

**Disorder!**

and

**Survival**

Essays by

David Howell



‘Three Essays on technology and human relations.

Digging deep beneath the present discontents.’

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# DISORDER AND SURVIVAL

*Can the centre hold or is the rest 'mere anarchy'?*

*A Collection of Three Essays by David Howell*



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## INTRODUCTION

*Professor Jürgen Habermas, one of our leading philosophers and political thinkers, has decided to revisit his past views on democracy and governance in the light of the all-pervasive digital revolution and the trends towards fragmentation, break-up and dispute which many assert it carries with it<sup>1</sup>. He is right to do so and it would be good if more of those in practical politics did the same.*

*Attached in this pamphlet are three recently published essays by David Howell which conclude, contrary to the views of many pessimists, that Yes, **pace** WB Yeats<sup>2</sup>, the centre of orderly society can just about hold, **provided that** those in authority and places of*

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas: A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics

<sup>2</sup>WB Yeats – The Second Coming : “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is lost

The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.”

*influence recognize the radical alteration (and blurring) in relations between the State and civic society; and indeed in human relationships in almost every sphere, that has been brought about by the technological upheaval of the last five decades. As a result political fragility and instability seem the new spreading norms in state after state and society after society.*

*Let us be clear – and honest. This is an upheaval **far greater, deeper and more disruptive even than the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution with all its immense political and social consequences, and with the eventual crisis of democracy shaking every institution and reshaping history.***

*Everyone knows we're facing an age of disorder and potential disintegration, but the proviso above is critical. Far too few in practicing politics, or the media or the 'influencer' class', recognize the causes or the consequences if we just drift on. Something akin to a new Enlightenment is called for with the philosophers stepping forward where the politicians and parties are so clearly failing, or merely trading abuse and accusations, while the world rolls away from them (and us).*

So here goes with a trilogy of essays seeking to encourage much deeper and more serious attention by serious leaders on what is THE central feature of our altered lives and circumstances - which is pervasive, growing all the time, global ,national, local, highly political , right in the front door, deeply influential in all our daily existence, life-styles, hopes, fears and attitudes. Yet amazingly few, especially in the political and policy spaces, appear ready even to

acknowledge, let alone address, adjust to or set about repairing and responding to this completely fundamental transformation in the way the world now works, and the direction in which it is headed.

*In the first article Lord Howell shows how electronic immediacy and transparency, mixed with grotesque information volume overload and chronic fakery on an ever-growing scale, have destroyed most middle ground **deliberation** in policy debates and in relations between the state or public sector and the society it is meant to serve (now no longer the other way round, as too many still assume).*

*Instead, we have a pathetic polarisation of debate, with the binding agents, the 'glue' which once kept society together, crumbling fast and almost no public institution fully trusted.*

*In the second part Howell argues that societies can only hold together (at all levels) against vast centrifugal forces ('the Centre cannot hold') if these dangers, and the slide to anarchy they threaten, are understood and vigorously countered. The very instruments and technology trends which via the communications revolution have distorted and destabilised must be turned and used to re-unify and re-assemble what they have been busily destroying. If nothing is done Mandeville's Fable of the Bees is cited as what will happen to society and humanity.*

*In the third essay, Howell welcomes the signs that at last some of the world's philosophers and political thinkers are slowly revising their earlier preconceptions about representative democracy and the modern state, to reflect the greatly altered balance of power and*

*influences both inside individual societies and in the wider world order . At the heart is the imperative need for the administrative State, and those who think they are empowered to change it, to reinterpret attitudes to the civil order from which the State's legal validation in fact now springs.*

*Despite society's increasing fragmentation and silo-isation, both sectors' shifting roles, public and private, (dependent on each other, as they have become) must find new and more trusted means for working together. To be urgently addressed are rapidly worsening collective problems and collapsing standards, domestic and especially international, and the need to construct new networks and alliances, as well as refresh old ones.*

Sunday November 12, 2023



# ESSAY 1

## WHAT LIES BENEATH

*The need for roots, balance — and a new Enlightenment*

Published in TheArticle – 14<sup>th</sup> Nov 2023



Rishi Sunak, Elon Musk and a new Enlightenment?

We have to, we just have to, make a better fist of understanding the roots of the modern world and the causes of many of our troubles. To do that we have to go deeper, much deeper, than the usual catalogue of issues and challenges, or tirades about broken Britain and demands for a new and shinier future.

