**A New Social Contract**

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2/5/15

Everybody is disappointed by this election. As [Jonathan Freedland](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/01/politicians-living-lie-regain-trust-voters-honesty) writes in *The Guardian*, the public are asking politicians ‘why won’t you just tell us the truth?’ And, he argues, why *don’t* they? Politicians of all parties, and especially the main ones, are not yet adapting to the new public mood. In the meantime, writes [Anthony Barnett](https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/anthony-barnett/haunted-election) in *OpenDemocracy* , the campaigns seem to have been exercises in systematic issue avoidance, simply neglecting most of the big issues facing Britain and the world in 2015. No wonder we’re disgusted.

Freedland’s point is an important part of the story, but at best half. In particular, the ‘fault’ of this communication breakdown is not so one-sided, lying squarely with the politicians. Rather this election of public outrage is indicative of a much broader predicament, of a new knowledge politics, that is equally a challenge for the public and electorate as it undoubtedly is for the politicians. This means that the present political malaise is a matter of dysfunctional relations amongst politicians and the public (and the ‘media’), not just the politicians ‘fault’. But, equally, seeing things this way also reveals paths to a positive change, and that this must involve movement on all sides. In short, we need a new social contract.

What is the ‘social contract’ as we understand it now? It is one of the founding myths of modern post-Enlightenment politics. To understand our present predicament, however, we must not treat it on its own terms, but look at it as a specific socio-historical response to a new knowledge politics of *that* time and place. In 18th century North Western Europe, the massive growth of commercial printing presses, pamphleting and public debate had created a circulation of knowledge, opinion and argument that was unprecedented. This went hand-in-hand with the construction of new *citizens*. And all of this was based within a new self-praising discourse of ‘rational’ debate in a new public sphere. Of course, these new citizens then needed, demanded and were *enabled* to demand new forms of relation with state power, built upon new bases of the latter’s legitimacy. In particular, true to the movement as a whole, this took the form of apparently ‘rational’ agreement between citizens and state in a ‘state of nature’ – all of which arguments were as much marks of their socio-historical particularity (what could be – in *that*  time and place – taken for granted) as of their vaunted ‘universalism’ and ‘rationality’. In this way, the social contract was established as the basis of modern, Western liberal democracies, as a highly productive story that fit the socio-technical mediations of communication and processes of political decision-making of the day.

Over two hundred years later, however, both of these have changed dramatically. Meanwhile, the ideology of the social contract, of how politicians and citizens should speak to each other, remains largely unchanged. This takes us back to Freedland. This election does not show how politicians ‘haven’t got it’ yet about the new public mood. Actually, it is illustrative of a positive feedback loop of relations between state and public that is now as dysfunctional as it was productive in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The new social media are crucial in this regard, of course, feeding demands for accountability and total transparency precisely premised on ‘rational’ and ‘objective’ truth as the basis of a legitimate politics.

But in manifesting this demand, they are asking for much more than the pamphlets of yesteryear, to the point of impossibility and political paralysis. For decision-making cannot be, and has never been, conducted in complete transparency and based purely on publicly-accountable knowledge. Yet, while previously this could only be compelled to a limited extent, the new ICTs allow this demand to be pushed much further with catastrophic consequences. This is not just because decisions depend upon more than ‘facts’, involving questions of values and interests that are in–themselves potentially scandalous to the ‘rational’ intellect when made available for public consumption. More to the point, knowledge itself is never ‘just’ the truth but always itself a battleground of politics.

So it is to demand the impossible that politicians ‘just tell the truth’, because there is never a moment or claim that involves stepping *out* of the political process. Indeed, strictly, this demand is meaningless: *which* truth, *whose* truth, with what longevity and in which context? All of these are questions that we habitually juggle all the time in our private discussions, but they are equally pressing issues for public debate too. To demand ‘the truth’ is to demand that all of this inescapable contextualization is simply neglected.

