

Authority has to Learn New Tasks

(From The Edge of Now page 46 ff. Written in 1999 and published in 2000, it still seems a good and highly relevant manual for governments a decade and a half later in the still further transformed world conditions from those we were already facing then. A little dated but at least moving on from the endless ‘new questions about the role of Governments’ , analysts so love to ask, to providing some actual answers).

1.“Authority has to learn new tasks, meet new demands and find new ways of acting and proceeding. What this means is that the business of governing (as well as of managing and directing most other great organisations of commerce and society) has changed radically , and so have the tools of this business. All the old sources of opinion and advice on which the makers and shapers of policy used to rely have to be questioned – especially the advice of social scientists and economists , on which reliance used to be so heavy , and so misplaced .

2.And all the old qualities which were supposed to give rulers their right to rule and imbue leaders with the essence of their leadership have to be revised.

3.The old centre has indeed fallen apart – whether it be the centre of national government, the centre of the large corporation, the centre of supranational power or any other centres of hierarchical authority. But its fragments cannot just be left scattered and discarded. They have to be re-assembled in a different pattern, carefully but urgently, so as to perform new duties and tasks – and to do so efficiently . Old fragments have to be combined with new materials – lessons and understandings from the past with new perceptions about the present and future.

4.Above all, the new mosaic of authority requires a binding agent . If our societies are to hold together under immense new pressures and centrifugal forces some of the oldest values and virtues and some of the newest perceptions will need to be blended in proportions of the deepest subtlety. Out of this recipe the new cement has to be mixed – strong enough to give identity, attract loyalty and resist anarchy and yet pliable enough to survive conditions of almost terrifying fluidity and change.

How is this to be done, and by whom?

The rest of this book (see *The Edge of Now*. Macmillan 2000) seeks to answer this question. Here, in tentative and un-argued preview form, are some of the basic stances and directions which rulers and officials, it will be contended, would be well advised to adopt. The need is for:

Deeper recognition by society's leaders - in thought, word and deed - of the changed nature of Authority in all its forms. Deeper understanding that heavy centralism, uniformity and hierarchy are no longer the key requirements of order, that in an age of interactivity and networks, when people can talk back, Authority has to earn respect and loyalty in new ways, to concentrate on new tasks and learn new techniques of governing. The whole approach to the organisation of society has to become far more modest and circuitous.

More history being taken into account in formulating policies and reaching conclusions about human behaviour. As Lord Bauer once remarked 'antecedents are critical to the understanding of social phenomena'. Yet the world of social science and economics has largely ignored them.

More humility and caution on the part of national governments and their leaders (and their advisors) when it comes to trying to 'manage' something called 'the national economy', or 'create growth and jobs', along with a greater recognition of the amorphous nature of the whole concept and of the severe limits of central government power in shaping both business activity and society generally (with pronouncements modified and re-worded accordingly).

More focus on the real and underlying engines of prosperity and social harmony and on the conditions, as far as they can be shaped by public policy, which promote risk-taking, innovation, diversity and healthy markets, and the other basic ingredients of the capitalist process in a world of networks (freedom under the law, a stable political system and stable institutions being the ur-conditions for successful capitalist progress).

Fuller appreciation of, on the one hand, the weaknesses and inefficiencies of the big state apparatus, and on the other hand, of the plurality and multiplicity of creative sources in society. (The privatisation revolution has taken us along the first stretch of this road, but there is a long way still to go).

More vigorous rejection of over-specialisation in learning and research and of spurious quantification and measurement of non-measurable and constantly shifting phenomena and behaviour patterns as a basis for policy.

Greater understanding of the means by which wealth and the benefits of prosperity are shared and spread, and far more scepticism about orthodox and traditional techniques for either measuring alleged inequalities (between individuals, between families, between regions), or remedying them (e.g. by frenetic and ineffective income redistribution).

Wholesale revision of views about the processes of economic and social development, how they are triggered and how they are helped or hindered by public policy (again, with policy language totally altered). Four decades of theorising about economic growth, at a level of abstraction and generality which defeats all useful purposes, have to be pushed overboard at this point.

Clearer recognition of the new and even more important roles falling to the nation state entity (e.g. in the field of stronger institutions, wiser and better enforced laws and much greater readiness to discard old and empty roles which the central power is no longer in a position to fulfil). Globalisation and the internationalised network of communications may redistribute power and change the points of influence on people's lives but they do not demand the abject capitulation of nation states and the surrender of democratic legitimacy to higher forces.

Less dependence on misleading international comparisons and less defeatism, inspired by flawed data, about the qualities and capacities of individual societies and of nation states, (an especially relevant point for the British leadership, but of course applicable to all the democracies).

Less faith in bigness, especially in the organisation of international relations. Less belief in forming , or trying to form, big geographic blocs and more understanding of the need for flexibility, suppleness , subtlety and innovation in alliances and relationships between nations.

Stronger moral leadership - by which one means less leadership by opinion polls and constant testing (by highly subjective and unreliable methods) of alleged public opinion. Henry Kissinger reminds us of what might be called the Napoleon the Third syndrome - the example of a weak national leader who made himself the prisoner of short-term tactics and publicity coups and who merely mirrored his own subjects' insecurities instead of calming them. If he had had opinion polls and focus groups no doubt he would have been guided by them totally.

Leaders in the new paradigm will be expected to illuminate, to see a little further beyond the edge of now, to have confidence in their own assessments and to be bold enough to respect the virtues, qualities ,truths and values which it is their duty to maintain. That will be the end of defeatism and, as Part Seven will suggest, may well lead to some surprisingly different conclusions about the status and capacities of countries like Britain from its usual image as 'a second rate power', 'a medium-sized player' , ' just one more European state', 'the European laggard, or sick man' and a dozen other conditioning epithets.

Not a bad starter manual for Governments whether in 2000 or 2014 onwards, as they struggle to retain trust, authority, respect and direction in the present troubled age.