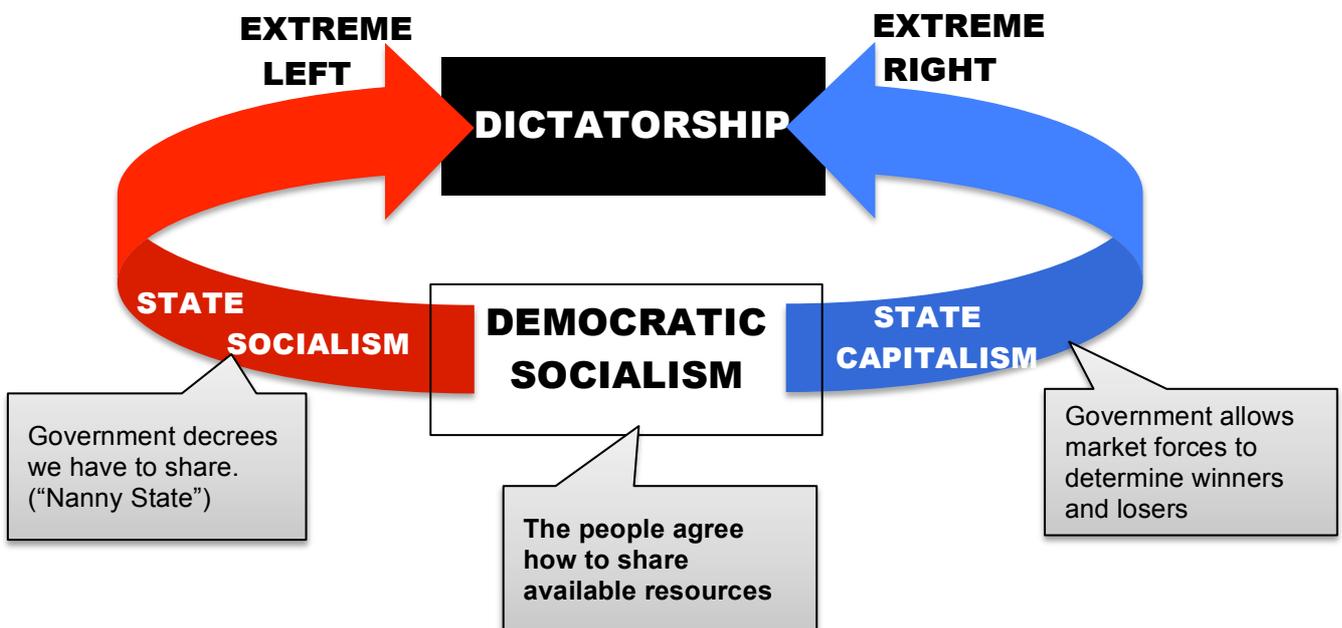
Left, Right and Centre

The political space most Britons want to inhabit is often described as “the centre ground”. This is based on the proposition that politics is a simple split between two opposing ideologies, the “Right Wing” and the “Left Wing”.

But in my experience, politics are circular. The extreme Right looks very much like the extreme Left, and both are about a small, powerful elite trying to control the lives of ordinary citizens.



The choice, as far as I'm concerned, is whether the people decide how we're going to live together peacefully and equitably, how we're going to share out the available resources, land, and wealth; how we view other cultures and how we manage the flow of people, goods and services in and out of the country. Or whether we let a bunch of oligarchs decide for us. So I prefer to use the labels below:



Labels are a terrible thing. They mean different things to different people. They are used and twisted to suit all sorts of agendas.

Whether or not you agree with my labels, I hope you agree with my fundamental proposition that under a democratic system of government, power should lie in the hands of the people. The Government is there to serve us. Not the other way round.

In the UK right now power lies in the hands of the government and the private industries they have sold public services to.

That is fundamentally not right. How did we end up here?

I believe a collapse in our understanding of leadership and authority has left us at the mercy of a sophisticated propaganda machine that has subverted all the mechanisms of democracy to its own ends.

Just as Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Party did.

But we do not have to fall for the same trick again.

Leadership and Authority

I am a baby-boomer. Born to parents who had lived through National Service and the discipline of the war years, we craved individual freedom. We are the rock'n'roll generation.

