A New Great Reform Act

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"The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground."

Thomas Jefferson, letter to Colonel Carrington, 27 May 1788

1. THE CANCEROUS GROWTH

In 1962, I became editor of *Tonight*, a nightly topical programme on BBC television. My first crisis was Don Haworth's decision to apply for a producer post in Manchester. It was a crisis because Don was our best film director; not only better than the others but also more economical. He did not want to leave, but he needed the extra money. I tried to get his salary increased, but he was already at the upper limit of his grade, so I failed. Don duly applied, was appointed, and spent the rest of his career in Manchester.

On the same day, I had a visit from the Administration Department. They had a crisis too; they were seriously underspent on their office furnishing budgets. Would I like new carpets, new curtains, new armchairs? The amount available was for more than it would have taken to keep Don Howarth in London, and, since the furnishings were perfectly serviceable, I asked if Don could have the money instead. As anyone who has worked in a government bureaucracy could have foretold, it was completely out of the question. The Administration Department would never transfer a penny to the Personnel Department, and, even if they did, the Personnel Department were handcuffed by the BBC's grade structure and remuneration policy.

I mention this comparatively trivial incident because it was the point at which I first realised the folly, the waste and the destructive nature of bureaucracy. The higher up that decisions are made, the worse they are likely to be. The higher up that money is spent, the more likely it is to be wasted. Of course some decisions have to be made at the top, and some money has to be allocated at the top, but a healthy organisation will strive to keep both to the minimum.

Since that moment of insight in the early 1960s, I have come to see more and more clearly that bureaucratic empire-building is not an aberration from, or distortion of, the natural order of things, but a response to a basic human need. People in large organisations will always strive to enlarge their staff, increase their budgets and widen their areas of authority and jurisdiction. It is a cancerous growth.

Fortunately, there is a countervailing force that can be harnessed to check and control the bureaucratic growth of empires. In the business world it is competition. Bureaucracy always increases costs, directly by supporting itself and indirectly by imposing costs, restraints, and wasteful procedures on the people and activities it controls. Businesses that keep their costs lowest are the most likely to survive. I once interviewed two managing directors of successful large businesses who had risen to the top, having both begun as trainees. I asked them what it was that had taken them to the top out of the hundreds who had joined at the same time. Neither knew, but one said, "All I can tell you is that none of the jobs I've done existed until I took it." The other said, "All the jobs I've ever done were abolished when I left them." They epitomised different examples of the way corporations control and adapt bureaucracy.

But how do you control a government bureaucracy, which is both free of competition and an unchallengeable monopoly? The textbook answer is that it is controlled by voters and their elected representatives. The truth is that one vote in a general election every five years is powerless against the imperial instincts of the great armies of politicians and bureaucrats whose hands operate the levers of power. Most people, I believe, feel that the system is wrong and must be changed. The purpose of this paper is to show where it is wrong, and what needs to be done to put it right.

2. HOW THE NUMBERS WENT WRONG

The last time the political and government system of Britain was as hopelessly wrong as it is now was around two hundred years ago. A large and growing industrial urban population was almost completely unenfranchised, while a small, largely rural aristocracy controlled the affairs of the nation. It took many years and much agitation to correct, but the anger finally boiled over into the Great Reform Act of 1832 and what is generally regarded as the great age of British Parliamentary democracy.

Which brings me to numbers. Numbers are central to this discussion, since all political representation comes down to numbers. And the first number is 1,200. That was the approximate number of voters in a constituency after the 1832 Act. Obviously, this left the great majority of adults disenfranchised, but, for the MP and his constituents, the consequences were profound. He could actually know most of them (and all of them at one remove) and they would all know him. He might support a political party, but it would not own or control him as parties do today. His seat in the House was dependent on the trust and respect of his constituency supporters. If they wanted him to vote against the party he

supported, the party could not expel or deselect him: he might lose the odd bit of royal patronage, but his supporters would send him straight back to Westminster at the next election.

