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Politicisation and Political Participation:

BEYOND APATHY

Introduction: Politicisation and Depoliticisation

In his paper I want to make the claim that there is room for a cautious optimism concerning the present state of politics and that we should not fall into despair either because of the apparent apathy of the many or the seemingly anti-political activism of the few.¹ Perhaps one of the most curious things about the contemporary world is that it includes both widespread political apathy and increased politicisation. Politicisation, of course, takes different forms: negatively, there has always been concern about politicisation of the judiciary, of the police, of the civil service. In this respect there is a standing battle against politicisation – a battle to ensure that certain things are not made (in the party sense) political. But there are other senses of politicisation too and these are the ones I am interested in here. One difficulty is that the term ‘politics’ and its cognates is irredeemably ambiguous. In what follows it is sometimes used to refer to political activity in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term, sometimes to the established political order, sometimes to party politics, and sometimes to extra-party political activity. The context will, I hope, make it clear which is intended on each occasion.

If we take a standard measure of democratic participation, for example, willingness to vote at elections, the state of politics in many parts of the modern world may be said to be parlous. In recent British parliamentary by-elections turnout fell to around thirty per cent; in the recent American presidential election it was just over fifty per cent. Throughout the industrialised world electoral turnout has steadily declined² over the past thirty years, people are less likely to identify strongly with a political party than ever before, there is declining confidence in public institutions, and less than half of the European public say that they have confidence in their political representatives. Thus, as Anthony King suggests, 'the overwhelming impression ... is one of voter weariness' (cited in Bentley, 2001). Whether we should call this apathy, however, is less certain. Tom Bentley, for one, argues that:

The fault is not so much apathy as political disengagement. People do not talk less or care less about politics than they did in the past; rather, they have become more detached from the institutions of politics and government. (Bentley 2001, 25).

Perhaps people do not talk less about politics, but it does not follow that the overall level of political debate is unaffected by political disengagement. To illustrate. It is frequently said that all politicians are corrupt or merely self-interested, and that they therefore have no interest in reforming the political system out of which they do so well. This sounds plausible, and indeed a well-articulated scepticism might be appropriate. However, the claim as typically made is indicative of unargued cynicism rather than critical scepticism. Reasons can usually be found to accept at least part of the cynic's claims, but it is a matter of proportion. The cynic proceeds a priori; empirical evidence is either interpreted favourably as proving the case or discounted. Cynicism is therefore always hard to refute: but the truth is invariably both more subtle and more interesting than the cynic supposes and will reveal its secrets only to the careful observer seeking to establish conclusions empirically without prejudice. To take one example, all observers can agree that the British Labour Party has little immediate political incentive to alter the electoral system out of which it benefited considerably in 1997 and from which it

will again benefit in 2001. Nonetheless, the Labour government has introduced a variety of new electoral arrangements outside Westminster, thereby creating political experience and expectations which in turn affects the debate over the election of the House of Commons itself. The UK now has party list proportional representation for European Union elections, German style proportional representation for Scottish, Welsh and London assembly elections, preferential voting for the Mayor of London, and the House of Lords is currently being reformed: renewed pressure to reform the House of Commons is bound to follow.

Cynicism and the forms of political argument it inspires damages political argument and is corrosive to the body politic: if left unchecked it deforms and degrades debate and leaves us all open to the ultimate cynical conclusion that politics as such is worthless and best avoided. This is, of course, a nonsensical and dangerous conclusion. Politics is not an optional extra from which we can disengage. If we do not engage politically, either as participant or as intelligent voter-spectator-critic, we do not thereby bring about a better world free from the politics and politicians we despise; on the contrary, the opposite outcome is perhaps more likely.

Perhaps the real issue is what we take to count as politics and what therefore counts as political participation. On the one hand it could be argued that politics is alive and well and that it is merely party politics which is not: witness the rise of pressure group activity, new social movements and the rest. On the other hand it could be argued that politics might occur in ways unrecognised by the participants as politics in the pejorative sense of the word. Much political activity is not carried out under the name of 'politics,' precisely because 'politics' is tainted by association or identification with party politics. At the other extreme would be claims which amount to the politicisation of all activity, whether traditionally regarded as political or not. On this account everything could be regarded as political: this implies a reshaping of the boundaries of the political. But surely not everything can be politics? Or, if it is, it can't all be politics in the same sense. Complete politicisation is either intolerable or vacuous: if it implies that everything is a matter for the state authorities or collective determination it is intolerable; if it does not imply this, it is the extension of a category beyond sensible bounds.

If everything is political then perhaps nothing is political. Where, by contrast, the term ‘political’ denotes not a particular type of activity then. In this paper I want to identify genuinely political activity through observation rather than through re-definition and to observe some of the ways in which the political expresses itself in new forms and in new spaces.

Forms of Repoliticisation

Many young people appear to be apolitical or anti-political. They tend to see politics and politicians either as a problem or as an irrelevance. But that does not mean that they don’t engage in politics; it merely means that when and where they do, they engage in forms of politics untainted by the clammy hand of conventional party politics. The rise of single-issue political protest is an example. In the sequel I shall argue that such protest may contain, as the diamond in the rough, the origin of genuinely political action in a (broadly speaking) Arendtian sense.³ But whether it does or not, it is clear that (if we leave these forms of protest to one side) political indifference and ignorance are Europe-wide concerns. In Britain there is extensive debate currently surrounding the issue of citizenship education which is poised to take its place as part of the national curriculum. The premise of the argument for the inclusion of citizenship education is that there is under-participation in forms of democratic political activity because there is insufficient understanding of the nature and importance of politics and its accompanying institutions. Despite the difficulties of succeeding in this enterprise, it is to be welcomed. One reason for this is that it is at least an attempt to rescue politics from privatisation, from its descent into the realm of the purely private. Politics can be depoliticised in many ways, and one way is to deny the distinction between the public and the private, reducing one to the other. Where the public sphere is reduced to the private sphere, the distinctive features of the public and its associated values (the common good, the general will) are lost; where the private is reduced to the public, everything is politicised, as discussed earlier. Further, reduction of public to private is frequently

