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Depoliticising Citizenship

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How can educators teach young people about politics? For most of us, the politics of our country, and, indeed, other people's countries, is an overwhelmingly dispiriting spectacle.

Public debates about policy and laws hardly seem worthy of the name 'debate'. The dominating party system – whatever it is – polarises or splinters deliberations and enquiries which then seem to have nothing to do with the merits of the case. Partisan control of government means debates where speakers talk past one another, and governments whose overwhelming preoccupation is staying in power rather than governing. Putting wars aside, the aspects of the political process that really catch the public's attention are inevitably government failures or corruption.

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Underlying this pervasive negative perception of politics are some deep problems and paradoxes.

1. Politics is associated with dissimulation and strategy. The reason for acting that a government or authority will claim will often not be its real reason for acting. If you have been persuaded that another person's or party's view should be accepted or otherwise taken on board, it will nevertheless often be the case that you don't want to admit that you have been persuaded or otherwise have given way. If you want your point to be persuasive it's often best not to say what you really think or feel. Political action always involves coalitions – making alliances with people whom you disagree with in some matters or some degree. This can frequently look and feel too much like supping with the devil to be morally comfortable. Strategic action smacks horribly of game playing, and moral persons believe that games should not be played around peace and war and poverty and education and health.

2. Politics is associated with talk talk talk. Reasonable people can often see a straightforward way to tackle problems like poverty and injustice. What we need is action, action, action. The political process strikes many practical people as a waste of energy.

3. Politics stands in an ambivalent relationship with violence. Sovereign power is the power of life and death – the power to make war, to direct police forces, to punish criminals. People who are engaged with and in government are touched by this violence. You don't have to be an anarchist to be troubled by the disciplinary and punitive power of legislation and administration. Similarly, many individuals are repelled by the hints of violence and aggression in political events such as demonstrations and the exercise of free speech, and in antagonistic partisan debate about policy decisions.

We have a problem. Politics poses a problem for education because to educate people politically can seem to be to educate them out of ethics. Politics has this overwhelmingly negative value connotation. Furthermore this is for contradictory reasons. For many critics politics is intimately bound up with conflict and aggression; for others the problem is that it is all talk, not action. Feminist thinkers have criticised conventional political institutions and action because of their masculine value stance. Terrorists and financiers, and other action types can hold the politician in contempt because he is emasculated, effeminate.

There are many alternatives to the political way – theoretically, at least. It is clearly not true that every society clearly distinguishes political institutions from the generality of social institutions; or politicians from other roles. Thinking commonsensically, but also guided by philosophy, we can see that there are in principle alternative ways of making decisions which affect all, of reaching a solution to the problem that some kind of government is needed. Governments, think tanks, journalists, and gurus are constantly proposing alternatives to or modifications of political rule.

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- We could, for a start, have recourse to the way of nature. Actually a very selective view of nature is generally invoked in this train of thought: we could allow the dominant to decide; who actually is dominant could be determined in the time honoured way by fighting and success in reproduction.
- More peacably, markets can be the mechanism that determines who gets what and how.
- Or many have understood society, state and government to be structured like a kinship group or household. Schools and other similar institutions often, of course, proclaim themselves as families. At least head teachers frequently aspire to have their school members conduct themselves like family members, with themselves as respected parents.
- Alternatives to the political way also include the use of magic, or spiritual, or religious power – the power to rule proceeds from the power to offer salvation or its equivalent.
- One of the most important anti-political ideas is that of the self-organising community – people who share values and ways of life can organise themselves in small units based on the social human capacity for cooperation and order by way of norms.
- And one of the most significant alternative ways is the military way – the domination of society by the armed power and the direct use of violence; the displacement of political decision making with military strategy and tactics.

