DEMOS

THE HUMBLE POLICY MAKER

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

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Humble is not a word that has often been used about me. I have strong opinions, and I'm not very good at hiding them. I often hear that joking response - "next time say what you really think!" even when I think I'm being calm and reasonable. I've endlessly been told to "think about the impact you have on other people." I like winning. I like being right. And I'm hopelessly socially awkward in any situation where being clever offers no social advantage - like mother and baby groups, or getting a table at a restaurant. In other words, I find humility actively disorientating.

I'm telling you this because the world of politics is set up for people like me, and I think that's part of what makes it such a disaster.

This is the third paper in a series called Making Democracy Work. In the first, I set out why the foundation of a healthy, liberal democracy should be trust and connection between citizens. In the second, I explored the cultural, technological and demographic forces that are undermining that trust. This paper looks at what's wrong with politics and policy making: why the basic way we make decisions is undermining our ability to navigate this age of exponential change. It's an attempt to challenge the two dominant mindsets in policy making: partisan thinking and technocracy, both of which have a seductive appeal not just to voters but to the people actually doing the politics and the policy making. Despite their appeal, partisan thinking and technocracy are eating away at democracy.

We need a new approach to policy making if we're going to resolve the problems I set out in the previous papers: an approach that bridges division, builds community, and makes the sacrifices and compromises

of living in a democracy feel worthwhile. In this paper I want to make the case that neither technocratic nor partisan thinking can solve our problems. And, because this doesn't come naturally to me, I hope to do so with the zeal of a convert. I am a recovering technocrat and apostate partisan. I want to explain how and why I changed my mind.

THE PARTISANS AND THE TECHNOCRATS

Almost everyone you meet in Westminster and Whitehall is either a technocrat or a partisan. Many are both.

By technocrat, I mean a policy wonk: someone who sees problems and opens up a spreadsheet to start analysing them. You'll recognise them by catchphrases like: "what matters is what works", "causation is not correlation," and "the data are unclear."

By partisan, I mean someone who's taken a side and wants their side to win. You'll recognise them by catchphrases like "the mood on the doorsteps" and their tendency to say that their opponents are wrong headed and dangerous. Some love the kind of jokes made at Prime Ministers' Questions; others prefer cerebral analysis of the problems with the opposition's world view. All of them struggle to take off the blinkers of bias.

Before I look at the harm these systems of thinking cause, I want to take a moment to explain how my life in politics taught me to be both. It's the only way to thrive in politics.

When I left university, I wanted to be a writer. But the journalism job I found was at a business magazine called Property Week. It was here that I got interested in public policy. Our whole world revolved around internal rates of return and investment incentives. My beat included tax and planning policy and I spent hours mapping and understanding how even small changes could alter the viability of development decisions. This is when I became a technocrat.

I started working for the Liberal Democrats in 2004, advising them on housing and local government policy. I'd decided I wanted to be a political journalist, and I thought some direct experience in politics, in the six months running up to a general election, might help. The main policy I worked on was a proposal to replace Council Tax with Local

Income Tax. I built a fantastically complicated model out of property valuations data and the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings to map the different impacts on different kinds of earners in different parts of the country. But the real turning point came at the party's spring conference, where I heard then MEP Saj Karim speak. "This isn't the Britain I was born in, and I want my country back," he said. Tears sprang to my eyes. I didn't want to be an analyst any more: I wanted to be a campaigner. This is when I became a partisan.

And I went full throttle.

I wrote a pamphlet for Demos long before I got the chance to work here: it was a joint effort between me and Nick Clegg, though it was published in his name. I was working as his speech writer, so it was basically my job to write for him. At the time I was immensely proud of what we'd put together: it was a paper called The Liberal Moment. We argued that the 2010 election was the moment when progressive politics moved away from the labour movement and towards liberalism - that the Liberal Democrats would replace Labour as the main party of opposition. We were, of course, wrong, though we didn't really expect to be right. We thought it was worth making the case, and trying to make it happen.

Looking back, the paper makes me cringe. It's not the policy proposals we detailed; most of which stand the test of time. It's not the case we made for liberalism and the redistribution of power, which I stand by. It's the tone of intellectual arrogance with which we wrote. For example, we said:

> "Only liberalism possesses a clear understanding of the way in which power has flowed upwards and downwards from the central state. Only liberalism marries a passion for devolution within Britain with a commitment to international institutions and the international rule of law."

We make sweeping, absolutist statements about how the other parties see the world. We're not mean or abusive. It's more patronising: Labour, the poor dears, just naively believe that the state has no flaws. The Conservatives, bless their cotton socks, think history can be stopped.

In political circles you hear these sweeping statements made all the time. The political operatives go around saying Labour are all communists who'd bankrupt the nation because they can't do maths; or the Conservatives are evil psychopaths who are only in politics to make a quick buck for their friends. The political philosophers, who think themselves above this kind of tawdry abuse, say things like: "I'm not a liberal because I believe in objective truth;" "I'm not a progressive because I don't believe human nature is perfectible;" "I'm not a Conservative because I want to serve the interests of the many, and not the few."

Sure, not everyone talks like that but I've heard every one of these sentences, calmly delivered, by intelligent people who've thought deeply about politics, and yet somehow believe these sentences have meaning. Can they actually find me a liberal who doesn't believe in objective truth? A progressive who thinks humans will ever be perfect? A Conservative who wants to harm the many for the sake of the few? Of course not. Partisans caricature our opponents, while granting the privilege of nuanced understanding only to ourselves.

Of course: I'm creating a caricature of my own. Even Westminster has plenty of reasonable people who - at least in private - will take a nuanced position. But in thousands of conversations with political people of every hue over twenty years, I've been surprised by people's partisan blinkers far more often than I've been surprised by their open mindedness. I've been shocked to discover that MPs believe the "line to take" is true far more often than I've seen an MP refuse to take the line because it isn't.

