

A practitioner's view: Mark Hayes 18 January 2020

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These views represent my own opinions and are not necessarily those of any of the organisations I am involved in.

Two themes underpin what I want to say:

My first theme is trust: that seemingly now old fashioned idea that we can trust people in positions of authority or power to be honest and truthful with us.

My second theme is responsibility: that we should be able to expect those in positions of authority or power to take ownership of the problems our society faces.

A couple of examples of what I mean:

TRUST.

Here's a statement I would strongly agree with:

"I'd vote to stay in the Single Market. I'm in favour of the Single Market. I want us to be able to trade freely with our European friends and partners."

A statement made in 2013. The author of that statement wouldn't get very far in today's Conservative Party, so what did happen to Boris Johnson? It shouldn't surprise us that trust in the political system has collapsed when politicians change their position so blatantly just to get into power.

RESPONSIBILITY.

The general consensus is that adult social care needs fixing. It's not a new problem, it's needed fixing for decades. Growing numbers of people are unable to access social care and care providers are at risk of collapse. Yet successive governments continue to avoid tackling the problem.

Arguably our political system has been failing us for a considerable period of time.

Whatever changes we make to our political system will be for naught if we can't arrive at a position where we can re-establish trust in our politicians and our politicians start to take more responsibility for delivering solutions to the problems that our society faces. Perhaps we could make some changes that incentivise greater trust and a willingness to take responsibility.

I want to explore in more detail some of the consequences of our political system failing to address key challenges in my particular areas of interest: housing and education. Starting with housing, where there is one very obvious example:



The Grenfell Tower fire occurred in June 2017.

72 people died in the worst residential fire in this country since the Second World War. The fire was started by a malfunctioning fridge-freezer and spread rapidly up the building's exterior, because it appears that both the cladding and insulation that had been used in order to increase the building's energy efficiency when it was refurbished were inflammable. There was also an air gap that acted like a chimney. So, the measures that were taken to make the building more sustainable turned it into a death trap.

We know about Grenfell because of the terrible loss of life. But there are other events that have had much less publicity:

How many people here have heard of Lakanal House? Grenfell was not the first time this had happened



The Lakanal House fire occurred in a tower block on 3 July 2009 in Camberwell, London. Six people were killed, and at least twenty injured, when a high-rise fire developed and spread through a number of flats in the twelve-storey building. Southwark council admitted it failed to address fire risks at Lakanal House in the years leading up to what was then the UK's worst ever tower block fire.

The fire, which an inquest previously found had started in a television in a ninth-floor flat, spread through the 1958-built block of 98 maisonettes with a ferocity that baffled firefighters and terrified residents.

Those who died had been told to stay in their homes by 999 operators, who believed fire safety measures would be sufficient to prevent flames and smoke from reaching them. The stay-put policy is believed to have been a factor in the number of deaths at Grenfell.

This was eight years before Grenfell. But sadly the story doesn't end here:





In August 2019, the homes and belongings of 150 older people were lost when Beechmere, a residential complex in Crewe was destroyed in a huge fire. Wedding rings, old family photos and even the ashes of a late husband were among the treasured possessions reported to have been lost. Beechmere opened in 2009.



Then in September 2019 at Worcester Park, 23 flats were destroyed. **The BBC reported on 24th October 2019:**

“Residents on two housing estates where blocks of flats burned down have been left at risk because of fire stopping measures in buildings being "missing or useless", the BBC has been told.

A block built in Worcester Park in south-west London by the Berkley Group **burned down in September.**

The BBC has found apparent flaws in two more Berkley Group buildings it is said would allow fire to spread quickly. The developer said all properties had been "independently signed off".’

The problem isn't limited to housing. Similar materials have been used in schools, hospitals and hotels. Anyone staying at a Premier Inn this weekend? Make sure you know where the fire escape is:



That is a picture of the Premier Inn at Cribbs Causeway in Bristol, after it was destroyed by fire in July 2019. The picture isn't on their website, but the following statement is:

“Due to an on-site incident, this hotel is currently closed” (Premier Inn website, 17 January 2020)

Fortunately, the fire started on a Wednesday afternoon when it was almost empty. It took the fire brigade until Friday to put the fire out.