All of this is negative. Politics is so awkward and so discredited that a range of projects set out to displace it, correct it with something else – something more rational, or less artificial, or more efficient, less frictional. It's actually very useful to dwell on what the world would be like if any of these alternatives wholly displaced political processes. Of course, they never could really. Actually existing societies we know about consist of combinations in different quantities of all these mechanisms and forms of power. And the serious political projects for spreading the market mechanism, or for promoting community, or giving the welfare function back to families, over the last decades have certainly not seriously set out to eliminate politics completely. But nevertheless, the shortcomings of the

political way prompt these and other such projects. And they invite us to think, as many of us have over the last thirty years, what lives would be like if all goods were allocated by market mechanisms; or if all life were subject to military order. Conducting these thought experiments can bring sharply into view what we would lose if we eliminated politics from life.

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What do we mean by politics? As an initial characterisation let's say: politics designates all those processes pertaining to the power to govern: keeping it, squandering it, subverting it, exploiting it, challenging it, etc. This definition makes reference to all processes – according to this, uses of military violence are every bit as political as party competition for the vote; bribery of rulers is as political as demonstrating against them. On the other hand, powerful strands in political thought are concerned to distinguish political power and political processes from natural, economic, religious or magic, kinship or community power and processes. When we think about what politics is not, certain definite features of it become clear. It becomes clear what, if we lost politics, we would lose.

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- Publicity: Politics is a public (visible and audible) process and onlookers are entitled to ask participants, in whatever role, to account publicly for what they do. When I'm out shopping there is no norm that demands that I answer a passer-by or fellow shopper who asks me what I'm up to; when I'm on a demonstration, there is; as a representative, or a civil servant I expect to be held formally to account for my actions in that role. A good deal of military power takes place publicly, as a spectacle; but the norms of accountability are by no means the same.
- Conciliatory deliberation: if a group with power is going to decide on a course of action which is opposed by another group, the opposition and its grounds must be taken into account. This does not mean the opposition gets its way, or that it is satisfied; but nevertheless political process itself fully acknowledges opposition, and a number of features of political decision making (deliberation itself, decisiveness) embody this acknowledgement. By contrast when magic

power is used against us we are simply enchanted; if I lose out in a market transaction nobody need acknowledge my loss. One meaning of 'politicisation' is the process of drawing attention to, and taking full account of, the consequences of mechanisms such as markets, or the exertion of power by people over others.

- Office: a political process works through agreed upon or established procedures, and those procedures are conducted, overseen, and administered by officers, who by virtue of their office, have duties. This is partly a matter of the accountability mentioned earlier. But most importantly offices are agreed – perhaps the most important aspect of political power is power to decide how we are going to decide. Contrast this with the natural order of the prides of lions and packs of monkeys and uses of physical domination; or with the single simple market mechanism of price.
- Prudence. The reasoning political actors engage in must be prudential. This is because a political process is decisive, and it is binding on all, so the consequences of it are grave. (Compare this with market mechanism, where there is no collective prudence; or religious law as that is thought of by Moses.)
- Accountability. Officers and governors are accountable, one way or another, for their actions and their consequences. In proper democratic and constitutional systems there will be established procedures of accountability. However, even where there aren't established procedures accountability is inevitably part of any political set-up – because one way or another, in the very long run, governors, officers and citizens will be held to account. By contrast in markets there is no identifiable agent; the dominant male in the pack can be overthrown – but not exactly held accountable.
- Openness. All of these principles add up to something very distinct about politics – it is inevitably an open ended process. Notwithstanding what I said about the bindingness and finality of political decisions, they are always revisitable and always will be revisited. This is another source of frustration for politics' critics. Whereas some critics dislike politics because it involves decisive use of power, and therefore implies authority and closure, other critics dislike

it because it is never-ending. Decisions aren't quite made, forms of words are agreed so that disagreement can be glossed over – and we have to come back, time and again, to the original dispute which is never, really, finally, settled.