As barbarities mount around the world, causing populations to turn inwards and vistas to narrow, it is plain that the great hope of human progress, which carried us through a bloody 20th century, has faltered again. The Enlightenment, which triggered the rise of many modern values (much of it taking place in Britain), which showed how science and

humankind could be brought together, and which pushed aside the superstition and harsh manacles of lives “nasty, brutish and short”, has ceased to shed light on much of the world. It must be revisited and reinterpreted if we are to start moving forward again, or at least prevent the drift backwards to a darker age of disorder and violence.

In the 18th century, it was Voltaire who looked with admiration on British thoughts and freedoms and described us as “a nation of philosophers”. But where are the philosophers today? Where are the modern equivalents of the coffee-house swirl and intellectual tumult? They brought balance, not bloodshed, to British politics, government and constitutional reform (slowly down from precedent to precedent), in the face of vast and fast industrial advance and the enormous social upheaval that went with it.

The time is surely long overdue for another Lockean *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Now it would be an “Essay Concerning Human Relations” – all aspects of which have been changed at every level of existence, life and work, by the microprocessor and the communications revolution. These are now shading off into the Artificial Intelligence Revolution – artificial intelligence being spawned from, and having to be dovetailed in harmony with, human intelligence – itself already being melded with, and deeply distorted by, the digital age.

But do we live anymore in an enlightened age, or an age of progress and hope at all? Are today’s intelligentsia afraid to come forward with their superior insights on this central question, for fear of being branded as insufficiently progressive or class conscious? Are they afraid to ask again what the whole digital upheaval, so far, with its intrusive transparency, its information overload, its identity pressures, its silo separatism, its giant paradoxes of hyper-connectivity and yet fragmenting hyper-individualism, have done to *every* kind of relationship in society and the nation, from the

humblest to the most international, from the innermost part of family life to the loftiest aspects of world order?

The evidence on all sides tumbles in. Start with the basics, family relationships. Parents lose authority over their children (truancy is soaring). Parental control, let alone mutually respectful dialogue, becomes increasingly exhausting, the more so with heat and light bills that cannot be paid, food that cannot be afforded. So the family unit, still the fundamental building block in society, turns out, like school buildings, to be developing aerated holes in it, creating unsafe foundations at the very roots of the stable society.

Move one up from the family to the community and local relationships, now filled with empowered and blogged anger and more assertive than ever. Yet these relationships are weaker, too, as the internet keeps people at home, fixated to the laptop screen and away from sustained community cooperation altogether, leaving the “tedious business” of local government in less experienced and more impulsive hands.

Devolution and decentralisation are all the rage. Yet the other balancing side of the constitutional process, the paramount need for central coherence and a framework, as Immanuel Kant long ago explained, hardly gets a mention.

Move up again to national governance and the nation state. “Everyone needs a nation to love”, opined the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali two decades ago — a man much maligned. Yet his words once again took us to the edge of the yawning gap, the consuming contradiction – that love of homeland, or the idea of the home country, now polarises and is many times amplified into dislike of the foreign, the opposite, the “Them”. “Us” first please is the insistent populist chorus – pressures on governments everywhere to spend on “Us” first, to put treatment of domestic social ills well before helping the ills of others. And

the weaker or more precarious the government, the more vulnerable it is to every minority demand for more homeland funding, leading inevitably to higher inflationary pressures, more erosion of real wages and more pay militancy, compensatory wage demands and more cost inflation — the whole doom loop.

Move finally to the international level. There relations have altered beyond recognition, with the new instant information and comment flow, with the new online rumours taking wings, the new shower of bogusly authoritative blogs and with outright fakery of increasing sophistication.

Here is an entirely new opinion milieu of which too many sleepy diplomats seem still sadly unaware. Yet it changes the tally of who are a nation's best friends on which occasions, the best kind of allies, best associates, and who are genuinely like-minded in a shifting international landscape. And it changes radically the best ways of relating to other societies.

Just as the unfolding digital age so far has already placed transforming demands on human relations, and the ordering of human affairs, at *all* levels, along comes AI awareness to place juddering further demands on individuals, on families, on institutions and on society to adopt new attitudes and new behaviour.

With the AI upheaval, as with previous pivoting points, come the usual sillinesses and wild predictions. Thus we have Elon Musk announcing, and given dismally uncritical attention in doing so, that AI will put an end to work as we have known it. This is a crass misunderstanding of everyday life, both family and social, where unending tasks await attention — in the home, in the neighbourhood, in the community and beyond, and where there is never any shortage of work, either for betterment or more often to halt deterioration and keep things the way they are, or seemed to be (usually rose-tinted).

Musk means of course, an end to swathes of routine wage-earning or salaried work – a declining proportion of total employment. But even that demands a mindset which can separate paid job income, necessary for living and breathing and daily existence, from other kinds of — often hard — work which may not be paid, or paid very little, but is rewarded by lifting the spirit and making a contribution in a satisfying and fulfilling way.