But then the numbers started to go wrong. At successive Representation of the People Acts, the size of constituencies was increased until they reached the 60,000 to 70,000 they stand at today, sizes at which it is impossible for a member to know personally even a significant percentage of his potential supporters. Very few of us today vote for an MP we actually know.

Instead, two huge changes over the past century have completely transformed – in effect destroyed – the 1832 system. Of course, there have been many more than two major changes in the world over the past century, but two of them – closely related – have had the most profound effect on the way we are governed. Both are the result of mobility. The smaller is the mobility of people. We travel huge distances in a short time, move home, change our job and our place of work and have many shifting relationships, instead of a few stable ones. So the MP who, in 1832, was likely to be a lifelong member of the constituency he represented, is now much more likely to be hardly known in his locality, indeed quite possibly parachuted in from outside. Equally, many of the electorate are likely to commute to a place of work outside the constituency, and be far more committed to, and involved in, their company or organisation than to the area where they happen to spend the night. It does not matter all that much who their MP is. Only the party label has any meaning.

The other great change is the rise and spread of the media. As a smaller and smaller percentage of voters knew their MP personally, so more and more of them have learnt about the

doings of the government and opposition through the press, the radio, television and the internet. The role and identity of the MP moved inexorably over the years from being the personal representative of his neighbours to being the (virtually anonymous) supporter of a national political party. It was now not his personal reputation among his local supporters, but his party's reputation in the media that determined whether he kept his job. If his party disowned him, he was finished. And so a system designed to reflect and represent the will of the country has been transformed into a system for enforcing the policies of one or other of a small group of political cronies.

Not surprisingly, those small groups found they needed three things to commend themselves to the electorate. They needed power to do the things that would make people vote for them, they needed money to do it with, and they needed a large central government machine to do it nationally. And so, in parallel with the growth of constituency size and media proliferation, there has grown more and more centralisation of power and resources, so that the party in power can present itself to the whole nation as the great benefactor.

Over the past 200 years or so, central government has sucked authority, decision-making and local independence out of local communities, it has sucked money out of the purses and pockets of citizens, and it has created huge government departments and government institutions, a vast proliferation of tribunals, inspectorates, regulatory authorities, quangos, bureaux and councils, taken on an army of consultants, advisory committees, coordinating bodies, tsars, initiatives, action groups and task forces, and printed millions of questionnaires, application forms, guidance notes, instructions, licences, tick-boxes, information pamphlets and leaflets that, between them,

spelt the death of trust and common sense and created the bureaucratic nightmare of twenty-first century Britain.

What is remarkable about this change is that no one set out to make it happen. No plan, no plot, no conspiracy. The change is contingent on other changes – growth of constituencies, the transport revolution, increasing prosperity, the communications and information technology revolutions – so it was never proposed or debated. There was never a moment when people were asked if this was what they wanted and given a chance to say yes or no. But, recently, more and more observers have been pointing out that the people of Britain are not in fact represented in parliament, but governed by an increasingly self-serving, almost unaccountable political class who are even further out of touch with the interests and wishes of the British people than were the rural aristocracy two hundred years ago.[1] It may be that the great parliamentary expenses scandal of the spring of 2009 will provide the impetus for change. But what change?

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[1] One of the first to point this out was Peter Oborne, in *The Triumph of the Political Class*, Simon and Schuster, 2007.

3. PEOPLE OR ACRES?

All systems of political representation come down to numbers. So let's start with a really silly number: 24,000.

For the 30 years that I lived in the London Borough of Ealing, the ward in which I voted comprised 24,000 voters. It was the smallest unit of political representation to which I was assigned but, in fact, it was not a political unit at all. We had no budget, no agenda, no meetings. It only existed on election days. It was just an administrative device, a line on the map indicating which polling booth we should use to cast our vote for the borough council. There were four candidates to be selected, and they were not even allocated to 6,000 voters each. They were a bunch of four for the 24,000 of us. The smallest genuine unit was the borough council itself, representing about 400,000 citizens – a larger population than several independent nations with ambassadors at the UN. Political life in Ealing was, of course, dominated by two tiny groups, the political parties; the vast majority of Ealing's citizens were effectively excluded from political life.