This open-endedness would be a loss, indeed, from those designs for society that seek to minimise or eliminate it. Think about the alternatives, arising from distrust, dislike and disenchantment from politics. The disadvantages of leaving social organisation to 'natural' power, or to local or small scale community life, or to the market, or military violence, or the authority of religious salvation are numerous. In each case we are likely to worry about exclusion – to turn to the political value of conciliation in order to at the very least acknowledge loss or disadvantage. Connected, that is, with the exclusions and losses that result from non-political ways of doing things, is the silence about them, the fact that within their own terms economics, religion, violence and community are not accountable for loss and disadvantage. By contrast, in politics, account has to be made. And, that means, that a situation of loss or disadvantage is never closed, never finalised. Even if an authoritative institution manages effectively to conceal or disguise loss the fact of politics means that it is not immune from notice, not immune from agitation, not immune from publicity.

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However, this openness, which like the others I present as a virtue of politics, can from another value viewpoint be seen as a weakness of political way. Politics doesn't settle things. It is associated with havering and wavering. How do we teach about this?

To summarise, the pedagogical problem has a number of aspects. First, there is the problem of ethics. It seems difficult to hold political processes up as models for the young. Second, politics is competitive. Iit is about rival claims in public policy, or rival claims to govern. Understanding it and discussion of it involves getting to grips with controversial issues. These can be to do with profound moral disagreements that mean that public policy cannot please everyone, or rival claims to land and

dominion, or disputes about what kinds of action and strategy are permissible in political pursuit of a group's claims. Third, the openness of politics poses its own pedagogical problem – what do we say about this? Do we tell young people that adults can't solve pressing problems?

In many curriculum areas we take it for granted that truth has to be compromised for pedagogical reasons. For instance, when teachers teach physical sciences, or history, they take it for granted that every year you have to tell young people that what they learned last year wasn't right – that it was a simplification, or it was partial. But it seems worse – even unacceptable - to go in for this kind of pedagogical misrepresentation when it comes to talking and teaching about political issues. Thoughtful people have difficulty with the idea of varnishing the political truth – pretending, for instance, that issues are settled politically when they're not. The openness and neverendingness of political process gives the political story the opposite of the structure of the fairy tale. Rather than lying, it seems preferable to leave politics for the grown ups.

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It has become something of a standard complaint by educationalists who specialise in citizenship education, and by political theorists, that citizenship education is consistently depoliticised. When we take into account this analysis of politics – no wonder. Politics is a taboo subject, conflict has to be avoided. In response, partly, to this, multidimensional models of citizenship have been embraced by educators. [eg Heater]. Such models emphasise that citizenship has a cultural dimension – it is about life and participation in a given society. It has an economic dimension. In capitalist societies citizens cultivate a certain level of self-reliance, they contribute to society through their work and other economic activity such as saving. It has a legal aspect – which will vary from state to state. Citizenship has an ethical aspect, it puts constraints on character and conduct. And so on. The problem with the way such multidimensional models have come to dominate the citizenship education scene is that the political aspect of citizenship is relatively downgraded, if not eclipsed altogether – most often the latter.

'Citizenship' is properly speaking a political relationship. Originally the term designates membership of a state, nowadays of a federal or nation state usually; but it also designates the political aspects of our local relationships in town, county or commune. To speak of ourselves as 'citizens' is to claim a particular kind of dignity, to proclaim a particular kind of relationship with our fellows, a particular set of responsibilities and privileges, and a particular kind of relationship with those who hold office, and rule, whether locally or at the national state level. In particular as citizens of a democracy we might be those rulers – we might run for office. And as citizens in any kind of polity we have an interest in decisions that are made – whether these are about very local matters like playgrounds or very big matters like invasions and immigration policy. As adult consumers we might say that playground provision is of no interest to us; as citizens, if we are acting as citizens, we must be interested in public and merit goods that are provided by the political authority. This interest we have in such matters, though, has as an inevitable corollary conflict – we will find ourselves in conflict with others who take a different view, or have a different style of argument. Citizenship in this sense is inescapably competitive. It is conflictual as politics is conflictual. But, given what I've said about politics, this aspect of citizenship can be unwelcome and unattractive.