America had liberated Europe, so America became synonymous with freedom on both sides of the Atlantic. Popular culture was American culture – the music, the clothes, the fashions. The attitudes.

Our parents wanted us to have the childhood and adolescence they couldn't enjoy. I grew up with a story that authority was trying to control you and stop you being yourself. Authority figures were old-fashioned and 'square'. Free love was cool. Sex was cool. Drugs were cool. Pop stars could trash hotel rooms and be idolised for it. The world owed you a living and rules were made to be broken. School was boring, politics was boring, responsibility was boring.

The teenager was born. The story of the teenager tells you everything is about individual expression – a reaction to the discipline of the war years which was entrenched in our parents' attitudes. And for so many of my generation the teenager never died. They are still teenage rebels, without the faintest idea how privileged and over-indulged we were, and still are. We took all the free public stuff for granted and demanded more, while at the same time demanding lower taxes.

All too many of my generation couldn't cope with the compromises of a long-term relationship – working out how two independent individuals could negotiate a way of living together and sharing responsibility without reverting to the old gender stereotypes. Those stereotypes were of course still very much alive and well in institutionalised Britain, lying in wait to latch on to the story of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Authority figures become predatory paedophiles – and maybe they always were. The lucrative drugs market was born and bred in organised crime – they just loved the idea of undermining the authority of the police. Bring it on.

Between them, the conflicting stories of unquestioned authority and unfettered individual freedom dismantled the old order.

My parents' generation intrinsically trusted pretty much everyone in public life. Now, we don't trust anyone in public life. And neither story is doing us any good, because democracy needs democratic leaders. Without leadership, a population of over sixty million prickly individuals is not going to agree how we distribute wealth and manage the culture clashes that arise from the globalisation of the economy and a history of Imperialism. We will just end up fighting each other over territory.

Leadership is not dictatorship. It is not an authority figure telling you what to do. What to think.

A leader empowers and motivates, and brings people together to achieve a common goal. A leader steps up to responsibility and takes the flack, and holds a steady course when the going gets tough. Above all, a leader is a person who inspires respect and trust.

When the best leader's work is done, the people say, we did it ourselves.

When the worst leader's work is done, the people say, how the hell did *that* happen?

Models of Government

As far as I'm concerned, there are two models of government, and they're not Right Wing and Left Wing.

Model 1 – Distributed Government

Under this model, power is distributed to as local a level as practical. Central government has a small remit mainly focussed on national security and international relationships. The main level of government engagement is regional, with some services and public engagement devolved still further to town or parish level. Political debate is driven by the public interest.

Since central Government only really controls the budget for the police and legal system, defence and international development, tax revenues are dispersed through the devolved administrations to the point of need. Efficient channels of communication feed information from the grassroots experience to political decision-makers at regional and national level. Those decision-makers are held accountable for listening to the grassroots experience and making appropriate and timely decisions.

Democracy and constructive political debate thrive under this model.

Model 2 – Command and Control Government

Under this model, Government seeks to suck power from the people and focus it in the hands of a small elite. It favours images of war and strong leadership. It is very paternalistic, and has a strong appeal to those harking back to the old stories of unquestioning obedience to authority figures. Conversely, it also appeals to the overgrown teenage rebel, since it allows such individuals to abdicate any responsibility for anything.

It thrives on dumbing-down political debate and keeping the population in the dark. It is a model almost inevitably riddled with corruption – it's kind of designed for it. All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, so if you design a structure that places all power in the hands of a few people, those people will become corrupt even if they didn't start out that way.

Command and Control Government attracts the very people who should never be allowed anywhere near power - narrow-minded, emotionally stunted egoists who never learned to learn. It promotes people who attack their critics and are incapable of listening – especially to people who know what they are talking about. Experts make them look stupid.

Given power, this model develops a life of its own and creates a sociopathic narrative based on rigid dogma that must not be challenged or deviated from, so no matter what good intentions some of the people caught up in it may have started out with, they rapidly fall into line with the prevailing doctrine.

It is very bad government and has very little to do with democracy. It has nothing to do with government by the people, for the people.

For decades, we had governments that were more or less operating the 'Distributed' model, with varying degrees of commitment and competence.