Now let us take a sensible number: 800. That was the size of the Somerset village I came to live in when we left Ealing 20 years

ago. We elect a Parish Council. Everyone knows someone on the council; most people know several. The Council has very little power and a pathetic budget of about £6,000 a year, which it spends extremely sensibly and responsibly. I only wish every six million pounds spent by central government was disposed of with such care. The Parish Council is a very small and impotent body, but at least it is a start, a point of entry, into political life and government activity. Above it, the District Council covers about 30,000 people. Then comes the County Council, covering a population about the same size as Ealing.

No one pretends that Somerset has much in the way of local democracy. Over the years, central government has sucked powers and taxation revenues out of the local community, and returned some of the money, like the BBC's carpets and curtains, with instructions as to what it may or may not be spent on. The great majority of its budget comes down from Whitehall in this way. Even so, it exposes Ealing – and all our other big cities where 80% of us live – for the political nonsense that they have become. It is the cities, much more than rural Britain, which have the greatest amount of alienation from government and the greatest number of social problems, and the greatest political anonymity, and yet they are given almost no genuinely real powers or communication channels whatever. I suppose, because city people are jammed so close together, it must be assumed that representation is determined by the area of land administered, and not the numbers who live on it. How else can the discrepancy between Ealing and Somerset be explained?

It is one thing to describe the lunacy of these huge, inefficient, expensive and wasteful centralised bureaucratic empires that have grown up on us over the years. It is another thing to correct it. The size of the national 1832 reformed electorate was

about three quarters of a million. Today it is 40 or 50 times that. We cannot simply go back. Nor do we want to. The problem of administering large numbers of people and large amounts of expenditure has preoccupied the industrialised world for the past century and more, and they know how to do it. I remember a visit to the GEC Headquarters in London, in the 1970s. Then GEC employed about 200,000 people, but head office consisted of about 40 people. Everything else was run by the manufacturing units, most of them numbering a few hundred. Large organisations have to solve the problem of size if they are to compete, and all over the world they have done so. Only the unchallenged bureaucratic monopolies of government can survive unreconstructed.

But political organisation is not the same as administrative delegation. If we are to reform our inefficient, unrepresentative and anonymous political system, we must rediscover and reinstate the personal knowledge, the common interest, the trust (or indeed justifiable mistrust), the day-to-day, face-to-face familiarity that holds groups together and enables them to function as political units, rather than the disparate and isolated individuals we have been turned into. And, over the past 50 years or so, it has become apparent that we carry the answer within us. The study of evolution, and in particular of the social evolution of primates – more specifically, the great apes – has revealed that we have a natural group size – or to be more exact, a number of natural group sizes – which have taken us down from the trees and up to the moon. Any system that is to work must go with the grain of our evolutionary nature, as it always has. Perhaps the greatest fault of our present system is that it denies and defies the evolved social nature of our species.

4. THE HUMAN GROUP

It is easy to think of the individual voter, or perhaps the small nuclear family, as the foundation of a political system. But this is not borne out by our evolutionary history. For millions of years, we evolved as social primates in groups of 50 or so –which is still the size of a normal group of our nearest relatives, the gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees. Although we split from them about six million years ago, the group size persisted. That group size was the instrument of human survival, and was, of course – among other things – a system of government, completely self contained and self-efficient, not answering to any superior authority.

To survive for millions of years, the group had to fulfil four basic functions: it had to preserve order within the group; it had to supply daily nourishment; it had to provide defence against competitors, attackers and predators; and it had to secure the future of the species. This could not be achieved by a solitary individual, or by mum and dad and a couple of kids. It took a group to do it, and those needs are still the fundamental requirements of today's modern political systems.