Partisanship is a powerful drug. Psychologists talk about confirmation bias: once we've decided something, we will go to extraordinary cognitive efforts to prove that we are right, and to fight off any evidence to the contrary. The classic story that's told is of The Seekers - a cult which predicted the end of the world in the 1950s. Their leader said an alien invasion would take the cult's followers into a UFO on December 21st 1954. The day came and went without event. The cult's followers did not stop believing: they predicted a new date for the apocalypse, and when that, too passed without incident, they proclaimed that it was their actions which had saved the world from destruction.

We see confirmation bias in political life all the time. Brexit supporters who interpret everything as evidence they were right. Remainers who interpret the exact same evidence to prove the opposite hypothesis. One study, chronicled in one of my favourite books, The Political Brain, looked at how voters who hated Bill Clinton responded to an anonymous candidate who shared his policy positions. When presented with a theoretical policy platform that matched Clinton's, they liked it. The moment they discovered it was Clinton's manifesto, they performed extraordinary intellectual contortions to explain away what they'd said five minutes before.

I started to throw off my partisan shackles when I joined the coalition government, in which I served for five years, from 2010 to 2015. I worked cheek by jowl with Conservative thinkers and ministers and I disagreed with many of them, on many occasions. But the experience disabused me completely of the fantasy that they wanted only to serve themselves and their friends.

But though I became less partisan working in government, I went full technocrat. I spent a lot of time looking at spreadsheets and data and having technical arguments about policy detail. I remember a long discussion with a senior civil servant in the Home Office about the ways exit check data could be used to build evidence and drive performance management in the visa system (I lost). I remember a lengthy battle with the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health over the phrase "presumption in favour of coterminosity" (I won). I even got briefly obsessed with how to improve chicken husbandry to reduce the need for beak-trimming (the chickens lost).

My focus was on trying to do the right thing. After all, we'd made a huge political gamble going into coalition with a much larger party that many of our voters hated; we had to use that power the best we could. I had once written a line for a Nick Clegg speech in which we'd criticised John Reid for focusing on "what sounds good" instead of "what works." So, with a view to doing the right thing, I focused on doing what works, even where it sounded bad. I don't want to distract from the argument with a lengthy exploration of the costs and benefits of the tuition fee debacle, but it is, for me, the perfect example: both a policy that works - participation rates, especially among the poorest students, continued to rise - and a policy that sounds bad.

I got completely obsessed with evidence. Here was a new way to work out the right thing to do: not by following some blinkered ideological path, but by following the facts. With the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, I helped, in a small way, to establish a new set of policy organisations called the What Works Network. Those organisations scrutinise and publish evidence about the effectiveness of policy across a range of strategically important topic areas, like educational improvement, healthy ageing, and well-being, and they do fantastically important work. It wasn't until I left government, that I realised the technocratic model had as many limitations as the partisan one. Let me explain why.

THE INCONVENIENT VOTERS

What technocrats and partisans have in common is the conviction that it is their job to figure out the right way to do things.[1] Partisans follow the ideology or the party interest. Technocrats follow the facts or the model. But both are adopting an essentially heroic stance, in which you are the source of the solution to the problem, whatever the problem happens to be. Having known such conviction, I can report that it is very satisfying, and hard to let go of. Who doesn't want to be a hero? Who doesn't want to come up with an answer to a riddle everyone else failed to solve? And when heroic promises are offered at the ballot box, who's going to vote for anything else?

Dominic Cummings is an extreme example of someone who came to the narcissistic conclusion that almost everyone else was stupid and incapable of doing what the country needed them to do, but there are more benign examples, too. At a party conference event I hosted a couple of years ago, former Labour Cabinet Minister Andrew Adonis gave a rather brilliant speech, which was punctured by a contribution from someone in the audience who observed that the recommendations could be boiled down to "have a brilliant minister, someone like me, in charge."

"Given that most ministers are mediocre, how can we build a policy framework that works when mediocre ministers are in charge?" the audience member asked. Andrew didn't have an answer.

1   If you're following this footnote, it's probably because you're baffled as to why that might be a problem. What is the job of a professional policy maker if not to figure out what to do? Isn't that what policy-making is? Well, no. It's only part of it. Keep reading.

Whether you think people are mediocre or not, all heroic policy makers come up against the same problem eventually: you are confident we should do x, but the public are against it.

One seemingly eternal example is hospital closures, usually put forward after a review of the medical evidence demonstrates that more lives will be saved if two hospitals - or two maternity wards, surgical suites, or A&E departments - are consolidated into one. Local people don't want to travel to a more distant hospital so they oppose the closure; it can easily become the most salient political issue in a constituency for years on end. So what do you do? Back the voters or save lives?

As we saw earlier in this series, this conflict is not an occasional one-off. There is a backlog of unresolved policy problems stuck in precisely this holding pattern, between evidence and politics: it's the primary reason why so many issues stay locked in the "too difficult box".

There are five basic options for what to do about your unpopular-but-important policy proposal:

1. Don't do it. This is the default option, and what's landed us with our backlog of unresolvable problems.

2. Do it anyway and get punished by the voters. This was, laughably or tragically depending on your point of view, essentially Liberal Democrat strategy for five years. It was also Theresa May's strategy when she put social care reform into her 2017 manifesto. Political strategists have learned the lesson. They won't be trying this again soon.

3. Do it early on in a Parliament, in hope that people will have forgiven you, forgotten, or started to see the benefits by the time an election comes around. This was how Blair and Brown navigated tax rises for the NHS, and tuition fee increases. It was quite explicitly Dominic Cummings' strategy for how to do boring (to the public), expensive things like setting up DARPA.

4. Make a lot of political fireworks elsewhere as a distraction so that no-one notices you doing the unpopular but necessary things. This has been deployed by successive political leaders. Blairites have often told me that all the sound and fury about anti-social behaviour and criminal justice policy was, in large part, political

pyrotechnics to capture the imagination while the "real work" was underway elsewhere in government. This is what Boris Johnson's most candid acolytes say too about Brexit: if you act like a psycho for a couple of months, you win trust so no one minds when you fold, and make big concessions.