Is it any wonder, then, that in the implementation of the citizenship curriculum in England and Wales schools have overwhelmingly concentrated on life skills instead of political literacy, on community instead of civic skills. Of course citizenship involves skills and competences; but it also involves relationships in the polity. Of course, it involves membership of a community – but it is also premissed on membership of a state or its equivalent. Of course, to be a citizen requires civility; but it also involves friction and rivalry.

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In light of these considerations I want to draw attention to two things. First, politics can't be eliminated, although it can certainly go badly, and it can be scorned and treated with contempt, and actors can attempt to evade it or displace it with community or violence or religion or something else. In

human societies there is conflict, oppression and exploitation. Where these are, people will – probably – act politically. They will get together, and cooperate, and decide, and act up publicly, and attempt to hold the powerful to account for power and injustice. Second, we need politics, because in human societies as such there is conflict. Conflict is why magic, or religious power, or markets, won't do. Such forms of rule will be, and should be, resisted by those who are disadvantaged by them. Conflict, both in the form of disagreement, and in the form of oppression, exploitation and exclusion, is a necessary condition for politics. And political process, with its procedural values of publicity, deliberation, office, and prudence is the best way to conduct conflict.

Now, this analysis has not talked of democracy, or justice. It is neutral in itself between ideologies and constitutional approaches such as liberalism or conservatism. Although this does not mean it is neutral as between all possible ideologies. It says nothing specific about theories of sovereignty – it is consistent with a certain kind of monarchy, and a certain kind of democracy.

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My argument is that liberal democratic political cultures have lost sight of the foundational political power that underpins them. The concepts laid out here are relatively unfamiliar to most citizens. I connect this to the conduct of political theory and philosophy in recent decades. Debates have been dominated by the enlightenment values of liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, and conducted on the terrain of a particularly late modern kind of ethics, taking a particular view of society and economy for granted. Of course, I am not arguing that we can in any way dispense with such debates. But it is notable that the way they have been conducted has, I think, muddied the water in many debates about the multicultural state as well as citizenship education. The emphasis, in theory at least, has tended to be on the policy goals and ethical ends on which we should fix; less on the political process by which those ends must be reached and the virtues or characteristics of actors that are needed for that process to go well. The point is that where politics is relatively disvalued or positively disliked, then there is a

temptation to conclude that if a magician could magic us into a just state; or a philosopher kings could somehow impose on us a constitution for justice, then that should be our choice.

There are two problems with this. First, it is a model of a just society without just citizens. That is to say, without citizens who themselves had engaged in the pursuit of justice. Second, then, the justice that resulted would either be held in place by massive authoritarian power; or it would be very fragile. Philosophical truth may be a necessary but it is not a sufficient foundation. That is, justice must be built on the foundations of true political power.

By political power let us remind ourselves we mean the cooperative power to get together and decide how to decide, to decide, to have methods of making the decision stick, and methods of implementation. My original characterisation of politics was all those processes pertaining to the power to govern. In this sense, politics the process must rest on this more fundamental political power to set up and to abide by government. But just as the power to govern can be lost, subverted, or squandered, so we collectively can lose, or lose consciousness of, the underlying political power. Political power truly is a property of people; although it is not a property that all people everywhere can effectively deploy.

There have, recently, been developments in the field of political theory which take this constitutive political power, and the virtues of politics, much more seriously. Some work directly addresses the issue of political virtue in the sense I have set it out here. More familiar is the work of deliberative democrats [Guttman and Thompson, Elster]. Here, an explicit focus on processes of deliberation (rather than straightforward voting for one's preferences) means that theorists are explicit too about the procedural values of openness, accountability, conciliation and publicity. Deliberative democrats are concerned with the project of ensuring that the political ethical values of equality, autonomy and justice are built into the political process, as well as constituting the ends we seek.