This group size of 50 or so is not recognised or reflected in modern politics, except for the occasional neighbourhood watch group or local protest group, and – marginally – rural parishes. But, in the wider world, it is found everywhere. Small business, departments of larger ones, works units, stores, common rooms, military companies and squadrons. It is a size people are happy with. You know everyone, you know what they do and how well they do it, you notice when they are not there. There is nothing magical about the number. It can be a lot smaller – a dozen or twenty – but of course it will be a lot less powerful and effective. It can be larger, though as it gets towards a hundred, it will lose that easy informal coherence and personal knowledge, and tend to split into smaller groups.

Any system of democratic representative government must rediscover and recreate those evolutionary groups. It is not a big deal. Essentially, all that is required is a recognised street representative for each group of 20 or 30 households, available to them if they have queries or complaints or suggestions, and calling occasionally to give information or warnings or canvas their views or votes. Some may become active and supportive groups. Others may never meet each other. It does not matter; through their street representative they are locked into the community and the organisation of which they are the foundation and the *raison d'être*.

5. THE HUMAN TRIBE

Although the primate group was self-sufficient and self-controlled, it cannot have existed in isolation. The gene pool would not have been large enough. However, other groups – competitors – would have their own hunting or foraging grounds within the area. As a group grew too big to manage itself, the surplus individuals would disperse and form new groups or latch on to groups of rivals, and, as they mated, would create the biodiversity required of a genetic isolate.

This platform of existence, many millions of years old, continues today with the gorillas and chimpanzees. But, some time after our ancestors, the hominims, split from them, a profound and ultimately cataclysmic change took place. That change was the emergence of the tribe. It did not mean the losing, abandoning or atrophying of the primate group. That is still firmly and ineradicably there within us all. It meant the coming together of a number of groups, so that instead of rival competitive and conflicting groups of 50 or so individuals roaming around the area, the landscape came to be dominated by cooperative groups of 500 or so, who formed a single social, and indeed political, unit. Analysis of data like hunting territories, game

density and travelling range of the hunters suggests that the group stayed at about the same size, but now they were friendly with each other, had shared family, communicated, met together, from time to time, and came to share ceremonies and rituals, though nobody seems yet to have much idea at what time or what speed. It may have started when our ancestors moved from the forest to the savannah two or more million years ago. It may be that the changes from chasing small groups of swift deer and antelopes through woodland to follow great slow-moving herds of large ungulates across the savannah created a different pattern of hunting and encouraged a more relaxed social relationship between the groups.

The experts do however have some idea about how it happened. For example, co-operation between hunting bands may have helped in killing larger game. Then there is exogamy: the development of pair-bonding may have preserved recognition of children and siblings after they dispersed to other groups, so that parents and children, and siblings, may have stayed in friendly contact across group boundaries. The increase in hominim's brain size may reflect the growing capacity to recognise and identify larger and larger numbers of individuals, and have led to the evolution of symbolic language with its unique power to unite larger groups.[2]

Whatever the reason, the evolution of the human tribe has been fundamental to the survival, spread and success of our species.

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[2] This subject is fully discussed in Bernard Chapais, *Primeval Kinship*: *how pair binding gave birth to human society*, Harvard University Press, 2008.

It seems that it was just a single tribe of a few hundred members who broke out of Africa, some 60,000 or 70,000 years ago, and went on to people the rest of the world with some six billion representatives of *homo sapiens sapiens*. That number, around six hundred (there is no particular magic about the exact figures, only the order of magnitude), is still firmly rooted in our human nature. It is about as large a group as we can genuinely belong to, where just about everyone can know just about everyone else. It is our natural maximum size within which face-to-face recognition is normal.

When the hunting tribes turned to agriculture, some 10,000 years ago, it became the farming village. As industry developed, it became the mill village, the pit village, the brewery village, the harbour village. Right into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, membership of your tribe was lifelong: towns, cities and conurbations grew up, but around and within them, their neighbourhood tribe where they were born and raised, where they lived and worked and died, formed the limits of the real human world that supported our existence, supplied our experience and defined our identity.