Recent Prime Ministers, certainly from David Cameron on, have demonstrated traits of Command and Control, but the election of Boris Johnson's government in 2019 sweeps it in with a vengeance. As I write this, Special Advisor Dominic Cummings is dismantling public procurement in favour of a crony system – despite the catastrophic effect on essential supplies right in the middle of a pandemic. He is busy ripping the heart out of the British Civil Service at the same time as we career towards a complete break with European

regulation and governance. Coronavirus has gifted him the opportunity to do all this away from the scrutiny of a supine Parliament, with the media spotlight directed elsewhere.

I'm not sure why we have allowed ourselves to slide so rapidly into the sinister embrace of Command and Control Government, but it is probably a combination of things. Britain is still hugely influenced by America, and the Americans have always been mesmerised by celebrities – those quintessential individualists. Their politicians have always favoured the language of war – the war on drugs, the war on terror, not to mention all the actual wars over oil revenues.

We think of America as the land of freedom – most Americans do, too. But of course it's not. It never really got rid of its slave-owning mentality (neither did the UK, of course). The USA is now the land of economic slavery, where your job defines you and your income determines what sort of a life you can lead. In order to preserve in pristine sanctity the spurious myth of "the American Dream", thousands and thousands of poor Americans have to endure the American nightmare – lack of healthcare, lack of social services, lack of affordable housing, lack of employment legislation, low food standards, high debt, poor access to good education. Denial of human rights. Brutal policing. Violence on the streets. Gang warfare. Persecution of minorities, discrimination and outright racism. The obsession with individual freedom, individual privilege (predominantly white, predominantly male) and individual greed negates all other values to the point where it denies humanity itself and believes certain individuals to be masters of all they survey.

It was that mantra which led the financial sector to overreach itself to the point of collapse. It was that same mantra which prescribed austerity as the correct response to the collapse.

It was the same mantra that elected Donald Trump. A narrow-minded, emotionally stunted egoist who never learned to learn. Who attacks his critics and is incapable of listening – especially to people who know what they are talking about. Experts make him look stupid.

People who are incapable of listening or learning *are* stupid. No matter how high their IQ. They are also extremely dangerous when allowed anywhere near the reins of power.

In the UK, Austerity was a contraction of power towards central government, withdrawing funding from the local authorities which actually have to provide public services, and be accountable to the people.

The experience on the ground was a sudden and almost complete loss of agency. Local services were withdrawn and protests to local authorities were met with a helpless shrug – there's no money. What are we supposed to do?

Austerity is a cynical betrayal of public interest – it wasn't the public who caused the financial collapse. It wasn't Labour's spending on public services. It was a lack of probity in the financial markets. Yet the public are still paying for it. In some cases, with their lives.

I believe the sudden disconnection from any kind of real political engagement was behind the vote to leave the EU. The leaders of the Leave campaign pulled off the biggest political con trick in my lifetime. They turned a protest *against* the centralisation of political power into a movement which concentrated power in the hands of a Command and Control Government.

Privileged Elite 1, Population of Britain 0

It's the Economy, Stupid

"Economists say economics is the study of scarcity. That's because resources, such as workers, land and raw materials, are limited - while the demand for them is infinite. Basically, we always want more.

So the textbook answer is an economy is a system for distributing scarce resources."

Bank of England Website

<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/knowledgebank/what-is-the-economy>

What we frequently call "capitalism" could more accurately be called "consumerism". It's the economic system driven by continual pursuit of economic growth, fuelled by market-place competition.

Continual pursuit of economic growth drives a relentless need to increase demand. Manufacture demand. Human beings are extraordinarily creative when it comes to dreaming up new stuff to sell and new ways of persuading us all that we can't live without it.

If someone had told me when I was a young woman that my local corner shop would do a brisk trade selling plastic bottles of plain drinking water to people who could get perfectly good drinking water free from their kitchen tap, I would have laughed at them. People aren't that stupid.

But they are. I am. How often do I forget to take a bottle of water with me when I'm travelling, and end up purchasing one of those blasted plastic bottles?

When my husband (who worked in computing) came home some time in the 1990s and suggested that we buy a home computer, I gave him a very old fashioned look. What would we do with a computer? I'd never use it.

Now, I'm never off the blooming thing.