No-one is being taught to think this through, since it does not immediately mesh with any of our inherited “values”, from Marx or the market. Few policy-makers show much interest in the bigger question which follows, namely how to resource with income, dignity and security the millions (the majority) who find themselves in this entirely transformed milieu. That matter, the fair distribution of asset growth, as well as from income generated now almost entirely by machines, becomes the hottest and most intractable political issue of all. It cannot be ducked or sidelined or dismissed as a mere matter of distribution. Distribution of life’s goods is *the* central political question, which so far digital capitalism has spectacularly failed to resolve.

In the recent confabulation about AI at Bletchley Park, there was plenty about international sharing of technical knowledge. But there was little or nothing about sharing in the new enlightenment, about how resources for daily life will require a fundamental change of attitude to distribution of wealth and income, as well as in personal views about the way life will have to be lived to stay in harmony with the new science and technology closing all around us; and how to tame it.

As Robert Skidelsky observes in his ambitious new volume *The Machine Age: An Idea, a History, a Warning* (Allen Lane, £25), we enter this new world of free will but then find escape from our imprisonment impossible.

The deep mining of intellectual origins to guide us through this predicament is just not happening. Instead we are subjected to a relentless flow of shallow thinking in almost every column, in almost every interview or discussion, but especially on the morning radio shows. The art of the good and informative political discussion, rooted in intellectual integrity and the search for truth, has truly been lost in a cascade of point-scoring and outright hectoring exchanges, with ceaseless interruptions from over-opinionated but under-informed interviewers barely allowing answers before they answer their own questions.

I suspect this is one reason for the rise of podcasts, where at least there is a chance of frank and friendly exchange in conversation and something gets learnt, while idiotic yes-or-no questions are usually avoided. But even here the banalities keep surfacing and flooding out serious reflection as to *why* things should be as they now are, or are plainly becoming.

Why, for example, the atmosphere of total distrust of all the apparatus of governance? Why the lack of trust, lack of respect, lack of patience, lack of belief? Why the lack of the binding agents which hold the centre together strongly enough to contain dissent but preserve a reasonable degree of social and national unity?

This is the glue of association and identity that has gone, leaving the fragments to proliferate and scatter. But if no-one stops to ask why, especially now, why we are so clearly moving *not* into a new age of Enlightenment but out of one — with evidence of a slide back to mysticism, superstition, paranoia, mindless crime, repression and incipient madness — then there can be no lasting repairs and no recovery. We cannot address the key points of weakness, with no check on the disintegrating slide, and no progress — in fact the opposite.

With the shutters going up all around, the situation is fertile for bogeymen and conspiracy panic, for a scattering of “my truth” in place of the search

for the Truth, and for a questioning of everything by everyone.

Uncertainties now prevail all round, with shoulder-shrugging to end every quest for answers – to massive climate dangers ahead, to social breakdown, to bottomless racial hatreds, to insoluble territorial clashes and ambitions, often laced with religious or ideologically brewed fervour being fed fatally into the mix.

Listen to many public affairs broadcasts and you hear how something called ‘The Government’ is the bogey figure to blame for pretty well everything, wrong at every step, failing to support anything, motivated entirely by the short term and its own survival interests, out of touch and all the rest.

It is as though we had slid back from democracy to the age of autocratic and unpopular monarchs, still claiming divine right and trying to save themselves by one wrong-headed measure after another. It must have been a bit like this in the 1630s and early 40s, the time before the Civil War, when fewer and fewer people had a good word, or reasoned argument for the struggling Stuart monarch, or even for the assertion of divine right, that had once seemed so unarguable and sacred.

Now it’s the Government that can be blamed for all ills and accused of the lowest motives. Anyone can cry *j’accuse* against this Leviathan, or indeed the even bigger bogey of “The Establishment” (Henry Fairlie’s fantasia of the 1950s) and be sure of an airing. Whether such a thing as the Establishment exists with the slightest permanency at all, hardly matters.

As in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the ground is again fertile for conspiracy theories and allegations, although of course magnified 100-fold in the microcircuit age. Popish plots were the strongest runners then. Today we have even stronger runners.

A good example is the current prevalence of Sinophobia – the belief that China is the evil behind many of our troubles. The pendulum has swung

from the over-the-top golden age of UK-China togetherness of a decade or more ago to fears of Chinese influence round every corner. So far it has not assumed the scale of American paranoia, where China is openly called the enemy and, almost in McCarthyite style, consorting with China — or even calls for balance, for containment but cooperation — are seen as little short of treachery.

