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**Free Speech, Idiocy and the Challenge of Citizenship**

Peter Bradley

Almost 150 years after it was established, Speakers’ Corner - that hallowed, almost mythical beacon of freedom - remains a powerful inspiration to the millions all over the world who are still struggling for the rights to free expression and public assembly which we in Britain have enjoyed for generations.

How rare and precious are those freedoms. Consider in just how many countries it would be impossible or certainly inadvisable for citizens to gather together as we have today. Amnesty International’s latest annual report[[1]](#endnote-1) identifies no fewer than 91 countries, lamentably including members of the European Union and the British Commonwealth, in which freedom of expression is somehow restricted or altogether suppressed.

Or imagine that the person sitting next to you whom you do not know – or perhaps you think you do – may be there expressly to report to some higher authority on what was said and who heard it. As Edward Snowden has recently reminded us, state surveillance did not go out of fashion with the Stasi.

I don’t want to sow suspicion or undermine hitherto beautiful relationships – in fact my aim is precisely the opposite. But I do want to make the case that the disillusion which so many Britons evidently feel about our democratic way of life arises not so much from an erosion of our liberties by a political elite as from our own forgetfulness of why, how and with what difficulty those rights were won and from our failure to appreciate their value to us now.

My argument, which is based on twenty years in frontline politics and the last seven as the director of Speakers’ Corner Trust[[2]](#endnote-2), a charity which promotes free expression, public debate and active citizenship, is that association between citizens and the free, face-to-face exchange of ideas, information and opinions – with each other as well as with the decision-takers among them – is a key not just to rebuilding trust and participation in our democracy but also to creating a stronger and indeed a happier society.

First, I believe, we must recover our understanding of and respect for our freedoms and for the world of ideas which shaped and continues to shape them.

But we need to go further: rights must not just be learned and appreciated; they must be expressed. In my view, a true state of democracy does not exist simply because the rights of citizens are guaranteed by a constitution or protected by law. Rights are like muscles: if they are not exercised, they become weak and ineffectual. Just as the body grows strong and healthy through the regular exercise of its muscles, so the democratic society is strengthened and renewed through the constant and vigorous exercise of its freedoms.

In this lecture I want to argue that if we are to revive our flagging democracy, we must reactivate our sense of citizenship and first of all reinvigorate our right to free expression.

**Positive and Passive Freedoms**

Isaiah Berlin in his lecture and essay *Liberty[[3]](#endnote-3)* made an important distinction between what he defined as positive and negative liberty. He characterised positive liberty as the individual’s freedom to pursue rights and entitlements; negative liberty he regarded as an absence of oppressive authority.

Interestingly, he believed that negative liberty was the more important because it created the space in which individuals can act without the interference of others. Indeed he was wary of attempts by the state to shape the choices which citizens might make, even in a benign cause such as the interests of public safety or health, because those motives are so open to abuse. Ultimately, he wrote, “to coerce a man is to deprive him of freedom”[[4]](#endnote-4).

This of course is the principle which John Stuart Mill had advanced almost exactly a century earlier in his great essay *On Liberty[[5]](#endnote-5)* when he wrote that

*“the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant . . . Over himself, over his body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”*

Both he and Berlin saw in positive liberty the seeds of authoritarianism. When Berlin delivered his lecture in the 1958, he would have been keenly aware of the repressive control central to the totalitarian concept of freedom which lay at the extreme end of the spectrum of positive liberty. Mill went further: for him, democracy itself posed a threat to liberty for it represented “the tyranny of the majority” over the individual.

I acknowledge that I have considerably simplified Berlin’s complex argument. He did after all recognise that both concepts of liberty lived and often contested together and that both are necessary elements of a free society.

But I do want to emphasise the point I have already made, that negative - or what I would prefer to describe as ‘passive’ - liberties alone cannot underpin the free society. For democracy to function and flourish, citizens, both individually and collectively, must be ‘active’ in exercising their rights, whether or not that is their natural inclination, and should do so for a general as well as a personal good.

In other words, as Isaiah Berlin recognised, the elusive goal of reconciling through deliberation and debate the conflict of these two apparently incompatible yet inseparable concepts of liberty is a proper preoccupation for those who care about democracy.

**The Idea of Democracy**

How do we set about that quest and how also do we seek to resolve the competition between our rights and those of others? I have chosen these words carefully: I want to emphasise that the importance and virtue of the process is not diminished by our failure to achieve the outcome.