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Schools, colleges and universities are great places in which people – teachers, staff and students – can familiarise themselves with the political way. But too often, sadly, in citizenship education programmes there is a yawning and unfilled gap between playground conflict on the one hand and Hitler on the other. (Footnote to Lynn Davies, University of Birmingham, Toronto Citized conference, July 2004) That is, schools always have tried to turn children into civilised beings. And for reasons best known to our forefathers we have invented the playground. On the other hand, in history lessons young people learn lots about tyrants, and horror – about riots and wars, and national independence, and the doings of dead heroes and villains. Between these two there is a gap, if citizenship textbooks and education programmes are anything to go by.

What is missing? What is missing is education in, practice in, understanding of what is at stake in holding power and authority to account, holding government to account. Between trying to make kids into better mannered characters, and teaching them about either good or tyrannical leaders, there is a space to be filled by discourses of the nature of political power as I have set it out. This gap obviously could and should by filled by experience, and formal education, in the school as a model polity. The analogy between school and polity is of course not perfect. But it's as close as we get – compare the school with the workplaces most of us enter later, or the commercial spaces of the leisure economy. In education institutions people (this can be from their earliest days) have responsibilities for tasks. They can be introduced to the principle of accountability and the constraints of office. We know that what the NFER longitudinal study calls 'school efficacy' - children's and students' own sense that they can participate and improve things in school - is a good predictor of civic knowledge and understanding.

Sadly, though, participation in decision making in school is frequently patchy and ineffective. Children and students are frequently frustrated by consultative committees and the like, and oppressed

by head teachers and other authorities' decisiveness. That is, school with its playground and its classroom representatives and its citizenship days can be an object lesson in how awful and petty and useless politics is.

Schools in many settings also model religious hierarchy; or they model productive firms for whom the young people are inputs to be turned into outputs of young people with educational credentials. Understandably perhaps given the pressure that schools face in containing the social stresses that result from deprivation, not really good enough parenting, and the pressures of the market, as well as the pressure to produce results, headteachers produce authoritarian styles of leadership or management, and teachers demand this, at least where maintaining social order among the students is concerned.

In these kinds of contexts the demands for citizenship education are most easily deflected, even in schools that take the project seriously, into fundraising for charity, to a lesser extent because it's harder to organise into volunteering in the local area, and into some developments of the programmes of social, personal and health education that are very common in UK schools.

What is missing? What's missing is systematic discourse of political power of the sort I have been outlining and recommending in this paper. I mean a self-conscious understanding of political virtues by teachers, self-conscious and developed standards of procedural justice so that decision making and conflict resolution in school, classroom and playground can be systematically related to the best standards of politics in the state and between states. In formal classroom work I think this should mean sustained attention to states and their constitutions, and the values that are articulated in their constitutions, and the way these values have or have not been, are or are not, realised in political events. How do events that are of national and international importance actually fit with democratic values, with the underlying cultural and religious values, and, crucially, with the political virtues that make

constitutions and political life possible in the first place? There is lots of evidence that young people do best, when it comes to civic knowledge , if they actually learn about it in a good classroom setting.

But this of course presents us with a problem. It means that teachers need a developed sense of specifically political power, political procedures, and political virtue. As I have said, our liberal democratic societies have to a large extent suppressed this sense. There are clear historical reasons why liberals have emphasised the foundational status of market relations; why in many places the cultural or religious underpinnings of the national culture have traditionally been central to common understandings. And there are clear historical reasons why progressive, radical and liberal persons communicate to the young a pervasive disenchantment with, or cynicism about, political institutions, political procedures and, especially, politicians. And if teachers are to develop this sense, then they and the rest of us need to practice facing up to the difficulty of political conflict, and facing in a non-fatalistic fashion the dissatisfactions of the political way. My recommendation is that these difficulties and dissatisfactions will be better faced if we develop, for ourselves and for young people, a clear and articulated commitment, which we attempt to make part of our political cultures, of the virtues and the wonders of the political way.

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