Why I am I placing responsibility for this at the door of a failing political system? Because I believe it is the inevitable result of very poor political decision making, for which those taking the decisions are never held to account.



Fifty years ago a terrible event in Saffron Walden, just south of here and where I live, transformed attitudes to fire safety. On Boxing Day in 1969, the Rose & Crown hotel in the Market Square was destroyed by fire. Eleven people died and the event led to the shaping of today's fire safety regulation across all hotels. The Rose and Crown was a 15th-century building and the fire raised questions about the safety of the premises. As a result, the government passed the Fire Precautions Act 1971. The Act gave the Secretary of State the power to “designate” any premise types he/she wanted to be covered by the act.

As a result of the Rose & Crown fire, hotels and boarding houses were the first premises to be designated as requiring a fire certificate issued by the fire brigade. The

fire certificates were backed up with a rigorous inspection and enforcement regime by fire safety officers and regular visits by local fire crews.

Factories, offices, shops and railway premises soon followed (but single private dwellings were excluded). On applying for a fire certificate, owners had a duty to prove that their premises had a means of safe escape and that staff were fully trained in fire safety. The legislation gave powers to fire authorities to apply to courts to ban any premises deemed too dangerous.

However, as part of the agenda to “cut red tape,” in 2006 the government rolled-up nearly all the preceding pieces of UK Fire Safety legislation into the Regulatory Reform Act (Fire Safety). This ended certification by fire authorities and instead of fire officers telling business how to meet the necessary standard of fire safety, businesses had to work it out for themselves by carrying out their own fire risk assessment.

According to the Fire Brigades Union, specialist fire safety departments within fire and rescue services have seen some of the worst levels of cuts in the entire service.

This is the consequence of a failure in our political system.

The Lakanal disaster, which killed six including three young children, resulted in a long coroner’s inquest which in turn made several recommendations about what should change to prevent a recurrence. Recommendations on fire risk assessments, **stay put policies** and refurbishment, including using cladding panels, were never properly implemented.

We cannot trust Government to act when it needs to and government still doesn’t take responsibility for ensuring that the lessons are learnt and acted on.

Large London housing associations have estimated that the total cost of making their buildings fire safe will be up to £6.87bn.

The G15 group, which represents the largest associations in the capital managing 600,000 homes, said in a statement that its members own 1,145 buildings over 18m in height with external wall systems of some kind.

It complained about government advice, saying some of the notes issued were “very unclear” and many of them didn’t consider a building as a whole but separated out connected issues.

The group added that investigations “point to potentially systemic issues in construction of tall buildings”. But it isn’t just “tall” buildings. Some of the examples I used were low rise.

At least the social housing sector is addressing this issue. It is a very different story in the private sector. If our political system can’t resolve issues of fire safety, we are entitled to ask how many other significant risks are not being properly addressed.