This is despite Chinese trade with the USA still running at near record levels, as it is with the EU and the UK. Never mind logic and commerce — we have a new bogeyman with which to scare each other.

Indeed, this is just one corner of a much larger picture of confusion – the fading of any balanced international dimension from the debate or the public mood. The Enlightenment’s original giants were acutely aware of the international setting of their views and the global consequences for humanity everywhere. Today one might assume that constant and instant connectivity did the same. In practice it does the opposite. The more that is revealed of overseas trends and views, the more horns are drawn in, the wider world is shut out, and the more the arena is narrowed to home concerns and cleared of foreign issues and linkages.

The recent King’s speech to Parliament (not his own of course) contained only the barest reference to the darkening storms of world affairs. Yet in the end these will have infinitely more influence on our daily lives, welfare and national security and well-being than any amount of domestic legislation, however worthy.

It is as though no lessons have been learnt. What should have come first comes last, or not at all. The old mindset has prevailed, perhaps more strongly than ever, over the new facts of the age. Science and humankind are growing further apart, not nearer as our enlightened forebears urged.

We can blame the opinion pollsters, among others, for this excision of wider world awareness from intelligent debate and public conduct. Lord

Sumption notes the lacuna in the proceedings of the current Covid Inquiry, where overseas experience and lessons hardly get a mention. Opinion polls put foreign affairs well down the list of public interests, usually about 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>, thus perpetuating the widespread view that there no votes in foreign or world affairs.

The founders of the Enlightenment held quite different views — allowing of course for the fact that many fewer people then actually had the vote. For them the context of the new mind-opening era was entirely international, indeed global. Darwin's vision of how man and woman could live with the machine age applied to all. Others, like Malthus, were confidently definite (although in his case mostly wrong) about the national and international implications of the oncoming machine age.

This brings us to the biggest gap of all in the national discourse, as currently orchestrated, and the strongest argument for going back not just to basic values but to the origins and lessons of the Enlightenment, on which so many assumptions, customs, judgements and values still rest.

It is events, whether man-made or natural, or both combined, lying outside the UK which have had, are having, and will have far the biggest impact on our daily lives and safety and on our national fortunes.

Start with oncoming climate violence, so far almost completely unchecked by emissions reductions, which carry the seeds of wars to come, shortages to come and tragic destruction and loss of life to come. The global energy transition, which is a pan-civilisation upheaval larger by far than any in past history, demands new structures and new politics, which remain as yet unshaped, indeed barely discussed. Meanwhile, total uncertainty clouds the outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Chinese threat to Taiwan, the Afghanistan or Syrian tragedies, the Israel-Hamas-Gaza horror and the result of the US presidential race. Explanations are there none — although

there could be. Vastly greater movements of frightened and starving peoples are the certain outcome, already showing.

In the UK two major parties, both coalitions of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century origin, struggle to stay internally united in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in face of completely new challenges and dangers, with every move guaranteed to expose more divisions of view. Between the two of them, arguments range over long irrelevant issues and yesterday's battles, with every statement filtered in dread of exposing more deeply the divisions which are now there all the time anyway.

At the time of the great opening of enlightened minds between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the printed word dominated and publications like the Spectator were seen as bringing enlightened views and values to the public debate. Is that still their role? Or is thinking still being focussed on the old shibboleths? Has the utter irrelevance of the old axes of debate been exposed, or just ignored by inane chatter pouring especially from the broadcast media? Has the ground been surrendered to the pathetic polarisation of all issues, with no attempt to row back?

Philosophy now has to be restored back on to solid foundations to cope with the waves of change crashing round our past stances and beliefs.

What is now upon us has to be understood, and addressed, within the great pageant of history, not in the latest podcast. The pendulum swings. Truth can be attained. Bring on the philosophers — if it's not too late.

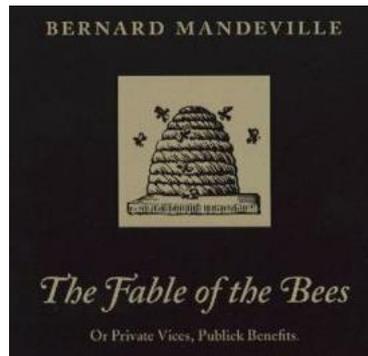


## ESSAY 2

# CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

*From Mandeville's Bees to Artificial Intelligence*

Published in TheArticle – 24<sup>th</sup> December 2023



*Following his call [here](#) in TheArticle to engage the best philosophic minds in keeping the UK and Western nations away from disintegration, and in the absence of any practical and serious lead from political parties, Lord Howell suggests ways to check the gathering slide.*

Not many people nowadays read Bernard de Mandeville's allegorical *Fable of the Bees*, first published in 1705. This described to a shocked world at the time how a large and successful beehive colony stayed bound together and prospered, so long as the bees all pursued their own interests within the law and their relationships one to another, as both individual and essentially social creatures, even if untidily, and with some backsliders. Each creature, by going about its reciprocal business, contributed, even if unintentionally, to the cement of society.