twinned with a view of the citizen as a consumer or customer, and the associated conception of the public good as merely the aggregate of individual preferences, where these are typically assumed to be identical with preferences in the market. Here the 'public' sphere comprises simply the aggregate of competing private claims; deliberation is absent and participation is reduced to private acts of consumption on the one hand and occasional acts of voting on the other. Debate is degraded through being reduced to the product of exogenous preferences which are taken to be not the product of rational deliberation, but the *a priori* which shapes debate, but is not in turn shaped by debate. Of course such preferences can be modified, but the inference is that they will be modified through manipulation, not reason.

The antidote does not lie in some constitutional remedy or new type of electoral system, desirable as these might be on other grounds. Rather, the antidote lies in a reconstruction of political activity as a deliberative activity within a vibrant and active public sphere. Is this possible? My answer is yes: and we can see examples of it in various forms of political protests, whether they be anti-capitalist, anti-genetically modified food, or environmental protests of various types. I am not claiming that each of these forms of protests is a fully constituted re-establishment of the public realm, merely that they are the location of emergent possibilities. Environmental protest (where it goes beyond NIMBYism⁴) is action for the public good, taking place outside the confines of traditional politics. Protest politics (in particular, environmental protest) 'puts the politics back into politics' by challenging the established political forms: it is a challenge to the privatisation of politics.

Categories of Political Feeling

I shall organise my discussion by employing a four-fold classification of different kinds of attitude or feeling towards politics. The categories are: apathy, antipathy, empathy and sympathy. These are not mutually exclusive – on the contrary, they are likely to overlap both in intension and extension. An activity may exemplify more

than one category, and there might be relations of mutual implication between the categories themselves.

Apathy implies absence of a concern with politics, indifference, an absence of feeling for politics. It is a lack of interest both in the political system and in political alternatives; in this form it is passive disillusion. If interrogated, apathy is found to rest on pessimism: in so far as it takes an interest in political life, it tends to be cynically pessimistic both about the present system and about the possibility of change.

Antipathy is, broadly, a feeling of dislike or hostility towards those who do politics or towards the possibility of politics itself. Like apathy it is pessimistic but in different and more complicated ways. There is no space here for a full taxonomy, but it could be argued that there is a multiplicity of possible political antipathies. These depend on the precise proportions of cynicism or scepticism, pessimism or optimism and whether these take active or passive forms; all of these can be predicated both on conventional political arrangements and of their alternatives or supplementaries. The important point, however, is that it is possible to combine a negative or pessimistic view concerning the political status quo with a positive or optimistic view concerning its reform or concerning supplementary forms of political action. At root, antipathy takes the form of rejection of established forms of political participation; this is often combined with the positing of alternatives. In general it is active disillusion with the current system. It tends to be at least sceptical about the current system; if it becomes cynically passive both about the present system and alternatives to it, it reverts to the condition of apathy. However, it can take a different direction and combine scepticism or cynicism about the present system with an attitude of active opposition to standard forms of political engagement. In other words it can be sceptically pessimistic about the present system whilst optimistic about alternatives. Antipathy implies disengagement with established forms of political participation, but it can go together with willingness to engage with other forms of activity, whether in the form of protest or moves towards self-government.

Empathy implies understanding of politics and of established forms of political participation. It implies at least an acceptance of the importance of political arrangements and a willingness to see value and

purpose in it. It is not apathetic as it is not inactive; it may be relatively passive – but it is not actively opposed to politics. It is a precondition of fuller forms of political engagement and it is the point at which education for citizenship enters the picture. Political participation requires at least a proper understanding of the forms of participation and the structures within which the citizen is operating. Citizens may proceed no further than the standard forms of conventional democratic participation, but this and all activities which go beyond it presuppose the ability to understand and imaginatively enter into the nature of political activity as such. A voter ideally seeks the enlarged mentality in which they subsume their own purely individual desires to the second order desire to take account of the desires and preferences of all in forming their political judgement. This seeking of the common good cannot be achieved in the absence of the requisite forms of political education and imaginative ability to extend the boundaries of one's thinking and feeling beyond the boundaries of the self.

Sympathy implies active and uncynical engagement with politics either within the present system or with supplementary forms of political activity. It is optimistic, but it is not on that account uncritical. Ideally (but not invariably) sympathy presupposes empathy and it is therefore an educated mode of political activity. In general, where its critical moment is not to the fore, it is prey to fits of enthusiasm and zealotry and an inability to see its place within the spectrum of political activity. But this is not to diminish its value. If, as Goethe remarked, nothing great is ever achieved without passion, then those passionately committed to political change are to be welcomed. Indeed one of the themes of this paper is precisely the extent to which movements appearing as powerful but shapeless achieve results accepted as politically valid only after the event.

Each category will have a different relationship with political (dis)engagement. Apathy, for example, implies general disengagement, whereas antipathy might combine disengagement in one arena with engagement elsewhere; thus apathy and antipathy overlap. Where antipathy leads to disengagement, it will tend to be active and conscious, not the passivity associated with apathy; however, disengagement can slip back into apathy. To take another case, sympathy normally overlaps with or presupposes empathy; but empa-

thy does not necessarily lead to active political sympathy or engagement.