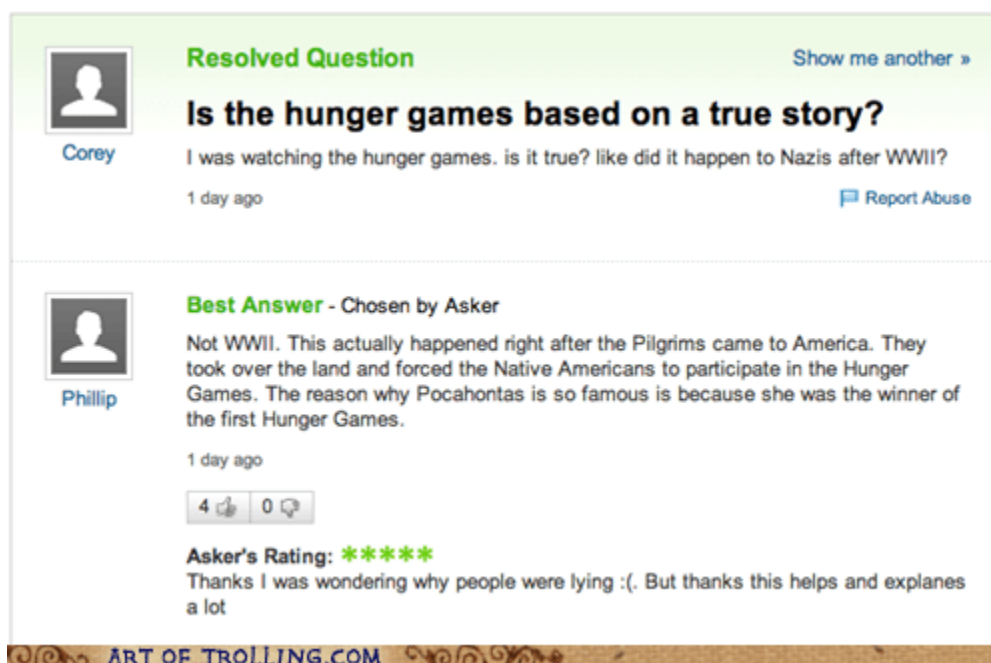
Let me move on to another area in which I have an interest. Something governments all become passionate about, but often in an unhelpful way, is education. I went through the system many years ago and am old enough to have taken O levels. I think schools, teachers and governors all long for stability and a system that doesn't keep changing as successive governments attempt to address the perceived problems of the measures introduced by their predecessors.

Paul Spicker identifies four main trends in the more recent reforms.

- *Centralisation.* The Conservative government in the 1980s and 1990s introduced national assessments, and for the first time a national curriculum.
- *Assessment by outcomes.* A series of measures have emphasised outcomes, measured in targets and performance criteria, rather than educational processes. This reflects a more general trend in government. The national assessments, and intermittent use of league tables, are examples. Outcome assessments may divert attention to measurable targets and are vulnerable to "gaming" (or cheating). An area where Ofsted is now taking a significant interest.
- *The use of "initiatives".* "Initiatives" have the advantage, for government, that they allow for earmarked funding and that they allow governments to be selective in what they pay for and where. There has also been a plethora of initiatives geared to greater inclusion, employability and "lifelong learning". There has been some criticism of potential "initiative overload".
- *Changing who controls schools.* A startling amount of policy effort has gone into governments' recurrent obsession with control - shifts from local authority control to nominal independence, "leadership" and the establishment of "academies" and "free schools". Sometimes these measures seem to work, but they may do

so by diverting or cornering resources, displacing problems to other schools. It is debatable whether they improve standards.

By way of a small diversion, we also have to cope with the problems caused by social media. Television used to be the problem, but how about this as a piece of disinformation:



The image is a screenshot of a Yahoo Answers page. At the top, it says "Resolved Question" in green, with a link "Show me another »" to the right. The question is "Is the hunger games based on a true story?" asked by "Corey" 1 day ago. The question text is "I was watching the hunger games. is it true? like did it happen to Nazis after WWII?". Below the question is a "Report Abuse" link. The "Best Answer" is chosen by the asker and is from "Phillip", posted 1 day ago. The answer text is "Not WWII. This actually happened right after the Pilgrims came to America. They took over the land and forced the Native Americans to participate in the Hunger Games. The reason why Pocahontas is so famous is because she was the winner of the first Hunger Games." Below the answer is a rating of 4 thumbs up and 0 thumbs down. The asker's rating is shown as five green stars. The asker's comment is "Thanks I was wondering why people were lying :(But thanks this helps and explains a lot". At the bottom of the screenshot, there is a watermark "ART OF TROLLING.COM".

One of my sons found that a few years ago on “Yahoo answers” when he was researching the impact of social media on pupils’ understanding of history! Schools now have their work cut out to respond to the impact of social media.

From my perspective, one of key problems is that we’ve ended up with a system of “winners and losers.” That’s fine if your child goes to a “winner,” but not so good if they go to a “loser.” What is, in effect, a market based system will never work because you can’t let a school go out of business due to the impact on its pupils.