5. Give up on democracy as a game for fools.

Think back to my argument in the first paper of this series about what makes democracy work: connection and trust. Option 5 may be the only approach that's nakedly anti-democratic, but if you accept my case about the importance of the relationship between citizen and state, then options 3 and 4 cause structural harm to democracy, too. They treat democracy as a game that you win in order to do what you believe is the right thing for people, instead of a process by which the people decide what's right for themselves. And it's like taking out the pieces in a game of Jenga: every move destabilised the tower a little more. Every time we treat the voters as a problem to be navigated, not as citizens and decision-makers, we undermine a little more of the trust between people and politics that is so essential to good government.

Partisans and technocrats alike assume a wide, essentially unbreachable gap between "what people want" and "what's good for people," and it's through that gap that populists of left and right have charged with a simple question - who are you to tell me what it is good for me?

Laugh at me if you want for experiencing a loser's epiphany, but it was being trampled, repeatedly, by precisely that sentiment that taught me to give up thinking that "being right and coming third" – a phrase used by Tim Farron at a Liberal Democrat conference - was a valuable way of contributing to public life. If you're coming third, and you're still not questioning your conviction that you're "right" then you're doing something wrong.

Initially, the political obliteration that was visited upon the Liberal Democrats in 2015 shattered my faith in our political system. I remember standing in the party headquarters in the cold light of the morning after, as we waited for Nick Clegg to arrive back in London from Sheffield. Paddy Ashdown, who had somehow been a hero of mine even before I

was interested in politics[2], stood in the middle of the office, strewn with campaign debris. With his voice breaking he asked the simple question of us all: "Why would anyone ever act in the national interest again."

By helping to provide strong, stable government for five years; by enacting policies we believed in on education, climate change, and tax; and by trying to tell the truth about the compromises necessary for a small party to make in coalition, we had done what we thought was right. And the party had been all but obliterated.

But the people I (broadly) agree with kept being defeated. Labour moderates were crushed by Jeremy Corbyn. The Liberal Democrats were crushed again, two elections in a row. The remain campaign was crushed by Brexiteers. And Conservative moderates were crushed by the leavers and the radicals.

On the morning after the Brexit campaign, I took myself to Ikea to buy office furniture for the charity I had set up. I couldn't concentrate on real work, and I liked the idea of saying I had done something European that day. I even had Swedish meatballs for lunch. I was at Ikea when I received a message from an old school friend, who was feeling as anguished as I was. "What is the point of democracy," she wrote, "if the vote of an educated person is worth the same as the vote of an idiot racist?"

That sentiment has become common currency among people I used to think of as my fellow travellers. An increasing number of political thinkers of a generally liberal, progressive frame of mind, frightened by the rise of populism, are exploring precisely that anti-democratic sentiment. It might be expressed in anger, like my friend above. It might be expressed in pity, as another friend posted on Facebook: "In 1917, they were cannon fodder. In 2016 and every year since, just fodder. Stupid, stupid, gullible fools." Or it might be heavyweight academic theories like Garrett Jones' case for 10% less democracy, which I mentioned in the first paper.

It's the one thing that holds the centrist liberals and radical populists together: a rather dim view of human nature. And that is a bridge I am

2   As it happens, I first heard of him when my next-door-neighbour-but-one stood against him in the 1992 general election, which seemed to an 11-year old like an impossibly glamorous thing to do.

not willing to cross. I am as convinced as ever about the importance of liberal values. As convinced as ever about the importance of expertise in public life. But not ready to give up on people, and think of democracy only as a hurdle to navigate around.

We have to find a new way to do democracy, not give up on it. In the rest of this paper I hope to convince you of what I have come to believe: that our leaders need to abandon the heroic stance and adopt a humble one. At its simplest, I want to make the case that it is often more important to find the answer we can agree on than to find the correct answer.

AGREEMENT IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

Lots of people will disagree with the last couple of sentences, so let me explain.

Partisans will consider a focus on "what we can agree on" to be a capitulation to their opponents. Partisans, as we've seen, often take rather a dim view of the intellect or morality of their opponents, so the idea that one ought to give them political house room is pretty upsetting.

The partisan way of thinking about policy is simple: there is an ideologically correct way of settling things, and that your job is to decide the right thing and go out and campaign for it.

In fact, people who do otherwise - who engage with the voters, or the opposition - are considered sell-outs. It was incomprehensible to Conservative backbenchers that Theresa May might reach out for Parliamentary support to the Labour party. The Labour party still condemns Tony Blair for indulging in focus-group politics, as if giving a damn what the voters want or think is immoral.

This whole paper is designed to contradict this idea that there is something wrong in involving the voters to identify consensus. It's not just morally defensible and practically sensible, it's also the only way to get policies that actually work to resolve those problems filling up our Too Difficult Box.

I'm going to set out the pragmatic case for cross-party working in a moment, but let's start with the basic point about democracy. It's a compromise.

Democracy is where everyone gets a vote, not just the people who you agree with. Labour say they stand for the interests of the many, and not the few: if that's the case, they ought to be interested in the ideas, values and priorities of the many, not just the few. Conservatives, too, claim their policy agenda benefits the whole country; if half the country is at your throat then maybe you're wrong.

The one simple fact most partisans need to be reminded of is this: whatever party you are in, the majority of people in this country did not vote for you, and they have as much of a right to a say in how this country is run as the ones who did. I know that it is hard to stomach. Let me share one message I received from a former colleague, whose opinion I respect tremendously, after I sent him a paper exploring questions about healing divisions in our democracy.

"I am heartily sick of the depolarise narrative that appears to place an unhealthy and patronising emphasis on - for want of a better word - Remainers understanding why Brexiters voted as they did. How about idiot racists now at risk of losing their jobs understanding why Remainers valued collective investment in our future?"

This, of course, is a reaction to one particular divide in our politics: between Remainers and Brexiteers. There are days when I, too, wake up feeling like this - longing for the certainties of partisanship. There is almost nothing more satisfying in politics than believing you are right, and your enemies are wrong. It fills you with righteous indignation when you are losing and righteous glory when you are winning. But there is a liberal imperative to listen, learn from, and engage with the ideas and critiques of your opponents, whether you're winning or losing.