Apathy

There is plenty of evidence that apathy is currently rife. For example, a report published by the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project in 1995 was entitled 'What in the World is Going on.' The authors of the report were worried that TV coverage of world affairs is shrinking: 'in the last five years the number of documentaries shown in Britain on international subjects has fallen by well over a third.' And they quote examples:

Maxime Frances, 31, a community development officer who thought Alaska was Israel on a map, and didn't know who the leader of the opposition was, cheerfully explained why. "These things have nothing to do with me. I'm a single mother, black, working with homelessness and young people on the streets. I'm not interested in people at the top. They don't help us. The people who help are local people, big companies like Boots. I could name you 30 friends of mine that don't vote. I like soaps, I know about jazz, and soul and fashion." (*Independent on Sunday* 1995)

The implicit claim here is that it is the shrinkage of serious political coverage which is responsible for this level of ignorance and apathy. This may be, of course, a reversal of cause and effect. Maybe ignorance and apathy lead to shrinking audiences for such programmes and thereby to shrinking provision? Another argument is that, implicitly, people are dissatisfied with the political system and therefore seek to escape from it and its claims on them. Thus:

The flaw lies in the system itself – the way we are governed. And that means our constitution. The British people woke up to this fact long ago, even if few dare say it. Polling data consistently shows a decline in esteem for our institutions and the system which links them together. While 48% expressed 'quite a lot of confidence' in the House of Commons in 1985, that figure had halved by 1995. A year later a European Union poll found that Britons had less faith in their parliament than the

people of any member country bar Portugal. Local government's standing has never been weaker, with turnout in council elections dropping like a stone. Trust in our institutions is in freefall, with the young especially disenchanted. One Mori survey found 71% of first time voters convinced that their ballot would 'make little or no difference to their lives'. We are beginning to vote with our feet – by staying away from the polling station. Britain's turnout figures are in decline, with recent by-elections lucky to involve more than 30% of the vote. (Freedland, 2000).

Some of what is reported here clearly falls within the sphere of antipathy. Apathy implies mere passive disaffection and disengagement: antipathy, by contrast, is a more complex state of affairs and seems to fit this picture better.

Antipathy

By antipathy I mean a feeling against politics – a state of being or feeling anti-political. That antipathy is common seems to be evident in the absence of trust in government, institutions and politicians, in disillusion with politics and all its works. The Eurobarometer surveys over the past few years show this very clearly throughout Europe. It is also evident elsewhere in the world. But what could being 'anti-political' mean? One can be 'anti' certain aspects of politics or 'anti' the established forms of political participation; but surely it makes little sense to be anti politics per se? Politics – whatever we take it to be – is inescapable: we can tilt at all the political windmills we can find, but the sails stubbornly continue turning. Again, being anti-politician is easy (and lazy) but it means little if it is not accompanied by a proper appreciation of what it means to be a politician. Of course not all politicians or systems are the same; certain types of systems breed certain types of politician, and so there are many different reasons for political disenchantment. However, my point is that to be 'anti-political' is an unstable condition, therefore the anti-politician, to attain equilibrium, must either turn away from politics entirely and revert to apathetic non-participation or convert anti-politics into political action. Thus, as Bogdanor points out, the anti-political may assume an active form:

There is, in much of the western world, a distinctly anti-political mood, as voters come to feel that they can make better decisions for themselves than politicians acting on their behalf. (Bogdanor 2000).

Antipathy, then, may go the direction of apathy (sour grapes withering on the vine – ‘politics, who wants to do that sort of stuff anyway?’) or it may take the alternative form of a call to new forms of participation or action (the sort of exasperation which leads people to say ‘I’ll do the job myself’). I shall return to this active form of antipathy (where it becomes an active feeling for politics) later. First some words about empathy.

Empathy

Creating Understanding

What I mean by empathy is the possibility of imaginative understanding (both rational and emotional) and, by extension, the removal of misunderstanding and ignorance. In furtherance of creating greater political understanding, there are an enormous number of debates and proposals doing the rounds, all of them somehow or other to do with politicisation with a small p (as we timidly say). We don’t want to make people ‘political’ as such (in the everyday sense of that term), but we do want them to be politically educated; we want them to possess at least the rudiments of whatever political education is regarded as necessary to becoming a good citizen. I shall not enter into the detail of these proposals here, but rest content by indicating both the virtues and difficulties of creating political empathy.

Most people will not feel political activity to be a primary focus in their lives and they do not therefore necessarily feel obliged to engage in political activity. This raises the issue concerning what terms such as ‘participation’ imply. Does it imply that we should all participate? And if so, to what degree? Does it imply that some of us should participate? Some more than others? At the very least we should, I think, pay heed to Michael Oakeshott’s measured scepticism about

these matters and question the extent to which participation is inherently a good thing and the extent to which we can induct people into citizenship in the absence of their own direct participation.

For most people, political activity is a secondary activity - that is to say, they have something else to do besides attending to these arrangements. But, as we have come to understand it, the activity is one in which every member of the group who is neither a child nor a lunatic has some part and some responsibility. With us it is, at one level or another, a universal activity. (Oakeshott 1991, 137)

It is secondary, but universal; it cannot be avoided, although its pursuit is not for most a primary activity in life. It requires knowledge and understanding, but this in turn presupposes an appreciation of what sort of knowledge and understanding is appropriate. For Oakeshott, knowledge can be conceptually distinguished into technical and practical. The former can be formulated into rules; the latter exists only in use and cannot be formulated into rules. In the UK the teaching of citizenship is currently being introduced into schools as a compulsory part of the national curriculum. The plans prompt a number of questions. For example, the national curriculum refers glibly to 'skills.' This is an all pervasive (but typically ambiguous) term in current educational discussion. Leaving to one side personal prejudices about this language, the question arises of how these skills are to be learnt; this in turn raises questions about what type of skills they are. To be skilled in the performance of something is to be in possession of practical knowledge – knowledge which arises out of participation in an activity. But what sort of participation are we looking for or expecting to find? Are pupils expected to 'participate' in a strong sense of the term? This seems implausible. Of course, they can participate in other senses, in the senses in which engaging in debate and discussion is appropriate. But it is hard to see how more than this can be demanded or expected (which is not to say that some pupils might not independently choose to do more). One suggested remedy is the simulation: but this (assuming that the time can be made available for it) may fall some way short of what is desired. There emerges a danger not only that participation as such is proposed as an end

in itself (over and above basic civic duties), but also that the way it can be taught will be misunderstood. This point is addressed by Bernard Crick when he remarks that:

the teaching of participation as an end in itself is only likely to create disillusionment in practice ... The virtues of participation are an important half-truth, but a lame half-truth if advanced alone. ... debates, mock parliaments and class elections etc ... may be fun, may teach some political manners, may develop some expressive skills and provide some alleviation of routine, but they are no substitute for a realistic knowledge of how the real system works. (Crick 1972, 199-200)