So now I would like to advance three propositions: first, that democracy is a living and evolving organism which, if not constantly renewed, decays – that is, literally becomes decadent; and, second, that a key means of democratic renewal is active, participative citizenship. The third, to which I will return shortly, is that the free flow of ideas and opinions is essential to that citizenship.

I would like to add two observations to my three propositions – one about ideas, the other about social organisation.

First: though I cannot speak for the rest of the animal kingdom, the capacity for ideas is fundamental to the human condition. As Aristotle observed, “man is the rational animal”[[6]](#endnote-6). But further, having had an idea, for most of us much of the time, the instinct is to communicate it. Indeed, it can be said that ideas and the impulse to share them preceded and indeed necessitated our facility of ordered speech. As Aristotle also taught, “man is by nature a political animal”[[7]](#endnote-7) by which he meant that we are intuitively social.

It’s because of our innate need to communicate what we think that we regard people who lack the confidence or skill or opportunity to express ideas as often frustrated and unhappy and sometimes damaged individuals. It’s also why we regard societies which do not enjoy the right to free expression and association as repressive, unhappy and often failed and dangerous states.

Returning to the contest between concepts of liberty, my second observation is that, as social animals, we are bad enough to need laws which regulate our behaviour but good enough to frame and for the most part abide by them[[8]](#endnote-8).

We know that, left to our own devices, the fittest prosper at the expense of the weak – and that in unequal societies the powerful exploit their access to knowledge and information not just to preserve their privileges but also to frame ideologies which justify them.

Democracy - literally the rule of the people - while no guarantor of equity is nevertheless our best attempt to reconcile the best and worst of human instincts and to guarantee the greatest individual liberty commensurate with a collective good.

As Aristotle taught, the aim of politics is the good society[[9]](#endnote-9) and, as I suggested in my first proposition, democracy can be seen as an endless process of debating and redefining what that good is.

Indeed, from the very beginning, democracy - unlike, for example, tyranny or any other non-democratic form of government - has been associated with the exercise of reason and the practice of debate. Plato taught that justice and virtue can only be achieved when reason prevails over the irrational impulses of spirit and desire[[10]](#endnote-10).

In ancient Athens, it was not just the philosophers but also the statesmen who believed in the primacy of reason and the exposition of ideas and opinions which were required to acquire and express it. Pericles in his great funeral oration for the dead of the Peloponnesian War of 430 BC[[11]](#endnote-11) spoke not just about power and public good but also about the contribution of reason and debate to both:

*“We reach decisions on public policy only after full discussion, believing that sound judgement, far from being impeded by debate, is arrived at only when full information is considered before a decision is made.”*

He was also very clear about the role of participative citizenship in good government:

*“Our government is called a democracy because power resides not in a few people but in the majority of our citizens. But every person has equal rights before the law; prestige and respect are paid those who win them by their merits, regardless of their political, economic or social status and no-one is deprived of making his contribution to the city’s welfare…”*

But crucially, he went much further in asserting that those who did not fulfil their obligations as citizens by immersing themselves in political life are socially useless. Indeed, our word ‘idiot’ is derived from the Greek for someone who puts his self interest before public service. For Pericles, ἰδιώτης (idiotes) is both a selfish and an ignorant person. He said

*“…our private citizens, though occupied with their personal business, are still fair judges of public matters. Unlike people of other nations, Athenians regard those who take no part in civic duties not as unambitious but as useless.”*

Crucially, the Athenians also believed that the right to free speech implicitly conferred a duty to the truth. They even had a word for this obligation, παρρησία (parrhesia). As the French theorist Michel Foucault described it in his lectures on *Fearless Speech[[12]](#endnote-12)*,

*“parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker…recognises truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.”*

But returning to Pericles, the glorious Athenian citizenship of which he spoke of course excluded the majority of the population made up by women, slaves and a wide definition of foreigners – and we also recall that Socrates paid for his parrhesia with his life. But as I have argued, democracy is not so much an end as an endless means and it is through the competition of ideas that we constantly redefine its principles and extend its boundaries.

That process can take us further from as well as closer to enlightenment. Some 350 years after Pericles, Cicero believed that politics was not so much about personal virtue as the protection of property[[13]](#endnote-13). His Roman values are perhaps more closely aligned to our society’s than those of ancient Athens.

**The State We’re In**

If Pericles walked among us today, would he consider us citizens or idiots?

I want to turn to the state of our own democracy and what we need to do to stimulate and sustain it. You will see that I am both pessimistic about where we are and optimistic about where we can be.