Learning

First: you can only learn from a place of humility. It is extraordinary political arrogance to assume that you, and those in your tribe, have the sum of human knowledge and understanding at your fingertips. And

it is historically illiterate, too. On Twitter, recently, I asked my followers to name any issues where, with hindsight, it was clear their political opponents had been right. I got too many responses to list.

Some conservative thinkers told me they'd been wrong about the minimum wage, equal marriage, and climate change. Some progressive thinkers told me they'd been wrong about joining the Euro, the privatisations of the 1980s, and the closure of the coal mines. I know some remain unpersuaded on every one of these issues, but most of them share a common history: a policy pushed through by one party, against strong opposition, which became hegemonic, irreversible change. In an earlier era, it was the founding of the NHS, or welcoming (if that's the right word) commonwealth citizens to the UK. No mainstream politician would propose reversing any of this: closing the NHS? Prohibiting same sex marriage? Reopening the coal mines? Joining the Euro? It is hard to remember a time when these were mainstream arguments; those who argued against them are the losers of history – what seemed at the time to be an ideological, principled case has now been consigned to the curiosity heap of history.

Imagine if Tony Blair had stayed open to criticism about the Iraq War. Imagine if Jeremy Corbyn had really listened to his opponents about anti-Semitism. Imagine if David Cameron had engaged fully with the opposition on the NHS reforms we tried to push through Parliament in 2011. Imagine if Margaret Thatcher had listened to her critics about the social harm her coal mine closures were causing.

The other guys might have a point

This brings us to the second reason to reach out beyond party lines, and engage with the substance of your opponents' case against you: it helps you avoid harm.

Confirmation bias means that once a party, or a minister, has adopted a policy they are putting psychological blinkers on that make it hard to see negative consequences from their actions. The opposition also puts on blinkers, but in mirror image: they struggle to see the possible upside of anything the government does. But together, they can see the whole landscape, and actually improve the quality of policy making.

When I worked in government, I was introduced to an adviser who had been brought in by the Conservative party to support the introduction of police and crime commissioners in England and Wales. My colleague Steve Hilton introduced me with the following words: "You know how I told you that everyone who stands in your way is an establishment stooge who needs to be ignored? Well, Polly is different. Her concerns are legitimate and you should listen to her."

Because we were in a coalition, I had been put into this closed space, where we were allowed to talk about the possible negative consequences of the policy, blinkers off. Liberal Democrats were worried about an elected person taking charge of the local police if they had the support of only a small minority of voters: this could lead to divisive policing, targeting one part of the community on behalf of another. In the US, there are only two real parties, and they have primaries to choose their candidates. In the UK, where we have multiple parties, it might be possible to win a police commissioner election with perhaps 20% of the vote. As a result of that conversation, we agreed we would elect PCCs through the SV system, where each voter gets to rank their first and second preferences. This puts greater pressure on the candidates to appeal to people across the broad spectrum of their constituency.

This is one small change that has made little difference in practice and is, sadly, in the process of being abolished. But it's a helpful reminder of the way in which engaging with people who disagree with you can help knock the rough edges off your policy. Some would argue that Parliament exists precisely for this reason – but with a majority government, its role is limited, and most government policy is not about legislation at all. It is formed and implemented behind closed doors.

As a result, in the normal way of things, change happens, and negative consequences are only dealt with afterwards, once a new minister is in place. They usually inflict a great swing of the pendulum in the other direction that creates a new wave of consequences.

It won't last

And this is the third reason why it is right to pursue broad, cross-partisan consensus for change. No party will rule forever. Your changes will only endure if you have planted the seeds of support among the opposition.

After the Second World War, development rights were curtailed by national reforms to planning policy. Whereas previously landowners had been relatively free to build what they wanted, and what they could sell or rent out, now the state was in control of planning development. All but the smallest building works had to be approved. Landowners were paid millions in compensation for having their rights nationalized in this way.

However, there was a new problem. If the state decided you could build, the value of your land would go up. You'd already been compensated for the loss of value, so this created what seemed like an unfair benefit. The Labour government therefore also introduced a development land tax, meaning landowners who were granted building rights had to give back that uplift in land value. The Conservatives opposed this policy, because they said it was unfair and would discourage people from building. They promised to overturn it if they could.

Imagine you are a landowner. You could apply for planning permission to build 100 houses today, and pay a development land tax. Or you could wait until there's a Conservative government, build your 100 houses then, and make far more profit. Unsurprisingly, lots of people sat on their land and waited. A Conservative government won the 1952 election and repealed the land tax, enabling many landowners to make large profits.

The next Labour government thought this was unfair. They introduced new legislation that would charge a 40% Betterment Levy on land sales or the granting of planning permission. Once it had come into force, landowners kept property off the market, expecting the tax to be repealed. In 1970, it was.

The third post-war Labour government tried again in 1976, creating a Development Land Tax at 80%. And you already know what happened next: the Conservative government repealed it.

Land taxes may be one of the worst examples of pendulum politics in our political history. But it is a telling one, where even the effectiveness of the policy during its periods of implementation was jeopardized by its political fragility.

Like it or not, in a democracy, policies only stick once they become the settled consensus. The process of building alignment between competing interests and different value sets is essential if you want to secure lasting change. We saw in the first pamphlet in this series the way political short termism has jeopardized lasting change on social care. Housing and infrastructure funding is in a similar mess.

Contrast the settlement achieved over pensions reform. A cross party process, involving business and labour unions, built consensus over a number of years for a new system of auto enrolment of workers into an occupational pension scheme. This policy was legislated for by the Labour government, but implemented by a coalition that had promised to cut regulation. Billions of pounds of regulatory cost was imposed on business – to the benefit of society – by an aggressively deregulatory government because the political work had been done, already, to bind their hands.

So there are three principled reasons to explore opposition ideas and build consensus if you want your policy agenda to actually work. Your opponents might be right. Your policy might get better if you take criticism seriously. And bringing people behind you is the only way to make sure it sticks.