Overall, we must be careful of approaches which assume that it is possible to provide short cuts to understanding political systems. Again, Oakeshott makes a typically pertinent comment:

Since a tradition of behaviour is not susceptible of the distinction between essence and accident, knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail: to know only the gist is to know nothing. What has to be learned is not an abstract idea, or a set of tricks, not even a ritual, but a concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricacy. It is clear, then, that we must not entertain the hope of acquiring this difficult understanding by easy methods. Though the knowledge we seek is municipal, not universal, there is no short cut to it. Moreover, political education is not merely a matter of coming to understand a tradition, it is learning how to participate in a conversation: it is at once initiation into an inheritance in which we have a life interest, and the exploration of its intimations. (Oakeshott 1991, 151)

This point can be developed further by considering Oakeshott's view of the nature of political principles, practice and ideology.

Liberal Democratic Principles and Practice

Oakeshott is well known for arguing that doctrines, ideologies and political principles are not derived from theory and put to practice but, on the contrary are distilled from practice itself. We should be careful in suggesting or implying that certain political or constitu-

tional arrangements are the application of prior ends or principles to practice. Oakeshott warns against this explicitly:

one of the most insidious current misunderstandings of political activity – [is] the misunderstanding in which institutions and procedures appear as pieces of machinery designed to achieve a purpose settled in advance, instead of as manners of behaviour which are meaningless when separated from their context... (Oakeshott 1991, 153)

How easy it is, for example, to construe debates surrounding the electoral system, justice, social justice and rights in this way. This leads to an important related observation, which is that the current proposals for citizenship education (in so far as they fall into the trap of which Oakeshott warns) might be in danger of depoliticising the politics in what they teach. Further, it can be argued that the very term ‘citizenship’ is used as a way of avoiding the politics. As Frazer (2000a) points out, it is not a term typically used in self-description and the content of citizenship education is typically expressed as though it were essentially uncontentious. But the truth is the reverse: virtually everything within it is contentious and inherently political. And this is clearly a problem: on the one hand there is the constant (even if frequently misguided) fear that political bias will appear in the classroom; on the other, ‘politics’ as a term has negative connotations for many, including trainee teachers. It would appear that the coming generation of teachers are themselves sceptical or cynical concerning politics. How exactly do we expect them, therefore, to induct pupils into an understanding of a political tradition with which they themselves feel at odds or of which they perhaps have limited practical knowledge? Again, although emphasis is laid on the importance of discussion and reflection, this may be insufficient to convey the full content of real politics. As Frazer points out, conflict may be inherent in the engagement and therefore political discussion in the absence of expression of conflict lacks its essential quality. She goes on to suggest that our political arrangements are situated not only within a tradition, but within a complex of power relationships, and that this has to be addressed. Pupils will therefore need:

education in the skills necessary for engaging in conflictual encounters. Of course, values such as justice, non-violence, autonomy, and democracy itself are a necessary background to such political engagement. If the values are wrong, then the politics will undoubtedly be wrong. However, it is clear ... that it is not the case that getting the politics right is simply a matter of getting the values right. (Frazer 2000a, 100).

Getting the politics right implies that one has to recognise the politics in citizenship; it implies that contestability and partisanship are in turn recognised; it implies that values, structures and constitutional arrangements have to be understood concretely within a full historical and developmental context. This implies that the list of desiderata identified for citizenship education is taken not as an indisputable set of principles, but as the starting point for activity and reflection: in other words, politics as a real shared activity. At this point we turn to sympathy.

Sympathy

By sympathy I mean ‘feeling with,’ sharing feelings and understanding and, in particular, sharing political activity – ultimately, the creation of a public realm.

The Practice of Citizenship

The theme of this section is that politics needs to return to the people, but not in a privatised form, and that there are indications that it is indeed being returned to the people. A few years ago Princess Diana died in a car crash in Paris. This event sparked a bewildering (to many) outbreak of un-British emotional instability bordering on the hysterical, which was commonly dismissed as lacking real substance or political import. But this view was short-sighted. The events were significant and real, even if they defied the standard categories of political criticism, and they were more political in their implications than was perhaps immediately apparent. In considering the political significance of the events, Eliza-

beth Frazer collected some of the press indications that there was something politically new afoot:

The Guardian reported that ‘thousands inscribed their words like citizens’ ... The Sunday Times wrote that ‘these people at the shrines or on the Internet are claiming a place in the public realm ... all of them see this as the moment when they can seize a definite public role for themselves.’ Moreover, the Royal Family was criticised, by journalists and by members of the crowds, for remaining in Scotland rather than coming to London, for wanting a ‘private’ rather than a ‘state’ funeral, for planning a short funeral procession rather than a long one and for sticking to protocol in the matter of flag flying at the Royal residences. Paddy Ashdown ... argued that it was a symbolic change in which people had started behaving like ‘citizens rather than subjects’ ... From a Conservative political viewpoint, however, such ‘citizenship’ looked more like ‘mob rule’. (Frazer 2000b, 204).