Go through an ordinary working week, and think about how much you consumed, compared to how much you needed to consume. How much your employer required you to consume, for no particularly good reason. How much you bought just because buying it made you feel better. It's so easy to click the "checkout" button. Amazon have built a commercial empire on it.

We clearly don't need all this stuff. Half of it ends up choking the oceans, buried in landfill or pumping carbon into the atmosphere from waste incinerators.

We're like a world of crazy hoarders. The stuff is destroying the very things we need to survive. All because the economic model thinks we're greedy so-and-sos who always want more. Maybe because it was designed by greedy so-and-sos who always want more.

How about if we have an economic model that thinks we all need 'enough'?

The sustainable economic paradigm is not about continuous economic growth. It is about continuous human growth. Evolution. Life.

Synergy not Competition

The other sacred cow of market economics is competition. The myth that competition is good pervades every aspect of our lives. Even creative arts are reduced to a spectator sport, with winners and losers. WTF?

My late brother in law was a huge music fan – he was always listening to some obscure (or not so obscure) rock band or the other, but he hated people asking him who his favourite band was. He liked all the bands in his extensive CD collection, it just depended which one he felt like listening to today. Tomorrow, he would prefer a different one. So the only answer he ever gave was, “the one I’m listening to at the moment.”

In other words, it’s not a competition. The question is irrelevant.

The story goes that competition drives down prices. Sorts the wheat from the chaff. Eliminates the weakling. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. And so on.

Really?

Is that really the kind of society we want? Where prices bear no relation to the cost of production? Where we discriminate against the sensitive, empathic people who don’t see life as a scramble to the top of the heap? Where art, music and writing are respected for their popular appeal, not for their intrinsic worth? Where we simply trample on anyone who falls by the wayside, and elevate those who trample on them to positions of power and authority?

Why would you want to do that?

If you have two children, do you really want the big one to flourish and the little one to be left weak and helpless? Of course not. We want all our children to thrive. They will squabble with each other, they will vie for attention and dominance, but if we have any sense, we teach them from an early age to share things. To take care of each other.

When businesses start valuing the experience of parenthood instead of regarding it as an irritating interruption to the business of producing more worthless stuff, maybe we’ll start getting somewhere.

Trade and business are about trust.

Cut-throat competition destroys trust.

Top-down, command and control management destroys trust, just as top-down command and control government does.

Without trust, there is no communication, and without communication there is no grasp of what value means, let alone any capability to deliver it.

The successful businesses of the future will be the ones that pay more attention to their customers and their staff than to their competitors. Build a strong relationship with your customers and you will know where the opportunity is without having to spend a fortune on marketing. Allow your staff to interact with customers and each other as human beings, and a whole world of possibilities opens up, because you are nurturing your people. You are allowing them to grow.

Environmental and Social Responsibility

Talking about irritating interruptions to the business brings us to ESR, the new buzz-words derived from the UN Sustainable Development goals.

All very laudable.

But let’s be clear. ESR is not a bureaucratic frill to be tacked on to the business.

It is the business. What do you think “sustainable” means? More to the point, what do you think “unsustainable” means? (I’ll give you a clue. Substitute “living” for “sustainable”. Then figure out what you would substitute for the word “unsustainable”.)

Post COVID-19 there will be far less money circulating in the economy. Quantitative Easing has almost certainly reached the limit of its ability to prop up a financial system that hit the buffers round about 2007.

We are heading into a global recession the likes of which we have never seen before.

Or alternatively, we are in transition to a low-growth economy.

You can crash and burn in a recession if you like. I prefer transition.

Businesses that succeed in the future will be the ones that are embedded in the communities they serve. The ones who build a solid and honest relationship with their suppliers, their customers and employees.

They will be the ones who invest in sustainable business models such as the circular economy, that use resources and manage waste responsibly,

They will be the low-carbon entrepreneurs, creating new products and services from sustainable lifestyles – up-cycling waste, generating clean energy, farming on a human scale, story-telling. Healing and regenerating. Innovating and inspiring. Creating and celebrating. Caring and nurturing.

The business that wants to succeed will already be in transition to the new model.

Need not Greed

World Health Organisation definition of Wellbeing:

"A state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community."

The dividing lines between public and private sector have already been blurred. We have seen the cruel dysfunctionality that ensues when the tail of greed wags the economic dog. Business models that prioritise an economic return to shareholders and the owners of corporate debt cannot, by definition, also be prioritising public benefit.