It is certainly the case that a democracy cannot exist without the guarantee of free expression. But free speech can also be a feature of non-democratic systems: a benevolent dictatorship, for example, may allow its citizens to think and even speak as they wish, so long as those with real power are left to make the decisions. These are functionless and therefore hollow rights.

But some may think that I have just described the way we live here and now in the UK and many of them will want to blame a political elite for degrading our democracy by taking powers to themselves which should be ours.

Even if there is at least some truth in this, I want to argue that the fault lies as much and probably more with citizens than it does with politicians. While politicians have often been prepared to abridge or appropriate particular rights in the name of some more pressing if arguable public good - for example protection from terrorism – I believe that citizens have ceded more general rights simply by failing to exercise them.

There is now a very considerable and growing literature which plots the atomisation of social and political life and its consequences for developed democracies. Robert Putnam’s account of the post-war decline of social capital in the United States, *Bowling Alone*, is perhaps the best known analysis[[14]](#endnote-14). But that trend has been mirrored in the UK.

A poll for the RSA in 2007[[15]](#endnote-15) found that 70% of those questioned had no ties with any local community group, rising to 80% among 18-24 year-olds. In 2010 the Government’s final *Citizenship Survey* found that only 33% had engaged in civic participation at least once in the previous year, the lowest it had recorded[[16]](#endnote-16).

As the world around us changes, as our means of interaction multiply and demands for our attention intensify, it is perhaps inevitable that our preoccupations and habits will adapt to that new and complex set of circumstances. Some will argue that increased disposable income and time and a greater range of consumer choice have actually made us freer than ever before – freer both *from* poverty and ill health and *to* make our own decisions about the way we live our lives.

But how does this new freedom manifest itself? In the context of this discussion, perhaps more worrying than this diminishing commitment to community life is the decline in confidence, interest and above all participation in our political processes.

The data shows that a smaller proportion of the electorate has voted in the last three than in any of the preceding 22 general elections since 1918. Before 2001, when turnout hit 59%, it had never fallen below 70% and peaked in 1950 at 83.9%[[17]](#endnote-17).

That trend shows little sign of abating: the Hansard Society’s tenth annual *Audit of Political Engagement*, published just last month, found that only 41% would be certain to vote in an imminent general election, down by a very significant 17% in just two years. In the 18-24 age range, the figure is as terrifyingly low as 12%[[18]](#endnote-18).

This decline in voter turnout is reflected in the near collapse of political activism. The combined membership of Britain’s main parties has fallen from over three million in the 1960s to around 400,000 today, about 1% of the electorate[[19]](#endnote-19), with trade union membership almost halved in a generation, from 13.2 million in 1979 to 6.4 million in 2011[[20]](#endnote-20). Now all three major parties are even struggling to field local election candidates[[21]](#endnote-21).

Of course exercising one’s vote or being politically active are not the only – perhaps not even the best ways – of making a difference in one’s community. Yet the Hansard Society found that though 60% agree that if democracy is to work properly every citizen should get involved in politics, 54% said they ‘don’t have enough time’[[22]](#endnote-22).

How has our democracy become so dysfunctional? Let me return to the question about the balance between self interest and public service. In my view, the unintended consequences of two factors above all have contributed to our problems.

**The Pursuit of Affluence**

First, the relative affluence of the post-war years has perhaps inevitably eroded the sense of common cause which people in need of decent housing, education, healthcare, work and wages felt. I believe that we have not yet found alternative bases for community.

So now we are constantly – and are constantly encouraged by admen and politicians alike to be - aspirational for what we don’t have, but seldom content with what we do; we are jealous of our property and fearful for our safety; we are suspicious that our neighbours might be enjoying better rights than ourselves but don’t deserve them; we are resentful of our politicians whom we believe are actually just like us – self-interested.

This is a big problem because, in my view, if it is an article of faith that our economy and with it our wealth must grow each year in perpetuity, we are bound to be disappointed. Though we struggle to deny it, there is of course an end to ever-increasing affluence: if nothing else, the sorry state of most western finances, and how they were brought low by greed - surely only an unfettered extension of aspiration - should have taught us that we can’t all keep getting richer all the time.

We should also have learned that increasing one’s standard of living is not synonymous with improving one’s quality of life and often quite the opposite if it makes people suspicious, resentful, uncooperative and ultimately unhappy.

Tellingly, according to a poll carried out for the BBC[[23]](#endnote-23), while Britain was by 2006 three times richer than it was 50 years earlier, the proportion of those describing themselves as 'really happy' had declined from 52% to 36%.