What campaigners do

The best argument against this pursuit of consensus is that it protects the status quo and prevents radical change. Pioneering car maker Henry Ford is reputed to have said that if he'd asked his customers what they wanted, they wouldn't have asked for a car, but a "faster horse". Campaigners often have a similar view. Their job, after all, is to introduce and make the case for a new idea - be that women's suffrage, carbon taxes, gay marriage or EU membership - regardless of whether people are in favour of it or not.

So let's be clear. I am not suggesting we give up on policy change, or give up on campaigning. I'm simply suggesting we need to adjust our mindset about how campaigns bring about change. Too often, campaigners pursuing a radical change seek only to influence the powerful, to try to get the change implemented. One obvious pathway is to persuade senior people in the Conservative or Labour parties to

put an idea in a manifesto. If and when that party wins, it gets done. This may seem benign but it's asking for trouble. If the idea is really radical, it's likely to fall at one of the hurdles set out above in The Inconvenient Voters. And the problem cannot be just written off as a lack of leadership by our politicians.

Here's the reality. If you want a change in policy that conflicts with the values or preferences of the majority, then your goal must be to change the values and preferences of the majority. Getting the government to impose something is not the way to do that.

People often pine for an imagined bygone era when politicians showed true leadership, and did the 'right thing' in the face of popular outrage. We often treat doing so as if it were an active sign of virtue; I remember one senior committee member in the Liberal Democrats telling a meeting that what made the party unique was its willingness to be unpopular.[3] We talk as if it is moral to impose the 'right thing' on an unwilling populace, until they learn that the right thing is right: and it's not just the left who do so. The hagiographic story of Thatcher is centred on her willingness to face down the serried armies of her enemies.

It is easy to mock "focus group politics" that follows public opinion instead of trying to lead it. But there is something fundamentally flawed in the idea that it is immoral to engage deeply with the public, including those who do not vote for you, in designing a policy programme. Public choice is the moral centre of democracy. All democrats should prioritise consensus over their personal preference, and never for a moment doubt that this is a moral position to take.

We will always need radical ideas. We just need a better pathway to bringing about consent.

THE PROBLEMS WITH TECHNOCRACY

Any non-partisan technocrats reading this are probably nodding along. They find partisan thinking rather exhausting, and would love to pursue cross-party agreement. And then they add: in line with the evidence.

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3   He wasn't wrong, of course.

So let me turn to them, and make the case for technocratic humility alongside the partisan kind. "What we can agree on" doesn't simply mean we do what the experts say is best for us.

Now: I still get the technocratic urge as much as the partisan one. I, too, have used the phrase enlightened self-interest to explain why things that sound bad for you are actually good for you. I, too, spluttered with indignation when Michael Gove said that people had had enough of experts. This is not going to turn into a postmodern rant that disputes the very existence of facts, or argues that because science is a permanent state of uncertainty, we might as well believe in fairies and homeopathy. Nevertheless there are real limits to what experts and technocrats can tell us about how the country should be run. And there are many policy issues where public consensus itself has a material impact on success.

I want to make three separate, but linked, arguments.

1. The question of "what works" is only relevant once you've agreed on what you're trying to accomplish.

2. Not all questions have a "what works" answer.

3. Even when there is a "what works" answer, technocrats often use over-simplified models of people to design policy solutions which mean the "works" part of "what works" fails to deliver.

That means we need to adapt the way we make policy: we need to stop using technocratic analysis to override public choice. Instead we must have the humility to put technocratic analysis in the service of citizen decision-making.

What works - for what?

Let's start with the first. I have lost count of the number of angry disputes I've witnessed with experts demanding that we do "what works" when what they really want is to change the intended purpose of the policy. Take crime. Michael Howard famously said that prison works. But of course you'll find plenty of criminologists - most, in fact, who will tell you that prison doesn't work. They're both right. It just depends what you are claiming prison accomplishes.

- Does prison work to help turn people away from crime and turn them into law abiding citizens? Not usually.

- Does prison work to deter potential criminals from committing crimes? A bit, maybe, sometimes.

- Does prison work to drastically curtail an individual's ability to commit crime, while they are in custody? Yes.

We have a similar set of circular disputes about benefit sanctions: the system by which if you don't follow the rules set by your JobCentrePlus adviser, you can have your benefits taken away for a number of weeks. Campaigners say: benefit sanctions don't work. What they mean is that benefit sanctions don't increase the number of people leaving benefits to go into work, and they're broadly right about that. However, the people who introduced benefit sanctions didn't ever say that was their goal. Their main goal, as I understood it, was to ensure that the benefit system was not a soft touch, with 'something for nothing' payments to people who were only pretending to look for a job. That may be a bad goal; benefit sanctions may be a bad policy for any number of reasons. But it's a misuse of expertise to say they 'don't work.'

I once got a policy note from the Department for Transport on a proposal for a young people's bus pass. They concluded that it was not cost-effective. This was intriguing because we hadn't told them the intended effect of the policy: it might, indeed, have been an inefficient way to increase bus travel by young people, but it was an extremely efficient way to transfer money to young people who caught buses. Argue about whether that's a good idea, by all means, but don't claim the policy doesn't achieve the intended outcome without asking what the outcome is supposed to be. Experts do themselves a disservice when they end up having an entirely separate conversation from the public. Technocrats should stop saying a policy "doesn't work" when what they mean is that they don't like what it seeks to accomplish.

The fact of consensus
The second problem with technocracy is also to do with scope. Not all questions have a "what works" answer at all.

You can separate questions into two broad categories. Discovery: where there is a correct answer. And agreement, where the right answer is simply the one everyone agrees on.

If I asked you how many words there are in this pamphlet, you could make a guess. We could discuss it between ourselves. But we could also count the words, or get a machine to do it for us, and we'd know for certain. That's a discovery question.

But if I asked you, "What colour should we make the cover?", there isn't a correct answer. The only correct answer is the one we can agree on. These are "agreement" questions, and for those, what matters is the process by which you come to a shared decision. These are decisions whereby the "right" answer is established not by fact, but by the fact that it builds consensus.