A report published by the UCL Institute of Education in 2018 analysed how well the ‘self-improving school-led system’ (SISS) policy agenda, which was brought in in 2010 by the coalition government had worked, and the implications it has had on schools. The report found the system had become less equitable, with higher achieving schools accepting fewer pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds than before.

The report stated: “The schools judged Good and Outstanding between 2010 and 2015 saw a relative reduction in the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (FSMs) compared to the 2005–10 period, while schools judged Satisfactory, Requires Improvement and Inadequate saw a relative increase. Schools that retained an Outstanding grade between 2010 and 2015 saw a greater relative reduction in FSM

pupils compared to schools that were Outstanding in 2010 but that had been downgraded by 2015.”

My experience, chairing a Multi Academy Trust, is that the system relies on the altruism of outstanding and good schools to get involved with their more challenged counterparts, using their leadership and expertise to drive improvement, hopefully changing reputations in the process. For schools that are struggling or in challenging circumstances, this only works if you can join a multi-academy trust that has both the energy and resources to help you drive improvement. It can be a challenge to find a trust that can do that and which will also respect your ethos and values.

Underlying all of this is a fundamental problem that there are not enough good teachers (and we lose far too many in the early stages of their career) and the funding available for the core purpose of teaching in the classroom has been reducing in real terms.



This picture captures that well known group of troublesome protestors, headteachers, on their protest march about inadequate school funding. This protest has gone down in history as the only protest march in London that left less litter on the streets after the march than before.

Here there is another example of how trust in the political system breaks down. The government talks of “more money going into schools than ever before” but fails to recognise that there are more pupils than ever before and that some of the money

disappears on route, being retained by County Councils who use it to fund their special educational needs budgets which are also seriously underfunded.

We live in hope that things might get better. On 30th August 2019 The Institute of Fiscal Studies said: “Today, the government sought to deliver on the Prime Minister's commitment to increase school spending by £4.6bn over and above inflation. Since 2009-10, school spending per pupil has fallen by 8% in real-terms in England. The new spending plans should be near enough sufficient to reverse these cuts by 2022-23. “

I'm left asking the question, would government and politicians gain far more respect if they just told the facts as they are, and told those facts in context, rather than so often trying to make things look better than they really are or making claims that can easily be proved to be spurious?

My experience of working with some great educators, leaders, teachers and staff at all levels, is that the funding (and pay) are very important but what really makes great schools is the vocation and dedication of the people working in them. When government attacks teachers or denigrates what they do, it risks undermining the foundations of our state education system. I don't see much recognition of this in our political system.



Something that really concerns me is how many of our members of parliament have been vilified if they try to perform their role effectively. I fear that, following

the December election, many new MPs will not be inclined to anything but follow what their party whips instruct them to do. The sight of newly elected MPs sitting on the government benches reciting “Get Brexit done” in chorus was more like the first day in Primary School than the House of Commons. There seems to be a conflict between the expectations of the government whips and the needs of a representative democracy.

Kenneth Clarke, the then father of the House of Commons, quoted Winston Churchill when he spoke to parliament in 2017:

“The first duty of an MP is to do what he [or she] thinks ... is right and necessary for the honour and safety of Great Britain. His second duty is to his constituents; of whom he is the representative but not the delegate.”

I’d settle for that!

There’s much I haven’t covered that I would like to have done:



- the failure of politics to deal effectively with and take measures to tackle the climate emergency.



- The impact of social media



- The Faustian pact we have made with google, sacrificing our privacy in return for free internet searches

It may be that much of what is happening is inevitable, and I fear there may not be much we can do about it.