Indeed, the economic historian Avner Offer has made the case[[24]](#endnote-24) that the single-minded pursuit of affluence, and more recently choice, has undermined rather than underpinned the quality of life we seek. Offer implies that although wealth can contribute to welfare, our obsessive consumption keeps us from what will actually make us happy, namely relationships with family, friends and neighbours[[25]](#endnote-25).

There is now of course a growing interest in the economics of happiness and well-being. One of its leading proponents, the LSE’s Professor Richard Layard, has noted the correlation between the capacities for happiness and trust and cited evidence that those who believe that most people in Britain can be trusted had declined from 56% in 1959 to 31% in 1995[[26]](#endnote-26).

This unhappiness and distrust extends beyond our attitudes to each other to our institutions. In 2004, Cambridge University’s Faculty of Economics ranked the UK ninth happiest and tenth in terms of ‘life satisfaction’ of the 15 European Union countries it surveyed. In an interview[[27]](#endnote-27) the project’s leader, Dr Luisa Corrado, suggested that

*“The most important factors influencing happiness appear to be the quality of our social interaction with others and the confidence we have in our country's institutions. The survey shows that trust in society is very important. The countries that scored highest for happiness also reported the highest levels of trust in their governments, laws and each other. The UK shows lower trust in government, the police and other institutions and higher social distrust, which might explain why the level of happiness among British people is also lower compared with other countries.”*

This general unhappiness and distrust is not surprisingly accompanied by a greater commitment to personal interest. Headlight Vision, part of the Henley Centre, has found that while in 1997 70% believed that the quality of life is best improved through a commitment to community, within a decade 52% thought that ‘looking after ourselves’ was a better stratagem[[28]](#endnote-28).

As these findings illustrate, the interplay between personalised aspiration and the loss of trust in relationships clearly has implications for our commitment to community and our faith in institutions. But while it might be anticipated that in a free society, a loss of trust in the political process would lead to reassertion of citizens’ rights, based on the dramatically decreasing levels of voter turnout and political activity, the opposite has been the case.

Large numbers of us do not believe but nevertheless behave as if we have achieved so perfect a state of democracy that we can afford to delegate our obligations to a small group of guardians - in whom when asked we say we do not trust - so that we may enjoy other more important freedoms, to acquire more, consume more, aspire still further.

**The New Connectivity**

The second factor in our cultural dislocation is the information revolution; we now have access to far more information and a far wider variety of sources than our parents enjoyed; we can communicate with people on the other side of the world about any subject at any time; we can use the internet to campaign, to argue and debate and, for many oppressed people, it is their only means of free expression.

But for increasing numbers, the internet has introduced a virtual reality which demands so much less of us than the real world. Increasingly our children, brought up with laptops, mobile phones, computer games and multi channel 24 hour TV, have come to view and often to negotiate life and relationships through a screen.

While it is argued that democracy is well served by the opportunities the internet offers for engagement, the anonymity of online identity means that people can contribute to blogs and forums without ever justifying their opinions to themselves, much less to others, which is why so much online debate is so negative, abusive and destructive. This is not so much engagement as a substitute for it.

Moreover, as the time we devote to our devices continues to increase, the scope for other forms of activity inevitably diminishes[[29]](#endnote-29): every minute we spend in front of a screen is a minute we’re not forming or enjoying relationships with our own families, friends and colleagues: the internet has undoubtedly opened a window on the world, but there is a risk that it has also slammed the door on our neighbours[[30]](#endnote-30). As JB Priestly presciently observed decades before the digital age, “the more we elaborate the means of our communication, the less we communicate”.

I accept that the internet has created the basis for a new kind of ‘global citizenship’. If that increases our knowledge of and respect for other people and other cultures, it’s of course very welcome. But a world citizenship which somehow bypasses local relationships and can be turned on and off by the click of a mouse could ultimately be doing more harm than good to the concept of community.

I believe that many of us understand this dilemma, if only at an intuitive level. While a wide range of web-based social networking tools helped to coordinate the popular uprisings which became known as the Arab Spring, one of their principal uses was the organisation of the mass demonstrations of real people in real public spaces which actually brought about the change we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt. At critical moments, people feel an irresistible urge actually to come together.

But though this is significant, on its own it is not enough. We have seen in those countries and particularly in Libya and Syria, that while the uprisings may have succeeded in mobilising opposition to repressive regimes, they have struggled to deliver their initial promise because they have failed through deliberation and debate to secure consensus about the change they seek. They have been rebellions but are not yet revolutions. There may have been common purpose in challenging the status quo but common cause in building the future has been harder to achieve.