But once they stopped working for themselves and their individual and mutual needs, focussing instead on higher and more perfect state design for general welfare and behaviour, their precious equilibrium was rapidly lost. The framework of society, which no one had planned but in which not only bees but humankind too had always existed, fell apart. Without that

glue, a cohesive society, which all the millions of their individual actions had created, crumbled and their relatively stable and balanced society disintegrated into chaos, division, grievance and immiseration.

So things would also turn out, went Mandeville's thinly disguised message, where in human affairs states spent too much time and effort trying to iron out social blemishes, intervening to insist on virtuous conformity to blueprints of perfection and putting the interests of an increasingly separate and distanced state ahead of people's daily lives and needs. It would all end badly, if ever it ended at all.

What has that got to do with today's planet in its current disturbed state? Or with current democracies – a dwindling number, we are told – or with present uncertainties on all sides? Suddenly, rather a lot.

Having spent 80 years since the second of two appalling world wars seeking to build “never again” global unity, anchored in the rule of law, the mood seems to be moving back towards chaos and disequilibrium. The challenge is not so much how to make progress, as how to prevent further alienation and division. A finger-in-the-dyke mentality is creeping into the debate.

The high hopes, particularly at the end of the last century, after the collapse of the unworkable and disruptive Soviet Union, have given way to tensions and anxieties in this one. The emphasis is now switching from building progress to halting regress, from new and kinder standards to seeing old and hideous barbarities revived, from compromise and dialogue to unvarnished abuse and empty middle ground, and from wider unity to narrow identity and separatism.

Books and journals now pour out with words like “breakdown” and “distrust” peppering their front pages. Experienced servants of the state

talk of the international rule of law “collapsing before our eyes”.

The *Washington Post* says the world order is “fracturing”. The *Economist*, that slim weekly volume of balance and common sense, says declinism is back in fashion, as empires — yet again — look likely to fall.

A recent Open Society Foundation global survey concludes that 42 percent of 18–35-year-olds would prefer military rule to sort things out, and 35 percent would like a leader “who does not bother with parliaments and elections”. PEW surveys pick up the same story in America. Of course, polls are polls and people may exaggerate or misunderstand in their answers to pollsters. But the tone of global discourse has changed distinctly.

We know of course why, or at least what kicked off the present phase. Russia’s bully-boy assault on Ukraine has set the recent world tone, but aggression and disgruntlement were always there. Fury and a sullen sense of somehow being cheated were always there, but the microchip has turned super-amplifier of every grievance and every minority. The channels of connectivity, which we hoped would bring an age of understanding through constant and reflective dialogue, which would bind interests and peoples and generations across continental networks, are now clogged with fakery and dismissive abuse.

The hum of enterprise, of trade, of social exchange, is having to share the platforms with the din of distortion, of hate and of propaganda as never before. The tech giants may genuinely want to wipe poison from their platforms and stay in good stead with customers and regulators. But what they can do is very limited and constantly requires new measures to keep evil material from seeping back into their systems.

So when and where do these problems stop? Probably never entirely, but a sort of check on the slide to anarchy can begin with a realisation and admission so obvious, so central and so omnipresent that it stays unstated.

The digital age, with its immediacy, its transparency, is almost costless ease, its formidable technology, with AI only the latest stage, has altered ALL relations, yes, ALL, from the grassiest of grass roots of daily communication, all between parents and children and schools, to all within communities, all between communities and institutions, between institutions and higher hierarchies and tiers of national authority, and so on up and across the great network of social relations in which human beings live, of which, indeed, they are part.

Above all, where the stakes are highest and the dangers greatest, the relationships between nations and groups of nations have left the old world of diplomacy behind, with its chessboard thrown over by the living web.

The intentional tomorrow so hoped for – of a world-wide social democratic future, and, within each society or nation, much closer links between caring government and contented governed, of wider mutual understanding at all levels of society — has been elbowed aside by other pressures. Instead, a completely unintentional future, not at all what was planned by ideologues or social engineers or by politicians, is rapidly emerging centre stage. Not what the bees, or the reforming ones amongst them, wanted or dreamt about or had the technology to deploy. But not what the would-be architects of ever bigger state interests and involvement planned either.