If you spend just about the whole of your life in the same place, with the same people, whatever you are hunting, farming or mining, you will know all 600 or so of them, or, at least, know who they are and what they are like. Things are different in today's world. Many people have very little contact with their local community (which is indeed part of the problem this paper addresses). This may have dismantled the old tribal structure, but it has not killed the deep tribal instinct.

Look around the developed world today and you find tribes everywhere. Not birth-to-death local tribes, but working communities of a few hundred people (often within large

organisations of many thousands) who spend most of the working week – some of them most of their working lives – in contact with each other. Armies come in formations of all shapes and sizes, but the building blocks, the 'units', are battalions and regiments of five or six hundred men. That most decimal of nations, the Romans, had a tent of 10, and a hundred men under a centurion, but the unit was the cohort of 600. Most parliaments and assemblies go up to 600 or so – the ancient Athenian assembly as well as the House of Commons; practical businessmen will tell you that 400 to 750 is about the largest number that a single boss can run as a one-man company – above that comes disintegration, or division, delegation and organised management. Private schools that are free to choose their own numbers usually stop at about 600, even if it would be profitable to accept more. Comprehensive schools of two, three thousand turned out to be the biggest nightmare of the state system. Actors will tell you that a full house of about 600 is the most satisfying to play to – something is lost when the audience gets beyond the 1,000 mark (indeed a few hundred is the largest number that can reasonably be addressed by the unaided human voice in the open air). The paralysing UK strikes of the 1960s and 1970s did not take place in the lowest paid industries (catering, retailing, agriculture), but in areas where thousands of people worked together without any tribal structure (docks, mines, car factories) – a tribal structure then being formed by the unions in opposition to the management.

It seems clear the tribe of around 600 members is the largest possible natural, genuine unit of the human community. We may associate ourselves with many other organisations and groupings; we may say we are Londoners, or Scots, or Rotarians, or Methodists, or National Trust members or Manchester United supporters, but those memberships are

essentially badges we choose to wear, not communities we are part of, knowing all the others, them knowing us, and people noticing when we are not there. And yet, outside rural areas, in our great cities and towns, this ancient and fundamental grouping has no administrative or political recognition.

There is no problem about putting this right, since outside the large towns and cities the basic structure is still retained in parish councils. So the first necessary reform is to create city villages, areas of some two or three hundred households, electing their own village council (the street representatives) and perhaps based on a corner-shop, post office or community office which would be the first point of call for any villager with a request or complaint or problem involving any branch of government. The couple running the post office might not be able to solve it, but they would be able to advise how to set about it.

And how do you make sure that the city village has any more existence and importance than the futile 'wards' which are only lines on the street map and exist only on voting days? This takes us to the heart of any political reform: any political unit must have power and it must have money. Otherwise it is no more than a polling sample or a focus group. Any reform that leaves money and power in the same hands will merely be ineffectual tinkering and cannot have any significant effect. The city village councils must have a budget, even if it is only a smallish five-figure sum, and they must have the authority to make some decisions – its play school, its street lighting, its parking restrictions – that affect the community.

Obviously, these will be limited in number because of overlap, clash and shared facilities with adjacent villages, but there will be enough to create conflicting opinions. And, once people see

unwelcome decisions being taken on their authority, and their money being wasted or misspent, political life begins. Rivals stand for election, and a passive locality starts to turn into an active community. And, of course, once the city villages are given official recognition, everyone is plugged into the government system and can access it by a single visit to the village post office. This, of course, is how communication in every successful large organisation works: the people at the top of one group attend meetings of the next group up, and so on up the management chain, from the foreman to the chairman, creating a personal human link from top to bottom. It even half works in my Somerset village with the parish council. But not in national politics. There is no such link between the MP and the citizen. Instead, the parties and the government communicate via the media, with spin and hype and political propaganda, thereby cutting off any genuine dialogue of the sort that happens round the table in healthy organisations.

6. THE SUBURBAN TOWNSHIP

Restoring the city village is a necessary condition of any reform of the political system that goes beyond tinkering. It is not however a sufficient condition. Villages are too small. Their very smallness is their strength in terms of citizen involvement and empowerment, but it is a weakness when it comes to providing the facilities needed in a modern state.