That is the issue on which I would like to focus as I draw towards a conclusion.

**Rediscovering Freedom**

The fact that we have not so far managed to master either our new affluence or our new technologies does not make the task of rediscovering and revitalising participative citizenship impossible. But it does make it more urgent.

I mentioned that the capacity to have and the instinct to communicate ideas are defining features of our humanity. Indeed, that word ‘communicate’ shares the same Latin root with so many other words about joint endeavour: many with positive value such as combine, common, compromise, consensus, cooperate, community – and of course, some less so, such as combat, compete and conflict.

It is my contention that when we’re not communicating, we’re unlikely to be developing common cause - or for that matter cooperating; if we’re not doing those things, what is the basis for community and ultimately for a democracy which is founded on our capacity and willingness to build consensus?

An important part of Speakers’ Corner Trust’s mission is to encourage people to re-evaluate and rehabilitate the hard-won rights we now neglect, unaware perhaps of their role not just in shaping the society in which we live but also its future. Among the most important is our right to free thought and speech.

Indeed, since the signing of Magna Carta, the 800th anniversary of which we celebrate in two years’ time, when the contest for power, or at least a share of it, between elites and commoners began in earnest in this country, free speech has been a key instrument as well as an object in the struggle for rights.

Securing our rights to free thought, belief, expression, association and assembly has taken many centuries not least because those in both spiritual and temporal power well understood the need to suppress arguments before they became movements for reform. Only in 1689 did the *Bill of Rights* give MPs the right to free speech and then only in Parliament. No one else enjoyed such privileges - certainly not the advocates of reform. While a century later, in 1791, Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man* was a best-seller, he was forced to flee abroad and was convicted in his absence of seditious libel.

In August 1819, magistrates in Manchester ordered the cavalry, sabres drawn, to charge a crowd which had gathered to listen to the radical orator Henry Hunt. 12 were killed, 600 injured and Hunt spent two years in prison. Sadly, when I spoke to a gathering of secondary school students in Trafford a couple of years ago, none was aware that the Peterloo Massacre had taken place just a short distance from where we were meeting.

Just a few months after Peterloo, the *Six Acts* reinforced legislation of just twenty years earlier, further curtailing rights to free speech and assembly and imposing a stamp duty on newspapers which put them beyond the reach of working people.

Later in the nineteenth century, those who gathered in Hyde Park to protest against the injustices of every day life in industrial Britain and to campaign for their rights were met by huge shows of force by the police. Indeed, it was only in 1872 that the *Parks Regulation Act* established a legal right to gather at what became Speakers’ Corner. But when almost 40 years later the socialist Herbert Blyth took to his soapbox to protest against the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, he was arrested for outraging public decency. Another 20 years on, well into the twentieth century, Guy Aldred, an anarchist, was arrested there for using “insulting words” about the Union Jack.

It was as recently as 1998 that Parliament enshrined in law our rights to free expression when the *Human Rights Act*, which some serious politicians would now like to repeal, codified provisions of the *European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*.

I have made this brief excursion through the evolution of free speech in this country, guided by John Roberts’ essay on *The Development of Free Speech in Modern Britain[[31]](#endnote-31),* in an attempt to dispel the twin popular delusions, first, that this has always been a land of freedom and, second, that we have outlived its golden age.

As history shows, our rights and our democracy have developed through the constant challenge of the status quo. But just as they have been won, our liberties can be lost again. Though we have not yet celebrated the centenary of universal suffrage, as we have seen, fewer and fewer of us now value or exercise that most fundamental of democratic rights, to choose who governs us.

So I am with John Roberts when he concludes his essay with these words:

*“Free speech, then, is not merely a gift bestowed on us by judges and government ministers. Free speech and what it means and entails depends on people coming together in order to test its limits. A healthy democracy demands this.”*

**Reviving Citizenship**

The democratic evangelist’s task is to mine beneath the self interest and cynicism of modern life into the rich vein of goodwill and energy present in every community and to make a convincing case that we cannot enjoy our entitlements as citizens unless others have the same rights and that none of us can properly experience our freedoms without fulfilling our responsibilities to others.

That’s what Speakers' Corner Trust seeks to do. In creating new opportunities for people to come together to discuss their interests and priorities and by providing new platforms for unmediated expression, exchange and engagement, we are tapping into that reservoir of ideas, intelligence and community spirit which make neighbourhoods, cities and societies viable.