Frazer summarised suggested that:

Ideals of and hopes for change in political culture were articulated very clearly by newspaper editors and leading commentators. The role of the press and other mass media in modern democratic societies was questioned. The idea that ordinary people should participate in public life was acted out. Theories and arguments about citizenship and democratic political culture that had been made in academic and policy circles for some years were discussed in a concentrated and extensive fashion, in a supremely practical and concrete context, in the pages of newspapers. (Frazer 2000b, 205)

Thus political movements, or movements with immense political significance, emerge unbidden in response to unanticipated events which crystallise otherwise un-noticed movements of thought and feeling. For an earlier example we might look to late 1994, when Britain experienced a huge surge of protest against the live export of animals for slaughter. The Independent reported that

Britain’s animal welfare movement has achieved its biggest success in years with the abrupt decision of the major ferry companies to stop mass transport of live farm animals The RSPCA and CWF have spent years and hundreds of thousands of pounds on advertising to try to

make the public put pressure on the government to end the trade. It was pressure on the ferry companies from passengers who hated the thought of travelling alongside suffering animals that did the trick. (The Independent, 1994a)

The same paper argued two weeks later that the animal welfare lobby was strong in Britain and that it extends across the vast body of middle England and is not confined just to organised 'extremists'. Further, unlike other issues animal welfare will make even Tories act:

the sniff of the farmyard, the sight of Dobbin and Daisy – and Tory logic turns on its head. Suddenly compassion means we must reach for the law book and act. A tip for trade unionists: the next time you want some help from Westminster: learn to moo. (*Independent* 1994b)

Commentators were uncertain what to make of the whole spectacle, with its distortion of the proportions of conventional political life. Some were argued that the really important thing was to press for legislative change at national or EU level; others were sceptical of the movement; some commentators were simply revolted by the whole thing. Polly Toynbee, for example, called it 'A spasm masquerading as a movement' and claimed that 'Protesters who take to the streets demanding animal rights are indulging in juvenile politics':

All of us, commentators and politicians alike, have been dumb-founded by the strange explosion of animal rights activism. Everything about it is unexpected, unfamiliar and odd. It doesn't fit into the deep, dull ruts of party politics. These people seem to have little to do with conventional Left/Right divisions. Their view of the world appears at Westminster to be upside down. ... Those depressed by the political apathy of our times have tried, somewhat frantically, to find hope in Shoreham and Brightonsea. At last, is there a flicker of life-blood in our veins after all. The argument goes something like this: disaffected with the ideological dust-bowl at Westminster, the people are at last rising up and expressing passionate political emotion about something, anything. ... Most of these are people who have never demonstrated about anything before and they are proud of it. They wear badges saying this is the single issue about which they care very passionately, and they have never cared so

much about anything else ever; not their fellow citizens and their social conditions, not difficult questions like distributing income more fairly while promoting economic growth, not hard issues such as the relationship of nations in a fissiparous world. This is juvenile politics, not even politics at all but a spasm masquerading as a movement. ... (The *Independent* 1995)

For Toynbee, the movement's claim to political seriousness was immediately disqualified by the mere fact of its being expressed in a non or anti-political way, especially where this took the form of expression of sentiment. My view is this: the point is not whether the protests were initially based on sentiment alone. Rather, the point is that a group of people spontaneously came together to protest something – surprising both themselves and others. They were of course middle class – but why should that be held against them? They were powerful because they were non-violent. They had much to consider and think through: they had quite clearly not thought through all the issues prior to protesting; but reflection on acts of protest can lead to a heightened awareness of the political significance of actions and a desire to render views politically consistent and coherent. Irrespective of the original lack of reflection, the action was implicitly the creation of a new public space. Some might say that this is too large and implausible a claim and ask whether it is really possible to regard protest of this sort, and others akin to it (such as Reclaim the Streets, anti-GM foods campaigns, anti-roads protests, anti-capitalism protests), as political action in the Arendtian sense, as the creation of a public space, as the opening up of genuine politics. Before reviewing this Arendtian theme further, let us broaden the empirical context a little by examining some other environmental protests over the past decade. The examples are mostly from the UK, although they could have been drawn from elsewhere in Europe or North America.

A New Wave of Direct Action and Civil Disobedience

The early 1990s saw a remarkable rise in the level of non-violent direct action (NVDA) in the UK. In defiance of environmentally de-

structive developments, the slow pace and apparent intransigence of government responses to environmental concerns, and the lack of real democratic opportunities to make a difference, widely disparate groups began to engage in direct action. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than by the ferocious protests against roads and the live transport of animals. In many ways this new mood of defiance can be traced to the events surrounding Twyford Down, beginning in 1992, where all sectors of the community were radicalised and became involved in forms of protests in which they would never previously have thought of participating.⁵ This radicalisation was further evident in a number of campaigns against road building in the UK. Participation in such protests, and the media coverage they have enjoyed, has politicised a wide range of people, putting the issue of transport and the environment firmly on the political agenda.

In many ways the rise in direct action can also be traced to a reaction against the activities of the established environmental pressure groups and the apparent 'professionalisation' of environmentalism. As the expertise of groups such as Greenpeace and FOE has grown they have begun to challenge the scientific methods and evidence of national governments and industrial companies. A new breed of 'expert' environmentalist able to articulate environmental concerns and to negotiate competently on a highly technical level has emerged. This has had the effect of creating a gulf between the 'experts' who run the leading environmental groups and both their core supporters and the general public. In many ways the rise in direct action can be seen as a practical response by concerned citizens to political alienation – a reclaiming of the environmental agenda. As Tim Allman of Road Alert! argues:

There were a lot of people who didn't like what was happening around them, but who didn't see what they could do that would make much difference. Direct action changed all that. It empowers people. It makes them feel that they, as individuals, can make things happen. (*Alarm UK* 1996, 21)

The national wave of NVDA has called into question the sceptics' accusation that environmental protest is merely a form of NIMBYism. The accusation of 'NIMBY' is a frequent form of abuse toward those

who object locally to development. Sceptics argue that protestors do not oppose developments in principle, but merely object to their proposed location. Certainly, in the roads protests and the actions against live animal exports, a proportion of the campaigners are local people opposed to the immediate local impact. However, for most of those involved it has become a matter of principle and NIMBY has evolved into NIABY ('not in anybody's backyard'): this can be seen clearly in the development of the roads protest movement after Twyford Down.