I want to put that in a religious context. As a United Reformed Church lay preacher I lead worship on about half the Sunday mornings each year. I am always searching for material to use and something that has made a striking impression on me is this – from an Easter Sunday sermon preached in 2008 by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time:

“we face a culture in which the thought of death is too painful to manage. Individuals live in anxious and acquisitive ways, seizing what they can to provide a security that is bound to dissolve, because they are going to die. Societies or nations do the same. Whether it is the individual grabbing the things of this world in just the repetitive, frustrating sameness that we have seen to be already in fact the mark of an inner deadness, or the greed of societies that assume there will always be enough to meet their desires - enough oil, enough power, enough territory - the same fantasy is at work. We shan't really die - we as individuals can't contemplate an end to our acquiring, and we as a culture can't imagine that this civilization like all others will collapse and that what we take for granted about our comforts and luxuries simply can't be sustained indefinitely.”

He then goes on to recognise that this alone would only be to echo the not very helpful remark of John Maynard Keynes – 'In the long run, we are all dead'; and that, on its own, would not be much of an Easter message! From a Christian perspective he goes on to say that God and God “alone is free to make us afresh, to re-establish the world on the far side of every catastrophe.”

Depending on your religious perspective, you may or may not agree with his conclusion. However, perhaps we can all agree that we as a culture can't imagine that this civilization like all others will collapse and that what we take for granted about our comforts and luxuries simply can't be sustained indefinitely.

So, I ask the question, is what many of us see as the failure of our political system just a symptom of the terminal days of our liberal democracy, and potentially even of our civilisation?

If it is, at least we can all blame Boris Johnson – there's a silver lining to every cloud.

But I'm not a glass half empty person. My glass is nearly always half full. I'm not in the mood to give up yet, so I put forward some practical steps we might consider in order to put things back on track, although I can't offer a silver bullet.

- Learn again the lessons of the past, including why we had fire certificates issued by the Fire Brigade.
- Break the strangle hold that a very small minority have over who governs us.
- Ensure we can still live in something that continues to resemble a democracy.
- Take a long term approach to investment.
- Three strikes and you're out
- “The Honest Truth”: A new source of accurate news and information
- A little bit of altruism on the part of every citizen

Let's not forget the lessons of the past in areas such as fire safety. The rules and procedures were introduced for a reason.

It seems obvious to me that we need to break the strangle hold that a very small minority have over who governs us. At the moment it's the paid up members of the Conservative Party. It's not completely inconceivable that at some stage in the future it might just be the members of the Labour Party. Unfortunately, that currently very remote possibility (that Labour will win a majority under the current system) seems to prevent the Labour Party signing up to change our electoral system. So, proportional representation is probably not going to happen.

But my glass is still half full. Can we get the centre-left to realign around a sensible manifesto that tackles some of the issues that desperately need our attention? We need an electable alternative to the Conservative party that means we can still live in something that continues to resemble a democracy. Can we ensure there is at least a credible opposition that might get elected?

If we are going to solve the problems that exist in housing and education, not to mention health, care, transport and infrastructure, then we need to take a long term approach to investment. That would take some serious cross party cooperation. Somehow we need to pressurise politicians to do this. Electors think these things are important, but not to the extent that it dictates how they vote – perhaps a concerted campaign could change this.

I have an idea on trust and honesty: A three strikes and you're out rule. If you're in government or an MP or in a senior public position and you knowingly tell a lie three times, then you're out. For parliament I'd beef up the role of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to police this and offer the job to Lady Hale now that she's retired as President of the Supreme Court.

One of the factors that I believe contributes significantly to the collapse of trust in the political system is the current state of our media, both traditional and social. So here's something that surely isn't beyond the capability of some fine Cambridge minds: an alternative social media that is based on presenting facts, at promoting intellectual integrity and that users can trust. Perhaps it would be owned by its users. Forget Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp – "The Honest Truth" would be the app to use. Just make sure that if it takes off, nobody can sell it off for millions to a greedy proponent of surveillance capitalism.



Finally, coming down to earth, the most realistic thing we can do is the bit nobody else can stop us doing. Each of us can put some of our ability and time into making something better. A little bit of altruism on the part of every citizen could make quite a difference. If we can't change the sorry state of our political system and governance, we can all make a difference in the communities of which we are part.

My glass remains half full.