

by Michael Meadowcroft

I still have far too many Charlie Brown moments in my political life. You may recall the Schultz cartoon strip in which Lucy always offered to hold the ball for Charlie Brown to attempt a place kick on goal. Every time Lucy pulled the ball away as he ran up and Charlie Brown fell flat on his back. At which point Lucy said to him, "Charlie Brown your faith in human nature is an example to all us young people."

Despite many decades of political activism I still experience the same triumph of hope over experience! So it was that imbued by optimism I approached David Blunkett's latest political offering, "*In defence of politics revisited*." This booklet is presented as being an updating of Bernard Crick's definitive defence of politics - first published in 1962 and now in its fifth edition. Now, Bernard Crick, who died in December 2008, was a difficult man but he produced a superb tract which should be required reading for all of us who have to defend the honourable practice of politics.

Unfortunately David Blunkett is no Bernard Crick and this is certainly no "revisiting" of the original text. If Blunkett really believes that his tome plays such a role then he is even more estranged from current political reality than I imagined. The strength of Crick's argument is crucially that it is pluralist, that is, it is an argument for all politics. It is not partisan and it can be drawn on and applied by politicians - and the public - from all parties and of none. By contrast Blunkett produces an extensive shopping list of palliatives which he believes will help to produce a new politics for the twenty-first century. These are all in themselves worthy of discussion and debate but they are candidates for a party manifesto rather than being of the essence of politics itself. They include, "Meaningful empowerment and development of communities," "Services for and by the people," and "New and innovative approaches to finance." You get the message? It is even more hijacked by Ed Miliband in his foreword. Perhaps no-one told him what the book was supposed to be paralleling, but to expatiate on politicians and false promises, and, explicitly, on the role of the Labour party, undermines still further the *bona fides* of this book.

Now, not only are these not modern extrapolations of the age old principle of politics as the means and the ground base of enabling a decision making process to take place with the possibility of enhancing the citizen's life chances, but they are actually the opposite of politics. In effect they replace politics. In its essence, politics provides the "space" in which voluntary groups of citizens - political parties in today's nomenclature - can formulate and promote different visions of the kind of society they believe to be the best chance for society. Blunkett's shopping list is part of the step after this moment of formulation and as such is partisan.

The case for politics as a fundamental principle, and as the "machine" for its practice by the whole spectrum of political parties, must be non-partisan. What is more, the desperate state of politics today requires a combined effort by all those of good heart to man the lifeboats. Once safely back in a deep water haven we can all then promote our separate philosophies and our ideologies.

I have spent the best part of the past twenty years endeavouring to install viable political systems in new and emerging democracies. In most cases the best we achieved was to buy time for the development of real politics in a secure and well founded structure. This was not an ignoble achievement but it was essentially partial in that there was and is no hope of healthy politics in these frail first efforts - or, indeed, in more mature democracies - if the political parties are not based on some sort of political philosophy. Unfortunately, the political parties were usually based on tribe, religion, region, charismatic leader or liberation movement, none of which provided a sound basis for an electoral result which enabled a government to be formed and to function on a basis of like minds.

When Bernard Crick wrote his book fifty years ago, the state of British politics was infinitely more healthy than it is today. Electoral turnout was approaching 80%, there were lively public meetings and inter party debates, and party membership was around ten times what it is today. But he still wrote it, quoting Hobbes, to address "the disorders of the present time." If 1962 was a time for concern about the state of politics, how much more is 2012? What a pity then that

David Blunkett produces a pragmatic prescription rather than a fundamental re-assertion of fundamental principles, with a prescription for reviving and enthusing the latent potential of our citizenry. I fear that the political parties are far too content to secure elected office, however feeble the turnout and however alienated the electorate is. Is David Blunkett really content to be in parliament on the votes of less than one third of his electorate? In party terms he has a "safe" seat but, in democratic terms, it is precarious in the extreme.

The same problem applies to local politics. Local government has, in effect, been abolished. It has been destroyed incrementally over the past sixty-five years, essentially because no party at local level was prepared to stand up to its party colleagues in government at the national level. Alas, there has never been a "trade union" of local government and this has permitted it to be salami sliced until today it is a sad apology for local democracy.

So, stick with Bernard Crick and despatch David Blunkett back to his hegemonic cul-de-sac. We need politicians of bigger stature to rescue politics from its gloomy depths.

In Defence of Politics Revisited, David Blunkett, Guest, 2012.

Available online from: http://davidblunkett.typepad.com/rt_hon_david_blunkett_mp/2012/09/politics-and-politicians-must-change-says-blunkett.html