Protest at Twyford Down and the Formation of an Anti-roads Movement

In the UK, direct action against road construction projects now seems commonplace. The images of protestors physically placing their bodies between machinery and environment, being 'cherry-picked' from trees and aerial walkways and taking their protests underground are all familiar. It is perhaps surprising then to consider that such actions are a comparatively recent phenomenon. The story of the Twyford Down campaign, which reached its peak in 1992, reaches back over two decades. It is worth dwelling on some of the aspects of the campaign as it was without doubt one of the major influences in the evolution of a national anti-roads campaign and it is an exemplary case of how environmental groups can be 'mobilised out' of the political process.

In Winchester, local people and organisations came together to object to the proposed extension of the M3 motorway by digging a cutting through the historic and beautiful Twyford Down⁶. The Conservative party won the 1992 election with the promise of extending the roads programme and thereafter construction of the road commenced. Local activists were faced with the option of resigning themselves to defeat or continuing the campaign in a new form now that all the legal and political institutional processes had been exhausted. Earlier processes included challenging the decision and its antecedents at public inquiries. However, because the issues that are open to debate are so narrowly defined, public inquiries provide only a 've-

neer of participation.’ Objectors are not allowed to challenge either government policy or to challenge the use of particular decision making procedures, in this case an elaborate form of cost-benefit analysis. Inspectors have always ruled such challenges illegitimate. This is particularly frustrating to protesters as, although the cost-benefit analysis produces apparent benefits to the economy of millions of pounds, the environmental and social impact of road schemes tend to be overlooked. The expert knowledge of economists is not open to challenge and the reality of public participation is thereby degraded. As Ray Kemp contends, ‘the professionalisation of planning with the introduction of technical terms and standards, bureaucratic and legal devices, may be seen to have led to merely token public involvement in many important planning matters (Kemp 1985, 183-4).

Following the exhaustion of political and legal procedures and standard forms of protest, the nature of the campaigning began to change. In order to raise public and media awareness, demonstrations took place on the site itself. Actions that stopped short of full confrontation were co-ordinated by Twyford Down Association (TDA) and Friends of the Earth (FOE). The transition from one form of protest to another is described by Barbara Bryant:

As far as the Twyford Down campaign itself is concerned, the transition from conventional campaigning tactics (consciousness-raising, legal representation at Public Inquiries, political lobbying, high-profile events) to non-violent direct action was not an easy one. The rationale behind such a transition was overwhelmingly clear: in February 1992, TDA activists and Friends of the Earth (who had been working together for more than a year) argued that the Government was itself breaking the law in proceeding with preliminary works before the EC has ruled on the complaint before it concerning breaches of the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. This unlawful behaviour entirely justified the use of responsible, non-violent direct action to slow down or even prevent the work continuing. A railway bridge due for demolition was therefore occupied on 14 February by Friends of the Earth. (Bryant 1996, 300–301)

FOE and TDA continued such actions for a couple of weeks, successfully halting construction before an injunction was served against

FOE. At this point 'lawyers advised them that to break it would risk contempt of court proceedings, which would result in fines of up to a quarter of a million pounds. This would bankrupt the organisation. FOE left the site, leaving a breach that was soon filled by the direct action protestors' (Lamb 1996, 6). The changing nature of the campaign continued with local people and green activists taking more confrontational but non-violent direct action against the construction. It is interesting that many of the direct action activists felt that FOE had let them down by pulling out. This reflects the tension between the newly emerging direct action (dis)organisations and the more established and well-resourced pressure groups. As well as the financial and legal problems that they could have faced, the new activists caused a problem for FOE 'who were anxious about being associated with mass illegal protests over which they had no control' (Doherty 1997, 149).

In late 1992, members of a newly formed local group, Friends of Twyford Down, as well as members of Earth First! and the Dongas Tribe who had camped on the Down, began 'bulldozer-diving' and 'crane-sitting,' squatting the proposed route on St. Catherine's Hill. What followed was to set the scene for future confrontations around the country. One incident in particular made protestors realise the physical power that could potentially be unleashed upon them. 'Yellow Wednesday,' 9 December 1992, saw private security guards hired for the first time to ensure that the site was cleared for the contractors. The violence meted out to the protestors, with the police looking on, shocked those present and those who viewed the footage on national television.

Undeterred, the Twyford campaign continued throughout 1993, slowing down the construction process and in the end adding some £3.5 million in security costs, including the hiring of private detectives by the Department of Transport (DOT) to gather information on the protestors. 1993 also saw seven activists jailed for breaking court injunctions and returning to the site. Further, the DOT attempted (unsuccessfully) to recoup the £3.5 million by suing a group of 67 protestors indiscriminately picked from a particular action that involved thousands. Although the road was completed in late 1994, Twyford radicalised groups all over Britain who previously might have given up the fight after the public

inquiry had given approval to the scheme. As Jonathan Porritt writes:

The trauma of Twyford Down galvanised thousands of people into a host of actions that might otherwise never have taken place. It was so horrific, so visible, so palpable. Even now, there is no amount of cosmetic landscaping and tree planting that can conceal the sheer scale of the wound inflicted on the countryside. It screams out at you, and will go on screaming out to all with ears to hear and eyes to see. ... Ruling politicians and their self-serving advisers consistently underestimate the power of symbolism in politics. Long after the Twyford Down campaign was lost, and the Dongas had been brutally routed, Twyford Down continues to work its magic as a symbol of opposition to undemocratic, ecologically wanton road-building, wherever it takes place. (Quoted in Bryant 1996, 299)

