

Why are all politicians useless?

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I received this comment in Substack yesterday, [on a post on austerity](#), from someone called Karen May:

I've read some of your comments, you all sound very educated, what I could grasp, from what most of you, were saying, is the governments past and present are shit at there job? My dad would often say "they couldn't organise a piss up in a brewery"

I don't think he was wrong 🤷🏻‍♀️

My question is this deliberate? Are they just on the take?

If I was to run a company like this, I would get the sack, when does that ever happen to politicians? They just seem to get promoted, I guess you could say, they get the sack, if their party loses, next GE, but does that make it right?

As for healthcare/NHS if we're such a civilised society, why is it, allowed to be used as a political football?

Would love to know your thoughts?

Apologies if my language offends, not my intention, just the way I was dragged up!

I replied as follows:

No apology is necessary. Your father's phrase is sometimes remarkably appropriate.

*But I don't think the fundamental problem is that politicians are stupid, incompetent or necessarily "on the take". The problem is deeper than that, and I addressed it in my book *The Courageous State*.*

In that book I contrasted the Courageous State with what I called the Cowardly State.

The Cowardly State is run by politicians who, whenever they encounter a serious

problem, walk away from responsibility for solving it. They have been taught by neoliberal economics that markets know better than governments, that private business is inherently more efficient than public provision, and that the state's role should therefore be reduced wherever possible.

So, when confronted with failing public transport, housing shortages, inadequate social care, energy insecurity, environmental breakdown or problems in the NHS, their instinct is not to ask, "What can government do to solve this?" Instead, they ask how they can persuade, subsidise or incentivise somebody else to deal with it.

That is the cowardice I was describing.

It also explains something else I have called the single transferable party. Neoliberal thinking now runs so deeply through our major political parties that elections too often change the people in government without changing the fundamental philosophy of government.

We vote one administration out because it has failed, only to discover that its replacement operates with much the same assumptions: government finances are supposedly constrained like those of a household; markets must be appeased; public provision is treated with suspicion; and government must not interfere too much.

The result is remarkably similar policy whichever administration takes office.

That is also why the NHS becomes a political football. Instead of accepting that government has both the responsibility and capacity to provide universal healthcare properly, politicians continually debate what can be afforded, what can be outsourced and what role private providers should play.

So I don't think the fundamental problem is that government cannot organise things.

The problem is that we have spent decades electing governments containing people who have been taught not to govern.

The Courageous State starts from precisely the opposite proposition. When society faces problems that require collective solutions, government has a responsibility to act.

That is the change in political thinking that we desperately need.

I highlight this for one very good reason, which is that this now seems to be the core problem people have with government.

Whether the issue is with modern monetary theory, where many of the objections come down to a belief that politicians would not take action to deal with inflation if it were necessary, or to this style of objection, about politicians not achieving almost anything, the sentiments I am encountering now all have one thing in common, which is the belief

that our politicians are just not willing to do their jobs.

There is, I admit, a certain degree of satisfaction in realising that what I identified as a problem in 2011 is now so widely understood. Similarly, the fact that this understanding does apply to the body politic as a whole, and not just to any particular party, does justify the use of the term “the single transferable party”, which I think Mike Parr first coined, and which has been used on this blog for a long time now.

The satisfaction of being right is not, however, the same as being satisfied that this situation has arisen. That neoliberal thinking has achieved its aim of incapacitating government can never be a source of satisfaction. It can, however, be the foundation on which action is based, and it is to the need for action that my thoughts very often turn these days.

What is the required action? It is that politicians, including those aspiring to hold office, verse themselves in what is possible, when so few now do so. The best current example of this is Andy Burnham.

We know that he spent 16 years, at least, wishing to be leader of the Labour Party, because he stood for election for that post in 2010, 2016 and finally in 2026 before securing it. However, as he has convincingly proved since he arrived in office, he had no idea why he wanted to be Prime Minister, or what he might possibly achieve by being so.

As is very clear from the backtracking that is already characterising his time in office, he had no more idea of what government can do than did Keir Starmer, or so many Tories before him. Each got to Number 10 without understanding the capacity of government to effect change, and was then told by civil servants wedded to what might be called “the Treasury view” that the requirement that the books must balance prevented the implementation of any of their plans.

Instead, they are told the government must be run like a household, and that is what they then try to do, even though this is precisely the approach to government that has failed all their predecessors.

In that case, what is the required action? Is it to provide all aspiring politicians with the education that they need in the way in which government finance can work so that they might deliver what the people of this country need? Assuming most aspiring politicians have limited attention spans (which is not to be rude: this is true of almost everybody now), this would have to be a work of relatively few words and quite a few pictures, or maybe infographics.

I will have to muse on this.