In public policy we have treated far too many decisions as "discovery" and left them to experts, without recognising that the process of making decisions is something pretty vital to us as humans. Having someone else decide and hand down the answer is incredibly alienating.

About 10 years ago, my husband and I spent New Year in Bulgaria at a ski resort, in the worst hotel I have ever been to. It was full board, but the catering was so bad that even a group of 20 year old impoverished students chose to buy food elsewhere. The first night, after picking my way through spaghetti so overcooked it had turned into a single solid slab of carbohydrate, I asked my husband to go up and choose me a pudding. He brought me back an orange which had gone mouldy around the top. I was outraged.

"It's the best thing they have," he assured me.

Of course, I didn't believe him, so I went up to the counter. The mouldy orange was, indeed, the best thing they had; but only when I made the choice myself did I have confidence in it. And this is the love of my life, in whom I have consummate trust. Imagine if a stranger, or a government, had brought me that mouldy orange.

Government decisions handed down from on high because they are, according to an expert's determination, the best option, can be like mouldy oranges from a stranger. When it comes to economic growth, for example, the technocratic model rather expects people in left behind

towns or marginalised communities to be grateful because the experts knew (or believed) that the government was doing the best it could, according to the evidence. We basically assumed that people would be pleased at being 2% better off than a counter-factual they never experienced, even when they could see, through the panopticon of envy that forms our social media, other people who were 100% better off.

I learnt this word counter-factual on my first day in government, from a senior civil servant who used it as if it were common parlance because it is, in government circles. It's the ultimate technocrat word. There is hardly anyone working outside the fields of economics, public policy or academic philosophy who uses it.

A counter-factual is a thing that didn't happen. You model out what would happen if you didn't do your policy and compare it to life with your policy. And then you assume that this little model on a piece of paper seen by three people and a Minister is enough to persuade the whole world that life is better because you did the thing you did. In retrospect, it's astonishing that it took the Brexit vote to help us see that this wasn't going to work.

People want the chance to make the decisions themselves, even if that means they might choose the 'wrong' option. There is such a thing as objective truth, but infrastructure decisions, public spending priorities, the structure of our welfare system and how we best manage the pathway to net zero carbon emissions: every one of these is debatable. They are not 1+1.

Of course, many people will argue that there is too much at stake: climate change is too urgent, for example; the needs of benefit claimants are too profound; the need to close that hospital and save lives is too great for us to risk the time, and possible mistakes, of participative decision-making. So let's start with an example where most people agree it's safe to have a community-led decision-making process, because it's low risk: deciding what to put in a new local park.

This is an agreement question, in which there is no single right answer. Nevertheless the choices the community can make are bounded by reality, and the decision-making process needs the benefit of experts. The boundaries of reality include the basic fact that you cannot put Alton Towers into a one-acre local plot, for example. Experts will be

needed to provide information about what kind of plants are likely to thrive in that kind of soil and climate; about the depths of foundations needed for any buildings or play structures; and about likely costs associated with the range of choices people might make. There might be a capped budget, or the local authority might allow people to agree to funding, collectively, a higher cost.

What happens when a community gets together to make the decisions, supported by experts in this way? Is the park any better than it would have been if an expert park designer did the layout on their own? It might be: it might balance the needs of the different park users better than the expert would have done, because they were involved. But participation has value even if it doesn't make the decision any better. It has value because it changes the people who were involved, and it changes their relationship to the policy. Being part of the decision-making process changes the way you feel about decisions: just as it changed how I felt about picking the mould off that orange. Participation triggers what I've treated above as a foe, but can also be an ally: our confirmation bias.

Let's take that insight back to the bigger issues, where there's more at stake, like our benefits system. It is certainly the case that experts still need to be involved. It is certainly the case that there are boundaries to what's possible. But participation changes how people feel about the policy and that has a material impact on whether the policy is successful.

Here's what the technocrats need to understand: legitimacy and popular support are actually essential characteristics of successful policy, especially when we are asking people to tolerate, or even lean into such extraordinary economic and social change.

Climate change policies that are resented and unpopular are not good policies, because citizens will find ways around complying with them: as we saw above, we need mass changes in people's behaviour and angry people won't make those changes, even if the politicians would insist on them.

A welfare system that is resented and unpopular is not a good welfare system, and not just because it is in perpetual political jeopardy. Vulnerable people often stay away from stigmatised services: in the pandemic it seems millions refused to claim benefits because they were

embarrassed to be dependent on them. Contrast our NHS, which has extraordinary legitimacy and popular support and is more effective as a result.

Participative policy making is not the only way to secure widespread public consent, of course, but it can help: the NHS was designed and has been repeatedly redesigned by technocrats. But it has more than 75 years of brand building to trade off, a privilege most policy dilemmas cannot exploit. If we want people to accept change, we have to put them in charge of it.

In the end, the choice is not between the perfect system (according to your technocratic or partisan preferences) and an imperfect one. It's a choice between a system that works because it is widely supported, and one that doesn't, because it is constantly under political attack.

The fact of our feelings

The third problem with technocratic policy making is somewhat different. It's about feelings, relationships, and the 'second invisible hand' of altruism that shapes so much of human societies.[4] Technocrats are much better at understanding, and dealing with the first invisible hand, which means they end up far better at growing the economy than at growing society, and we often get a ripple effect of social consequences in the informal economy, as a result of reform in the formal one. That ripple effect undermines our ability to achieve the intended policy goal.

This is driven, first and foremost, by the data that is available to plug into policy models. These models are getting more complex: we're slowly replacing homo economicus, a game theory version of a human who always acts in his or her own self-interest, with homo behaviouralis, complete with human psychological quirks and biases. But we are still missing vital information from our understanding of how society, and the people within it, operate. There are three key missing components: the gift economy, human feelings, and interpersonal relationships.

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4   Making Democracy Work looked in more depth at this "invisible hand". It's a reference to the invisible hand of the market, a metaphor introduced by Adam Smith in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, in 1759. Demos founder Geoff Mulgan wrote about the "other invisible hand" in a paper of the same name in 1995.