It is important to remember that before the 1990s there was no national anti-roads campaign at a grassroots level. Organisations such as Transport 2000 and FOE had campaigned at policy level against the road building programme and in support of an integrated transport policy; but at the level of individual schemes there was no real grassroots movement. This began to change in the 1990s. After having successfully co-ordinated local opposition throughout London against the London Road Assessment Studies in the late 1980s, ALARM, the umbrella body for over 150 London-based groups, went national. Roads for Prosperity, published by the DOT in 1989, promised a £23 billion national roads programme. Alarm UK's response strategy was to set up a network supporting local groups fighting proposed road schemes before, during, or after a public inquiry. Alarm UK became 'a central, umbrella organisation which supplies local groups with information on transport, environmental and campaigning matters, which staged occasional nationwide stunts (including a "Stop That Road Week") and which held conferences where the groups could meet' (Alarm UK 1996, 13–14). By 1995, about 300 local groups opposing particular road schemes were members of Alarm UK.

Following their experience of direct action together with the realisation that road schemes were under construction all over the UK, a small group of Friends of Twyford Down members set up Road

Alert!. As Rebecca Lush, one of the protestors who went to jail for their actions, explains:

Many people have been inspired by the protests that have sprung up since Twyford and have wanted to defend their land too. Road Alert! exists to help these people by passing on protest skills and helping others to get involved. (*Alarm UK* 1996, 21).

Without doubt the actions at Twyford Down acted as a spur to other NVDAs at proposed new road schemes and airport runways. The courage and commitment of activists is beyond doubt and we are witnessing a new form of flexible, non-hierarchical and spontaneous protest (Porritt, in Bryant 1996, 303). Certainly the techniques and forms of organisation utilised by activists are becoming more and more sophisticated. Direct action offers the possibility of new forms of political action in the face of political institutions that stifle meaningful public participation and that are unresponsive to environmental values. As Tim Allman, another founder of Road Alert! contends:

There were a lot of people who didn't like what was happening around them, but who didn't see what they could do that would make much difference. Direct action changed all that. It empowers people. It makes them feel that they are individuals, can make things happen. (*Alarm UK* 1996, 21)

Thus the Twyford Down campaign, whilst unsuccessful in its immediate goal of halting the destruction of the Down, was successful as a spur to further direct action across the country. And the direct action that followed has become more sophisticated and generated increasingly widespread public support. Twyford Down showed both that the public inquiry system is seriously flawed and that the standard legal and political channels of influence are weak and unresponsive. Furthermore, concern is no longer limited to particular local schemes but to the roads building programme as such and the way in which public discussion of road schemes is limited and circumscribed by an inadequate inquiry system. Chris Gillham, a veteran of the Twyford Down campaign (and a person far removed from the media image of the dreadlocked, unemployed youth) remarked:

I came from a background of concerned but respectable and restrained involvement. I spent years in formal committees of preservation groups, not achieving very much. Here is the justification, whenever it is needed, for non-violent direct action. The system allowed us to spend decades in argument, and huge sums of money, making an intellectually unshakeable case, only for the system to brush it all aside. When you hear the brazen words ‘democratic process’ and ‘rule of law,’ reply quietly with ‘Twyford Down.’ (Road Alert, 1996).

In these forms of protest we can see environmental activism emerging as a form of antipathy to the established political order; overall activists were knowledgeable about the system but deeply sceptical about its ability to respond to matters of pressing environmental and public concern. They took the view that they had to create their own possibilities for action. Both roads protesters and protesters against live animal export in their different way expressed and enacted the possibility of emergent new forms of political participation. But to what extent did their actions create a genuinely political movement?

Hannah Arendt and New Forms of Political Action

Hannah Arendt insisted on a proper distinction between the private and public realms. Political action has characteristics of its own, one of which is its unpredictability, another of which is its public and deliberative nature. My question here is whether the movements I have described in any sense measure up to Arendt’s estimation of what constitutes a proper political realm. Arendt was deeply concerned with the loss or decline of the public sphere. The public sphere being, in the words of d’Entreves,

that sphere of appearance where freedom and equality reign, and where individuals as citizens interact through the medium of speech and persuasion, disclose their unique identities and decide through collective deliberation about matters of common concern. (d’Entreves 1994, 140)

Public interests are not the same as private interests writ large, and they are certainly not the mere aggregation of private interests:

What Arendt is claiming is that our public interests are quite distinct from our private interests as individuals. The public interest cannot be automatically derived from our private interests: indeed, it is not the sum of private interests, nor their highest common denominator, nor even the total of enlightened self-interests. In fact, it has little to do with our private interests, since it concerns the world that lies beyond the self, that was there before our birth and that will be there after our death, and that finds its embodiment in activities and institutions with their own intrinsic purposes which may be often at odds with our short-term and private interests. (d'Entrevés 1994, 148-9)

I would suggest that it is possible to see some environmental and animal rights protests as a spontaneous form of action of the sort that Arendt sought to conceptualise. In other words they conform to Margaret Canovan's characterisation:

Whatever the particular purpose or occasion that brought them together, those involved find themselves constituting a public space with its own common life, within which they participate not as rulers and subjects but as equals who find their relative positions only by merit gained in the eyes of their fellows. Such public spaces can spring up unpredictably from nowhere and just as unpredictably disappear again. (Canovan 1974, 68-9).