Immediacy and transparency are the leading destroyers of the old collectivist dream of good and compliant relations between public authority and private lives. Sheer overload, impossible complexity and widespread fakery, now dressed up in AI, adding to the confusion, distrust and bewilderment.

Immediacy of response, tit for tat, of course kills off all time for well-reasoned response, for perspicacity or reflection, for the maturing of any form of trust in any relationships, especially those between officialdom

and people's daily lives. Transparency, dressed up as the right to know everything, pushes on into intrusion, with the freezing of deliberation and the hiding of judgment. Massive overload turns every pronouncement into a chain of clichés and assertive abuse.

Allow all this to sour relationships, and loyalty and respect melt away. A business loses its staff, a cause loses its adherents, a politician loses his or her audience and supporters, an institution loses its anchors, an administration loses all good will.

Here in the UK, in this cosmos of scepticism, distrust and straight disbelief, one wonders whether the party political champions on either side, lining up for the next General Election battle, realise how ridiculous their frontal, untuned shouts of party denunciation and assault, and their promises again of a better tomorrow (no, this time, really) now sound.

For nervous, even frightened, populations, a completely different tone is necessary. A tone that is far removed from the "gotcha" point-scoring of the electoral past or the condescending tone of a state apparatus that thinks it is superior to the society from which its strength, indeed its existence, actually comes.

At the global level, to halt the international deterioration, to make the forces pulling nations together, or most of them, once again clearly stronger than the forces pulling them apart, the very technologies which have so disrupted everything can yet be cleverly turned round to create the new binding forces, the new "glue" of constant communication which has been melting away so fast.

Within each nation, again, the same powers pulling parts of society apart can become the threads which stitch it together again, although with the state playing a new and much humbler role of service and support than in the past. To misquote Tolstoy, each country, like each family, even the

ones which seemed most united, has its own divisions to repair in its own ways and its own bridges to build or rebuild.

America, once glorious in its united dream of states from shore to shore, is now no country for young men — or women. It has a vast task of internal and constitutional renewal to bring it back to strength and wisdom.

The ties which once led towards European unity have gone and entirely new ones have to be devised, more suitable for the internet age. The amazing and enormous network of English language nations has to be pulled together after years of neglect. But the Commonwealth now emerges via digital communication as the one sort of loose, voluntary and broadly like-minded alliance with enough resilience and underlying soft power connections to stay in existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And meanwhile a new kind of connected Africa has to be allowed its own place in its own sun.

Coming from the global to the national level, the societal divisions, like deep flesh wounds, must be held with plaster strips and stitched together, not salted with more tired ideology from a past age and a partisan spectrum of beliefs and aims that now barely connect with the real issues before us. The heart of the matter is not race or gender or class, but reaching with new determination towards a capitalist system that shares, that is democratic, that is fair and spreads dignity and security to millions of households and financial literacy to an entire population, starting in the schools. This was the old dream of the Conservatives. The digital revolution brings a dream of genuinely widened ownership and financial justice to the edge of reality.

When election language and colloquy begin to touch on these fundamental issues, released from their cages by the internet age; when the leadership discourse begins to set our own nation's advance properly in the pageant of history and in the totally transformed world landscape; when the case

for staying together or coming together at every level gains new articulation — then we might just be on the road to avoid the ill-advised and misguided bees' fate.

What happened to them? In the Mandeville story they dwindle to impotence and purposeless penury, powerless to conserve or regain their lost contentment and buzzing in their few remaining numbers aimlessly around a rotting tree hollow.

We can surely do better than that.



# ESSAY 3

## DISORDER VERSUS PROGRESS

*The Centre CAN Hold*

Published in TheArticle – 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024

*Essay Three in the trilogy on the Communications Revolution which has altered everything - politics, representative democracy and the international order in particular – and the need to recognize, understand and respond.*



This is my final try (at any rate for the moment) to divert much deeper attention to a central feature of our altered lives and circumstances which is pervasive, growing all the time, global, national, local, highly political, right in the front door, deeply influential in all our daily existence, lifestyles, hopes, fears and attitudes. Yet amazingly few, especially in the political and policy spaces, appear ready even to acknowledge, let alone

address, adjust to or set about repairing and responding, to this completely fundamental transformation.

Contrary to the views of many pessimists, and *pace* WB Yeats<sup>3</sup>, the centre of orderly society **can** just about hold, **provided that** those in authority and places of influence recognize the radical alteration (and blurring) in relations between the State and civic society; and Yes and indeed in human relationships in almost every sphere, that has been brought about by the technological upheaval of the last five decades.