GIFTS: The gift economy is all the things we do for one another without money changing hands. It's every piece of housework we do for ourselves and our families. It's every moment of grandparental childcare. It's every friendly word or supportive text. It's every plaster and wiped tear after a fall in the playground. It's every smile in the street. It's every item of borrowed garden equipment or hand me down clothes. We collect vastly less data about this than we do about the transactional economy, for obvious reasons: without money, there's no data trail. Some feminists, noting that a huge amount of the gift economy is women's labour, argue that our failure to recognise it is a symbol of patriarchal thinking. They have a point, but there are also benefits (including to women) to keeping the eye of the state off the gift economy: everything we do for one another for free is also tax free.

RELATIONSHIPS: The gift economy is closely linked to the other characteristic of human nature that policy models struggle with: our relationships. When you're putting people into a spreadsheet, it's much easier to put them in as individuals. Some systems look at households, and some at family units, which are a slightly better reflection of how we live our lives, but mostly still far too simplified. We are social creatures, and our networks of relationships can have a profound impact not just on ourselves but on the success policies have in our lives. When you ignore them, you end up with huge policy blind spots.

Social care is a good example: the number of relationships a person has with people who are willing and able to care for them without financial reward, the lower their need for formal, paid care. And yet policy makers have almost no data on, or strategy to improve, relationships. We prioritise the formal economy, often because it's the only thing we have real data about, and forget to price in the impacts to the gift economy. When women - it is usually women - step into the formal economy, the time they have available for the gift economy shrinks. Sometimes outcomes worsen: children with working mothers are more likely to be overweight, for example. And sometimes the state steps in to cover the costs of rising unmet need, as it does with social care provision.

Because we struggle to count or model relationships, we also focus on individuals, and build almost all our public service and legal frameworks around them, even though few of us are entirely independent of other people. Just one example: the banks will tell you that you, and you

alone, are responsible for your PIN and your online banking password. And yet a third of people know someone else's. A fifth of carers look after someone else's finances. One in ten has impersonated their loved one on the phone because it was the only way to get past privacy rules. Policy makers have almost no answers to this.

FEELINGS: That's in part because they affect the final piece of human experience that policy makers struggle with: feelings. Politicians do care about how people feel about policies, of course, but that's different from recognising that feelings are of material relevance to policy design and policy success. Occasionally you will find ways in which feelings are measured: consumer and business confidence, for example, are tracked. But these are rare exceptions to a rationalistic model which presumes feelings are an irrelevance at best, and an impediment to understanding at worst.

This is short sighted. As consumer confidence shows, feelings actually change outcomes, they're not just a reflection of outcomes. They affect how people behave. They affect how people respond to debt crisis. They affect crime rates. They even affect medical outcomes - and medicine is one sphere in which, slowly, policy makers are starting to realise it.

Medicine is one of the fields in which experts dominate choices. It's not like buying a sandwich, where you'll trust your judgement, or even a TV, where you might get some expert advice, but you're confident you know pretty much what you're looking for. In the standard medical model, people go to the doctor when they don't know what's wrong. The doctor uses his or her knowledge and insight to identify the problem and prescribe a solution.

Economists call markets like this ones with high asymmetries of information. Markets with high asymmetries of information require closer regulation and scrutiny because it's much easier to manipulate and abuse someone who is following the vendor's advice about what to do. We have an entire medical professional regulatory system to ensure good standards from doctors. But one thing that struggles to deal with is the doctor's sense of his or her own heroism, as the source of information.

That becomes a problem when doctors consider themselves a source of information that, in fact, only the patient has access to. Sometimes doctors diagnose problems, fix them, and then discover that the patient still has the problem they had at the beginning. My first serious boyfriend was a competitive rower, and he'd injured his knee. He got a job which came with private medical insurance, which he was thrilled about as he could get fast track surgery to repair it. The surgeon pronounced the surgery a success: the cartilage around the knee cap was now fixed. My boyfriend was still in pain.

This isn't a one-off; particularly when it comes to musculoskeletal problems, surgery often doesn't have the impact both doctor and patient hoped for. So, from the 1980s, doctors started to collect what they called Patient Reported Outcomes. Instead of the doctor deciding if a treatment had worked, they asked the patient. As a recent paper on the history of PROs states:

> "[The] patient can tell many things like thoughts, complaints, opinions that technology or any observer can't and which is actually more valuable. Further to add, in some diseases survival is not the ultimate goal of the treatment but quality of life also plays an essential role in the treatment."

Doctors, like most experts, are an absolutely essential part of a healthcare system. But the hero model is the exception, rather than the rule in modern medical challenges. Of course - sometimes it's the invention and deployment of a vaccine that changes the game, and we should be in awe of the scientists who produce them. But most of our society's medical problems are ones where patient choices, patient feelings and patient capability are fundamental to outcomes. A doctor can tell me that I would be healthier if I ate less cake and exercised more often. A doctor can test my blood pressure and cholesterol. But a doctor cannot be beside me and prevent me from eating the cake, or take me out for a run in the park.

Modern medicine is slowly changing, reflecting the reality that, most of the time, you can only solve the medical problem if you put the patient in control. We can all understand that how the patient feels about their diet regimen is more important than the precise nutrients in every

forkful of food. Policy makers need to make the same journey: instead of focusing all their effort on designing the precise diet of policies, they need to focus on how people feel about the policies.

And sometimes, feelings are the outcome that matters most. After all, why do we care about GDP if it's not in order to improve people's well-being? If GDP went up but well-being went down, we wouldn't be winning.

Some technocrats seem to want to strip people of their emotions, educate them into rationality, train them to stiffen their upper lip and spend more of their evenings reading data tables and calculating risk parameters - perhaps then, they think, democracy could work. But feelings are not just an inconvenience: feelings are the outcome that matters most. Feelings are the reason we care about doing the right thing, not the barrier to the right thing. If you disregard them to make your model work, and abjure people to be happy because the model told them they should be, you've got your telescope the wrong way around.