But before we get too carried away, we have to concede that Polly Toynbee, quoted above, makes a good *prima facie* case when she expresses concerns about the animal protesters. She has at least put her finger on the point that political action is (and has to be more) than the mere spontaneous coming together of a number of private consciences, albeit in a public space, albeit disruptively and powerfully. In her view politics requires more than this, and in this she shares common ground with Arendt for whom there was an important distinction to be drawn between 'the private unpolitical stand of conscience and the public, political stance of actively caring for the affairs of the political community' (d'Entrevés 1994, 51). In so far as animal rights protesters are concerned merely with their own con-

sciences they cannot attain to the political, they cannot enter or create a public realm. The emotion of compassion or the dictates of an absolute morality are, in Arendt's view, dangerous bases for political action as they tend towards the fabrication of a uni-dimensional political realm rather than the creation of a pluralistic public realm emerging as the outcome of action. As we have seen above, some forms of environmental protest are more and some are less prone to this danger. Direct action against road building is, I suggest, less prone to it while animal rights protest is more prone to it: however, I contend that even there we may find the germ of a genuine politics.

Arendt's own examples shows that there might be hope for political renewal here. Her objection to Thoreau's account of what constituted civil disobedience, for example, was that it was a washing of the hands, a simple wish to disassociate oneself from something of which one disapproved rather than a purposeful attempt to alter that state of affairs. Clearly both roads and animal protesters are trying to bring about change. It can readily be admitted that caring for the environment may not be the same as directly intervening in the public sphere in the purely self-referential and contentless political way which Arendt sometimes seemed to endorse. But nonetheless it does take the self beyond the self (and thereby moves beyond private conscience) by seeking to address an issue of public concern through public protest whilst engaging with the public authorities and appealing to fellow citizens for support. Along the way it challenges prevailing political orthodoxies and conventions and insists on creating a public space for its expression. Thus the public realm opens up as an indirect intention, as a consequence of the throwing of the private self into the public world beyond the self. It is a step towards going beyond what Arendt calls 'this modern concept of government, where the only thing people have in common is their private interests' (Arendt 1958, 69). But, in the end, for Arendt this sort of activity is going to be unsatisfactory if it fails to engage with the public world *qua* the public world. This is where there is a clear difference between broader environmental protest and action which contains as part of itself reference to the public world and to critique of the institutions appropriate to it, and narrower forms of protest which may, it has to be admitted, stall on the road to the public realm. Despite all this, however, it is certainly worth remembering

that action may start as one thing but emerge, unpredictably, as another. That is the nature of political action for Arendt:

Action ... no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries. Limitations and boundaries exist within the realm of human affairs, but they never offer a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each generation must insert itself. (Arendt 1958, 190-191).

Conclusion

Somewhat bleakly, Arendt suggested that people are increasingly withdrawing into the private realm because they regard freedom as essentially freedom from politics:

More and more people in the countries of the Western world, which since the decline of the ancient world has regarded freedom from politics as one of the basic freedoms, make use of this freedom and have retreated from the world and their obligations within it. This withdrawal from the world need not harm an individual ... but with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men. (Arendt 1974, 4-5).

Such pessimism is understandable, and such a situation (if true) regrettable. However, the burden of this paper has been to emphasize that politics and politicisation, in the sense of creating something akin to Arendt's public sphere, can be found in the 'non-political politics' we increasingly see around us. Admittedly not all of this is fully formed and coherent – but then, on Arendt's own account, one would not expect it to be. The power and variety of the various types of response to current forms of political participation is easy to underestimate. Underestimates tend to arise through a one-sided evaluation of the way people respond to the possibilities of political participation. In employing the categories of apathy, antipathy, empathy and sympathy I sought to show that pure apathy is rare; that antipathy frequently leads to the emergence of fresh forms of partici-

pation; that empathy needs to be promoted (although its promotion in the form of citizenship education can be problematic); and that sympathy for political participation is more widespread than always recognised. I have argued that there is a case to be made for regarding some (at least) of the environmental protest of the past ten years as indicative of serious political sympathy on the part of people who regard themselves (for one reason or another) as excluded from the conventional forms of political participation. Such action should, I suggest, be taken seriously as political action and its existence should alert us not to draw premature conclusions about declining political activity, sympathy and participation. Of course the sympathy displayed is not sympathy with conventional politics but it is still political for all that. The fact that it tends to arise out of despair or disillusion with the current possibilities for significant participation reflects the point made at the outset, which is that the categories will tend to overlap. Political sympathy, for example, might emerge out of political antipathy, where antipathy takes the active form of determining to do something as opposed to the passive form which tends to revert to apathy. It is equally important, in my view, to recognise that critics such as Toynbee and others are right in their insistence that 'demonstrations alone do not politics make,' in other words that sympathy needs to rest on a platform of proper political understanding – what in this paper is called empathy.

A final point: this paper has been largely concerned with the responses of the public to the political possibilities facing them. It is important, as a final point, to stress that political structures are equally important. We should not shift the entire burden of responsibility for political activity on to the citizen. Citizens need the space and opportunities within which to act and should not be blamed for the failure to remedy all of the imperfections of an imperfect system. Again, it is important to remember that participation is not the same as democracy, and that a highly participatory society is not necessarily a democratic society. Direct action and other extra-representative forms of participation should not be allowed to usurp the structures of liberal representative democracy. Although direct action can be a sign of political health, the need for it might sometimes indicate a state of political disease. In other words, the new forms of politics examined in this paper may be both symptom and cure. Citizens

need structures within which their citizenship can flourish: they should not be charged with sole responsibility for remaking these structures anew.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank all of the participants at the Politics Revisited symposium held in Jyvaskyla in December 2000, and especially Tuija Parvikko for her comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 The national average decline is 10 per cent
- 3 In this paper I am going to focus primarily on the world of environmental protest. This is not to deny the importance of other forms of political engagement.
- 4 NIMBY: an acronym for 'not in my back yard.'
- 5 For a discussion of Twyford Down, see below.
- 6 Near Winchester, Hampshire, in the south of England.

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