Let us be clear – and honest. This is an upheaval **far greater, deeper and more disruptive even than the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution with all its immense political and social consequences, and with the resultant crisis of democracy shaking every institution and reshaping history.**

Everyone knows we're facing an age of disorder and potential disintegration, but the proviso above is critical. Far too few in practicing politics, or the media or the 'influencer' class', recognize the causes or the consequences if we just drift on. Something akin to a new Enlightenment is called for, with the philosophers stepping forward where the politicians and parties are so clearly failing, or merely trading abuse and accusations, while the world rolls away from them (and us).

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<sup>3</sup>WB Yeats – The Second Coming: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is lost  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.”

I draw on two previous recently published essays in *TheArticle* shaping and defining the issues. The first one, *What Lies Beneath*, was on the real and deeper causes of present discontents and the need for a new era of Enlightenment, a new kind of John Locke essay on human relations, despite the obvious eventual shortfalls in the ambitions of the original 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century opening movement.

The second essay was on whether the centre can be held in modern societies, to which the answer is Yes, (*pace* William Yeats), PROVIDED that the dangers in present trends are recognised, analysed truthfully and thereby accurately and effectively repaired.

We are speaking of the nature of human relations – relations between people and in the very heart of families, relations between the sexes, relations with institutions and communities, relations, between the individual and the apparatus of state, changes in the nature and role of ‘the state’ itself, relations within the nation state, relations internationally between nations and peoples and interests – requiring quite new forms of international interface and connection (to which the global diplomatic establishment has barely caught on).

### **Placard Politics**

All are in a state of flux. All pave the way for multiplying grievances, for placard politics in place of argument, for dissent shading into hate, and for UN-representative democracy to worm its way in. All these trends are already being fundamentally twisted in new directions by the communications revolution, the loss of deliberation in the immediacy of on-line response, the ugly intolerance of polarisation, the demands of uninhibited transparency, the evaporation of trust and respect for anyone or anything, the freezing of rival opinions into unarguable religions, shutting down all debate and suffocating freedom of speech and expression.

It is the microprocessor, constantly growing more powerful as predicted<sup>4</sup>, that has changed the definition of national security and the means of defending it, changed attitudes to the environment and climate, changed the entire energy scene and transition, and created a new universal balloon of fakery and misinformation, now being further inflated by misuse of AI.

Start making a list – it will be hard, impossible, to finish. The tiny microcircuit has completely transformed learning, leisure, sport, gaming, food and eating (even three meals day is now on the way out.).

It has altered all relationships at the heart of politics and administration, the procedures and connections which make the machinery of governance work. It has recast the business of being old, the business of being young, coarsened every cause and charitable instinct, blurred most distinctions between fact and fakery, agreed truth and disorienting misinformation.

The microcircuit has altered attitudes to government authority and official figures, to parents, to schooling, to religion, to almost all finance, public and private, and the handling of money, to the moral order, or even what that ‘order’ is meant to be.

To recognize these and numerous other dangers would at least enable response to them. But if only this were so. We could then begin to pick out of this patchwork of good and evil, the best areas to preserve and the zones to remove as soon as we are able. We could then begin piecing together again, world-wide and in the closet collusion with like-minded allies, broken links and ties, making ever unfolding new technology our ally, rather than the enemy, in the process.

Alas, most of our foreign policy thinkers, and even more those across the Atlantic, are just not in this game. They are still playing on chessboards in the age of the world-wide web!

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<sup>4</sup> Moore’s Law. The number of transistors in an integrated circuit doubles every two years.

## **The 2100 Survivors**

On the world scene is it interesting to learn (from The Catholic Herald) that the Vatican now sees two sorts of international networks with real lasting qualities, amongst the jumble of fora, defence leagues, treaties, assemblies, agreements largely inherited from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 70 years aftermath from the two horrific world wars. Those two global survivors are seen to be the Catholic Church (unsurprisingly) and the Commonwealth!

I had the lucky chance a decade ago to converse with the then Pope (Benedict) about the then 53 country membership of the Commonwealth, with two and a half billion people (larger by far than the Catholic Church) and new member states lining up to join (now 56+). He was clearly impressed by that number and I was in turn impressed by the way he went on round the room, murmuring reflectively as he shook hands with others, ‘fifty three countries’. Perhaps he saw what breathless Western policy wonks and instant media commentators miss again and again, that the humble chip has empowered a new sort of world-wide populism – obviously fragmented but nevertheless altering the balance of power between people and rulers, between the masses and the inward fortresses of state officialdom, just about everywhere.