But these challenges are *even greater* today, where the major questions of politics concern governing systems of growing complexity, in which the extent of uncertainty in the issue at hand, how it will play out and the dependence of this *precisely on* the unfolding of political wrangling is reaching qualitatively new highs. Hence, for instance, the government – and even the ‘objective’ ‘expert’ watchdogs to which it has tried to delegate decision-making, like the OBR – may claim certain economic policies will have certain economic results. But everybody knows this is false, precisely to the extent it is presented as ‘certain’ and ‘objective neutral science’, i.e. fulfilling this *role* in the current political process. And the irony, of course, is that a major reason these forecasts are so unstable today is precisely because of the new social media, which have involved many more people into the political process in ways that makes its unfolding much more turbulent and non-linear.

So this election has shown the growth of an outraged demand for politicians to ‘just speak the truth’, and the flailing (and failing) attempts to do so *while remaining contenders* *trying to win an election*. But this simply confirms to the public the politicians’ systematic duplicity, with concomitant deepening of anti-political cynicism and further demands for ‘just tell us the truth’. The ‘blame’, in other words, for the current malaise lies as much with the *public’s* determination to hold politicians to account on terms that are impossible as with those politicians (or rather, the political class’s) disdain for or distance from, or simple bafflement with, the (new Twitter-savvy) electorate.

But social media also have another key effect – in that a major part of our political cynicism is the growing and entirely *realistic* estimation that politicians *cannot* keep ‘their word’. In other words, a epochal *political education* is in process, in which the political nature of knowledge – that knowledge is *the* battleground of politics, not separate from it and so the basis of the rational legitimacy of the latter – is something we all increasingly *already know*. But this gives us an opening for a way forward – towards a new social contract that is explicitly built upon universal public acknowledgement of knowledge politics and power-knowledge.

What could this new social contract look like? Of course, it is not for me to say, precisely because it is not a matter of universalistic reason and rational deduction, but an explicitly *political* decision. This also means that it will be different in each ‘society’. And, furthermore, the challenge here is a great one: of trying to establish new forms of public accountability that acknowledge the irreducibly political nature of knowledge without collapsing into ‘anything goes’ when it comes to political debate. Indeed, this task is likely to prove impossible to the extent that the political education underway does not include a much more profound transformation than in cognitive understanding, as in new practical habits (or even virtues) of both commission and omission or restraint; a further opening beyond the Enlightenment conceit of the purely rational society, and one that is absolutely necessary since only the non-rational and non-cognitive aspects of the people – all of us, not just politicians – charged with governing this complex socio-political system have any prospect of doing so productively.

But we can offer a few abstract points, primarily in terms of the rights and responsibilities of both sides vis-à-vis its relations with the other. A new social contract would thus demand of politicians that they are understood to be committed to the productive and equitable but laborious task of forging collective solutions to the myriad complex system problems of the present. And that, on this basis, they speak to the public as to each other, as political ‘grown-ups’ who expect only dealings in good faith, not to be let in *en masse* on that party’s strategic plan. In other words, they do not *expect* to be simply passively ‘believed’. Politicians cannot offer this, though, to the extent that they are beset (including amongst themselves) by social media hungry for outraged ‘gotcha’ moments spotting hypocrisy, duplicity or simply changing one’s mind; all both unavoidable when managing social media’s fusing of public sphere and private discussion, and arguably essential for productive politics and governing. The reciprocal responsibility of the public, thus, is to refrain from asking the impossible of our politicians, whether with glee, disgust or both; but instead to challenge politicians relentlessly regarding the weaknesses and inequities in their plans for complex system governance, as an essential element of precisely that process.

So a public that accepts that knowledge is political and that sometimes private and public truths *have* to be different for the governance of that society to work, *especially* in democratic polities. And political representatives that deal with the public as themselves adept and savvy users of knowledge politics. And thence a public and a group of professional politicians *both* of whom are charged with responsibilities of governing that depend on each other. Then, perhaps, we can have an election about the real issues.

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