If a private business failed to compete in the old market economy it simply went under. That's the "sorting the wheat from the chaff" story in action.

But when public services fail, the country ceases to function.

So what all too often happens with so-called 'privatised' public services is that public money bails out incompetent and corrupt private enterprises. The privatised business sucks all the money out of the service, and runs it into the ground, and is then rewarded by the government for the abysmal failure to deliver the desired outcome. Corrupt executives and corrupt politicians are well-served. The people of the country, whose hard-earned money puts the cash in the public purse, are not.

We need a new organisational model that applies best business practice (see above) to delivering vital public services. People working in these services must be properly remunerated for the essential and important work they do. Supply chains need to work efficiently and effectively, supplying the right stuff, in the right quantity, at the right time. Services must be delivered the same way, 'pulled' by individual demand at the point of need. We must stop allowing the money, or lack of it, to get in the way.

Whether in business, public services or the third sector, we all need to start treating each other as human beings. Sovereign individuals with a right to realise our own individual potential. We all need to have the life skills and social support to cope with the normal

stresses of life. We need to ensure everyone has the will and the energy and the opportunity to work productively and fruitfully, and the time to make a contribution to the community.

This is not Utopia. This is just the way we should, and could, be living. Why are we even arguing about it?

Reclaim Politics

I believe that what the last decades have shown us is that we can't trust the politicians with politics. We need to bring power back into the hands of the people, and find real political leaders. Not command and control circus performers.

Local politics has to be given agency. Local authorities need to be properly funded and properly engaged with the communities they serve. They need to have both the authority and the capability to address local housing and health needs, local energy generation, local transport, and local transition to low-carbon living. Local politicians can be held to account. If they have to look into the whites of the voter's eyes while they're lying through their teeth they are much less likely to do it.

MPs need to be freed from the party political whip. They need to be free to challenge the leadership on behalf of their constituents, and be treated with respect. Dissent should be seen as a virtue, not an aberration to be slapped down. Being a Member of Parliament is a civic duty, not a personal career choice.

Similarly, effective, informed opposition is essential to democratic debate. Argument should be vigorous and passionate, but it should never descend into playground name-calling and bully-boy tactics. Politics is not about winning an argument and exterminating the enemy. It is about reaching consensus. Teasing out the truth from the complexity of conflicting stories.

It's the negotiation that the rock'n'roll generation haven't learned how to do. It was too easy just to walk away from the task of replacing old fashioned, unquestioning respect for authority with something better.

If we're ever going to achieve 'something better' we can't keep walking away. We need responsible leaders.

So don't engage with the lies and the propaganda. Don't believe the snake-oil salesman who says he's got the panacea for everything you don't like about the society you live in. Go out into your community and help fix it. Talk to your neighbours. Write to your MP. Join a local community group, environmental group or political party. Maybe even stand as a local councillor.

Above all, listen. Always remember you have two ears and one mouth. Before you jump on your high horse, stop and ask why someone is saying or doing the thing that annoyed you. It may have triggered your fight-or-flight response, but ask yourself whether what you're reacting to is really a threat, or actually a cry for help, an expression of unbearable pain?

If there's some sector of society you feel inclined to blame for your misfortunes, volunteer to help people who fit that profile. See what life looks like from their perspective. You never know the truth until you've heard all the stories.

There's still a lot we can do to consolidate the freedom and power we still have and counter the corruption at the heart of British politics. But if we don't do it soon I fear we will wake up one day and find it gone.

Just like civic pride and public services.

We need to open up the political debate. We need a big discussion on how we all work together for the common good – government, public services, private enterprise, third sector organisations and the citizens themselves. What is the role of each and what are the responsibilities of each? How do they fit together? And how do we sort the money out?

Politicians should, of course, be leading on this but in the UK we are currently governed by the politics of denial, which simply refuses to acknowledge what's wrong with business as usual, even as the world of "usual" disappears into history.

Can the private sector which has benefitted so much from a sell-off of public assets pick up the challenge? Can we, the people of this country, step up to the job of being responsible citizens of the free world? In that infamous phrase, can we "take back control"?

If we can't I fear we're all screwed.