He must have seen, as others have not, that the old ‘glue’ keeping nations and alliances together had crumbled. He and those around him must have begun to realize that the new ‘glue’, the new binding agent holding nations in friendly unity, as well as holding individual societies and races in an internal framework of common loyalties, lay more in the use of soft power, in continuous dialogue, exchange and understanding at every level of society, now technologically easy and possible every hour of the waking day, and the night, and far less in the hands of governments alone.

This is the more fluid international pattern of the digital world future, in contrast to past painfully negotiated treaties, yesterday's dogma about purposes and common values, or past hand-on-heart melodramatic commitments about common security or 'being with you to the end' – all the old wooden language of the archaic state when the real call is for the new and more subtle and resilient language of peoples.

That may be why wise heads round the world see the growing and lasting relevance of the Commonwealth model of networking as the century progresses.

2024 is going to be a year of elections in numerous countries – ours here in the UK, and under our noses the American one, which could blow the world apart, and dozens of others. Some will be fairly conducted, some will be blatantly rigged, but all will trade in surface perceptions, deploying rear-view mirror arguments around outdated dilemmas (such as capitalist versus socialist 'systems', Western 'leadership', class warfare, trade protection, conventional 'troops and rockets' defence) parading the dogmas of the past in face of the vast and unfamiliar threats and issues clouding the 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape .

### **Concluding Note.**

Of course our Philosopher Kings of Enlightenment will never be assembled, and if they were, would all disagree.

No amount of enlightened wisdom will help much with immediate crises or with global and geopolitical changes far outside the control of any single government, even the USA, as Americans are discovering to their frustration. New collective mechanisms, including reform or replacement of the UN structure in face of new challenges, will be needed to address

these world-wide trends and dangers, and the morose atmosphere they have created.

Nor within nations, the UK especially, will the light of new wisdom speedily bring forth the degree of solidarity and consilience which a democracy now needs more than ever to obtain consent for every action deemed to be in the public interest.

But over time minds change and the pendulum, at least in an open society, swings. Over time respected voices and skilled articulation can push public sentiment, and policy preferences, in the direction of common ground versus no-man's land, democratic capitalism and financial literacy versus monopoly capitalism and concentrated ownership. It can help create an underlying bed of consensus, however sharp and vigorously argued the differences on the surface above.

Above all, new wisdom can help get at the truth about the limitations of the State, and its validity, in the age of universal information, including the State having to work with and share private power and dispersed power on a scale never before matched.

Even in the realms of diplomacy and repositioning the nation in a changed world we can see weakening central government monopoly (and constitutional authority) being nibbled away by Parliament trying out its own foreign relations programme. This is especially so where there is an official policy vacuum – as at present - on how we work with our close European neighbours much more constructively and creatively, (without being sucked back into the lumbering EU Commission machine) , or by devolved regions, and cities, also entering the foreign policy arena with exchange delegations, permanent offices in other capitals, and 'independent' policy commentaries on world affairs.

All of this promises chaos and bitterness, as already evident by the time Parliament and Government spend arguing over what lies within powers

reserved to the central administration and what has been devolved. Without new clarification and understanding the only outcome must be disappointment turning to outrage, outrage inevitably, to physical dispute and then to violent resistance.

But in the deep ruminative channels of discussion throughout the UK, often far from the public gaze, thoughts may be taking a new shape. The seeds and remnants of the practical but also philosophical angle which Voltaire admired so long ago may still be there embedded in the British character and mindset.

It is now unavoidable that there have to be deep changes of approach, and that common ground has to be found, between and within political factions and parties, on which to proceed. Whoever forms a Westminster Government most of the major issues of our time are well outside the control of one national government. Even within the domestic arena the patterns of power to change direction, to innovate, to touch the levers of growth which are believed to exist, are now in practice mostly outside the State's diminished reach.

Instead a policy establishment and a Parliament aware of its own limitations and aware of the hugely amplified power (positive and negative) of the people in the digital age is still well capable of ensuring that the Centre of society and the nation can hold and that order and a mannered public debate can continue to be combined with freedom of thought, speech and ambition, so that progress may be resumed, although defined differently, in an open society, democratic framework.

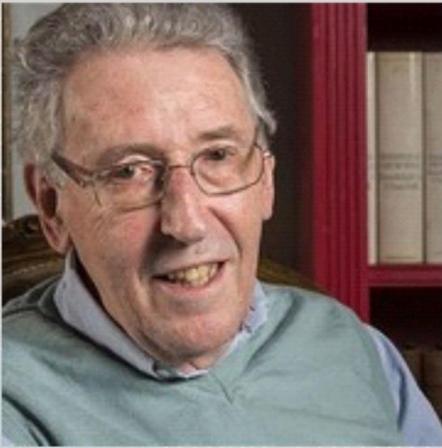




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