The humble technocrat
Of course for all three factors - gifts, relationships and feelings, some will argue that we just need better models that do put all this into the mix of policy design. We certainly can, and should improve the models. We should shift the outcomes we care about to those ones reported by citizens themselves as the ones that make life worth living: well-being and life satisfaction. But complexity theory tells me we will never have perfect models of the complex, living, interconnected systems humans create. We saw in the pandemic that some kinds of problems are far better resolved by local and hyper-local activity: community organising, which leveraged local social capital, was not just faster and more personalised, but also more efficient and effective in getting food to shielding people and families in food poverty. This shocked many technocrats who thought a standardised, centrally procured system is always the most efficient. It cannot be, because it's incapable of interacting with, and leveraging, the complexity of human feelings and relationships.

Of course: not all problems can be solved this way. The centralised apparatus of the state (while leveraging local relationships to use non-NHS buildings like cathedrals) was fundamental to the success of the vaccine roll-out. There is still vast need for technical innovation, science-led discovery, infrastructure investment and other things that the state is, on balance pretty good at, and should carry on doing. But when you look at the unresolved problems queueing up at our door you realise that they are unresolved precisely because they are not the things our current state, with its heroic model of management, is any good at. If we want to fix them, we need to go about governing in a different way.

CAN YOU FIX IT?

A fundamental law of politics is that it is far easier to identify problems than to identify solutions. I hope I've made the case that we're harming democracy by trying to ignore difficult conversations with the voters, and sneak policies past them when they're not looking. I've explained why partisan thinking harms our ability to create lasting solutions, and I've poked holes in the technocratic fantasy that all problems can be solved by three clever people, a spreadsheet and a randomised controlled trial.

But what do we do about it?

The answer, I believe, lies in humility. It lies in accepting that policy makers, experts and technocrats are the servants of our democracy. Instead of putting our hero armour on to quest for the right answer, we need to be humble, and search instead for what citizens can agree on. We must devolve power so it's close enough to citizens that they want to get involved. We must stop arguing about what works unless and until we've decided what we want to accomplish. We must involve citizens themselves in the driving seat of participative policy-making: by doing so we can design policies that have popular consent and widespread legitimacy and are, therefore, more successful policies. And by involving people directly, we bring information into the policy process about the feelings, relationships and complexity that bureaucracies find it impossible to perceive.

I'm talking about a lot of hard work for citizens, here. And that's important. Because the heroic model of policy making isn't just failing

because our leaders are wrong, or the models the civil service builds aren't clever enough. It's failing because it lets citizens off the hook of being responsible for their choices and their consequences, and in the face of extraordinary change in our lives and circumstances that isn't good enough. If we put the weight of the state into efforts to help us find settled solutions to shared problems – those 'answers we can agree on' I'm advocating for – it shifts the burden back to citizens to be part of the thinking, part of the process, and part of the solution.

Management theorist Charles Handy wrote that in an uncertain, complex age, business leaders needed to change. "Whereas the heroic manager of the past knew all, could do all, and could solve every problem, the post heroic manager asks how every problem can be solved in a way that develops other people's capacity to handle it."

The heroic policy maker wants to fix citizens' problems for them, but the post-heroic policy maker accepts that instead we need to build their capacity and capability to fix them themselves.

At Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln spoke of government of the people, by the people and for the people. The phrase echoes through history as an expression of the democratic ideal. But we took a misguided shortcut. Technocracy is government for the people; if you have the right civil servants and elected officials, it can even be government of the people. But it is not government by the people, and that is at the root of its failures. Only a radically more inclusive democracy will be able to navigate the collective catastrophes we're currently heading towards.

As John Stuart Mill wrote 150 years ago: "A state which dwarfs its men … even for beneficial purposes, will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished." For generations, we have had a democratic system that has dwarfed its men - and women. People have been denied the opportunity to learn from the process of democracy - from being part of decision making in local, responsive organisations connected to their everyday lives. It is no surprise that sometimes people ask for the impossible when they have had no opportunity to learn about the difference between the possible and the impossible.

Our system has taken responsibility away and put it all into the hands of distant representative politicians, hidden in complex and unresponsive institutions. Our leaders wrote legislation that no-one could understand.

They designed solutions for ciphers instead of flesh and blood human beings. They took decisions based on cost-benefit analyses that bore no relationship to what people wanted or preferred to happen in their place. They infantilised and alienated citizens with opaque policy process, and pyrotechnic politics that rarely tackled the big issues.

Government for the people is failing. Government by the people has the best chance of succeeding.

I will be accused of naivety. Of an idealistic view of human nature: that people have the time, capability, patience, and intelligence to take more decisions for themselves. In fact, I am not naive about human nature at all. I think it's clear that humans are a peculiar species with all sorts of tendencies that make us rather poorly adapted to the circumstances we find ourselves in today. We are bad at understanding reality: ask the average person in the UK how many Muslims live in their country, chances are they will overestimate by 10 or even 15 times. Ask them how many women experience sexual harassment and they'll underestimate by half. We are hamstrung by our cognitive biases. We are naive and foolish and prejudiced. We live in stories, not facts. But we're also a source of extraordinary compassion, bravery, understanding and innovation. Flesh and blood humans, with all our faults, are the source of all our joy and purpose in living.

We need a democracy that builds on the peculiar strengths of the human species, not its peculiar faults. The central strength is this: the more we know each other, the more we trust each other, the more we will do for one another. That means building trust, knowledge, and relationships is an essential part of statecraft. Devolution; public participation; citizen empowerment; developing societal resilience and community capacity to resolve problems: these are the key ingredients of the policy revolution we need.

As we saw in the first two papers, great and growing diversity of interests and fragmenting social capital are reducing the scope for policy we can agree on, as each day goes. That's why the new era of post-heroic policy needs to go beyond involving the public more deeply in policy choices. We need to go one step further. We need a policy programme to create the conditions for consensus in society, starting with trust and shared identity. That will be the focus of my final paper - The Gravitational State - in a couple of weeks.

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