But some experts in primate and human social evolution believe that there is one other unit which has a genetic base in human evolutionary history. It is more recent than the tribe, and therefore fainter. We can get by without it, as indeed we can without the tribe, but not without earlier and deeper behavioural imperatives like mating and suckling.

They put this last unit at something around six thousand. It is a convenient number – almost suspiciously convenient – in that it would comprise ten tribes, and ten is generally reckoned to be about the largest practicable number for the ancient human hunting band, or the modern board or committee, or football team, or army section – the Roman army and Genghis Khan's

army as well as modern ones – or jury, or pit gang, or work group, or project team, or any other close operational group that our species forms. It is, of course, the fighting-foraging part of the old primate group, which numbers about 50 when you include the families and old folk who complete the unit. The leaders of the ten tribes in this larger unit would come together to form and bind the leadership of this supertribe.

Again, we do not know how or when it happened, but clearly it did. It cannot have been based on personal face-to-face recognition like the original tribe, but it is possible to see how the development of a common language and a common culture would have made it possible to identify fellow-members of the supertribe by their language, dress, decoration, songs, stories, rituals and ceremonies, even if you have never seen them before in your life. In fact, it does not matter too much whether this grouping is genetically embedded in our species or whether it is a cultural construct; it has formed the basis for ever larger and wider cultural groupings – regional, national and global – that cannot possibly be genetically determined.

And, of course, it is not a complete innovation, some new kind of grouping. Just as the tribe was formed by linking the separate, rival hunting groups into a single cooperative tribe, no doubt bringing the leaders of the groups together as the instrument of unity and control, so the arrival of language could have made it possible to bring the tribal chieftains together as the ruling council of the supertribe. What is important is that the civilised version of the supertribe, the market town of a few thousand people, is a number we have been happy with over the centuries. It is comprehensible and manageable, it can be self-governing, self-contained and self-sufficient in a way that a village of a few hundred never could be.

Our cities are full of these potential market towns; six thousand is the sort of number that can support a local shopping parade, a supermarket, a school, a medical practice and clinic, a police station, a magistrate's court, a benefits office and job centre, a sports club – all the normal services and facilities for day-to-day living. It is not all that long – a few hundred years – since towns of that size had to run themselves, as they were often effectively inaccessible on wheels for much of the winter. They ran themselves with minimum help or interference from above.

They still could, if they had a political existence and an administrative structure. Just as it only takes power and money to create genuine city village communities of a few hundred, so the same means can create city townships of six thousand or so. Six thousand may sound a small number of people, but a government budget of £600 billion means that, one way and another, such a group contributes and consumes £100 million a year. At the moment, each citizen deals separately with an absurd range of government institutions – departments, councils, committees, agencies, licensing authorities, commissions, tribunals, offices, centres – whereas almost all of the these transactions could be carried out at the offices of his city township.

The reason they are not is the delusion of proximity. Because half a million people live close to the borough offices, it can be the centre for all of them, whereas, in the countryside, distances mean that small towns have to have at least some sort of organisational framework and independent identity. The proximity idea is, of course, nonsense. It is people, not acres, whose needs determine the tasks of government and must dictate its organisation. Handling a large number of people creates a much bigger problem than covering a large area. A

famous nineteenth century general, when told that the enemy had 30,000 troops to his 10,000, replied "Splendid, they do not have a general who can control even 5,000 men. If they have 30,000, our victory is assured." It also fosters the illusion that you can run a community with letters, circulars and leaflets, recalling the complaint of a naval officer in the Suez crisis "If Nelson had had a telex, we'd have lost the battle of Trafalgar." There was a case for a single central authority when all the files were in one place, but that excuse collapsed with the IT revolution.

Creating suburban townships would not simply involve removing a mass of work from the multitude of bloated centralised agencies. It would mean turning the whole system on end and running the country from the bottom up instead of from the top down. Of course, there will be services that the city townships will need higher authorities to provide: universities, major hospitals, prisons, high courts, airports, rail terminals, motorways, trunk roads, trunk rail lines, national parks. Of course, there will areas of overlap between townships for a higher authority to arbitrate. Of course, there will be equalisation payments from the rich areas to the poor areas. Of course, the State will need armed services, a foreign service, a treasury, a national legislature. But, once the huge mass of work dealing with individual citizens has been handed back to the townships, the size, cost and complexity of the higher levels of government would be drastically reduced. And, of course, flexibility would be increased: local revenue can be switched to wherever it is most needed. One township may need to spend more on pre-school children and another on retirement homes. It is their decision.

Central taxation would be slashed and replaced – though presumably at a considerably lower level – by local taxation,

raised and spent by the townships. Local people have a strong incentive to economise – it reduces their tax payments. Bureaucrats have only external pressures. It is a general rule of expenditure that a large number of small sums spent close to where they are raised are more carefully and effectively spent than a small number of large sums spent a long way from where they are raised. Sums spent on their own needs by the people who supply them get far better value than sums spent on other people's needs by people who merely collect them. Whitehall and Brussels are the most obvious, but not the only examples. Equally, fraud is much harder when you are defrauding your neighbours of their own money than when you are defrauding distant bureaucrats of taxation revenue.

The townships are, of course, too small to send a member to Westminster, but ten townships could get together to elect an MP and they would be much more likely to choose someone well-known and respected locally, someone who was less dependent on the backing of a national political party and more dependent on the confidence, trust and support of his local community.

6. COULD IT HAPPEN?

All this may sound like abstract theorising. In fact, it is the exact reverse. It is the rediscovery of something we knew and possessed for a long time, but have progressively and unintentionally lost over the past 250 years or so, leaving the city suburb an administrative desert set in a political vacuum.

The restoration of city villages and townships means once more getting our system of government back in line with our evolutionary nature – humanising it. The creation of small electoral units is rediscovering the truths about local representation that were understood by the people who passed the 1832 Reform Act. The problem, and the urgency of solving it, would have been more obvious if there had been some villain actively trying to take power away from the people for his own use. But there was no villain. There were needs – public order, public health, public education, care of the elderly poor, welfare services – which were met by creating public authorities financed by public expenditure. To start with, the system was controlled by voters' representatives and serviced by a largely clerical bureaucracy working under their instructions. But, year by year, the numbers (and quality) of the bureaucracy rose,

while the relative number and power of the politicians fell. People talk about a 'Third Way', either between democracy and dictatorship or between free markets and socialist planning. But the Third Way that has actually arisen can be best described as Consultative Bureaucracy. It employs millions of people and spends hundreds of billions of pounds, but it does not seek to exercise power. All it wants is comfort, security, a decent income, an easy life and a well-funded retirement. It is only slightly fanciful to see the political parties as marketing agencies competing for the custom of the great bureaucracies by devising projects that will satisfy the political market sufficiently to keep the tax revenues flowing in at the required rate. In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins showed that it was possible to look at the gene not as a device for the perpetuation of life, but to look at life as a device for the perpetuation of the gene. In the same way, we could say "Don't look at the bureaucracy as a means of supporting life in Britain. Look at life in Britain as a means of supporting the bureaucracy".

We have virtually replaced local democracy with a form of colonial government, taking power and wealth away from the subject provinces, the regions of Britain, and spending it at the centre. It sort of worked while people felt that the political class had the knowledge, the skill and the experience to guide the country in the interests of the citizens. In May 2009 that illusion was publicly shattered; it became clear that the political class had finally lost any anchorage it may have had in the trust, values and aspirations of the voters they were supposed to represent. At the same time, the Government had driven the country to levels of debt never seen before and a need to cut expenditure of a different order from earlier economy drives. Creeping up, all the time, on the internet were new ways of

improving and simplifying the working of democracy and functions of government. The time has come to rediscover the lost truths and to unite our ancient evolutionary nature with the possibilities for democratic participation and administrative flexibility created by the new technology.

The time for a new Great Reform Act has come.

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