That process starts with a much wider public debate about the things that matter to us than we’re currently having. So the first step in reactivating citizenship and reinvigorating democracy is to get people to start communicating with each other again, engaging with the world of ideas - literally coming back down the garden path to talk to each other.

That may sound nostalgic and sentimental and, in the digital age, outmoded. But if neighbours aren’t talking to neighbours, they’re hardly likely to be talking to or influencing their politicians either - and if people aren’t talking to each other, as I suggested earlier, there is little basis for community.

But if we wait for politicians to deliver all our aspirations, we will inevitably remain disappointed. I believe in both politics as a process and in politicians as people who are for the most part committed to a public good. But perhaps now more than at any other time, they find themselves unable to show leadership in the public debates we should be having. Today it is almost impossible for a politician to express an original thought which does not resonate with a popular orthodoxy or reflect the prejudice of a powerful vested interest without making himself or herself the target for vilification and electoral failure.

Politicians themselves are partly to blame. They have made a big mistake in encouraging people to believe that they can and will deliver everything that’s asked of them even though they know that it is impossible even if it were reasonable or desirable. They should be much more honest and courageous about the need to draw the line at which their limited powers end and the responsibility and power of citizenship begins.

They need too to be more open to the truth that the ideas, insights and intelligence of citizens can contribute to framing rather than simply validating policy.

For our part, we as citizens should recall Pericles’s description of a truly participative democracy as it echoes across two and a half millennia. We - and politicians - need to acknowledge that in sending our representatives to Parliament, we do not dispense with our obligations either to ourselves or to each other and that in criticising the shortcomings of our leaders, we are also condemning our own failures.

That is why I say that citizenship is not just an entitlement but a challenge: democracies

are only as good as we collectively make them. Put another way, democracy cannot flourish without active, participative citizenship.

We have a huge opportunity to unlock the abundant talent there is in every neighbourhood in ways which enrich individuals and revitalise communities. We just need to create opportunities and encouragement, for the experience we have with the Speakers’ Corner project shows clearly that there is a huge, unfulfilled appetite for citizenship.

Would it not be wonderful if every town and city had a Speakers’ Corner as a symbol of our rights as citizens as well as a platform for expression and exchange - as many did before mass communications and in particular the TV swept them away!

Would it not be exhilarating to see once again, with heads brimming with ideas and portmanteaux full of pamphlets, the great thinkers and speakers of the day travelling from town to town to engage their fellow citizens in dispute and debate!

Would it not be inspirational if we could transform Parliament Square - as SCT and a range of partners are proposing as a means of celebrating the Magna Carta anniversary - from a hostile, unlovely roundabout into something like the Athenian Agora, a genuine space for citizenship and the proper focus for the institutions of state which surround it?

In our different ways, I suspect that all of us here today are in some way striving to create or recreate a culture in which ideas and opinions matter and form the basis for richer lives and stronger communities.

The expression, exchange and celebration of ideas in genuinely open and inclusive public debate is in my view the key to restoring not just faith in our democracy, but also the strength and cohesion of our communities and the essential confidence in our own capacity to improve our lives and those of our neighbours.

Let us choose the path of reason, cooperation and citizenship. The other way lies idiocy.

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1. Amnesty International *Annual Report 2012 – The sate of the world’s human rights* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Speakers' Corner Trust at <http://www.speakerscornertrust.org/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Berlin outlined his theory in a lecture on *Two Concepts of Liberty* delivered and subsequently published as an essay in 1958. It was included in *Four Essays on Liberty* published in 1969 by Oxford University Press and subsequently by OUP as *Liberty* in 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *On Liberty* was published in 1859 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Aristotle *Politics I.2* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Or as Aristotle put it in *The Politics*, “for as man is the best of all animals when he has reached his full development, so he is worst of all when divorced from law and justice”. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Aristotle, *Politics* [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Plato, *Republic* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Translation by Benjamin Jowett, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University, 1855-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Fearless Speech* (published in 2001 by Semiotext(e), ed Joseph Pearson) comprises six lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California, Berkeley in 1983 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Cicero, *De officiis*, ii, 22 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Putnam’s essay *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital* was published in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1995 and followed in 2000 by his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. YouGov poll for the Royal Society of Arts [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Citizenship Survey: Headline Findings - April-December 2010, England* published by the Department for Communities & Local Government, 14 April 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. According to the House of Commons Library, fell from from 71.4% in 1997 to 59.4% 2001 (59.4%) and though it increased in 2005 (61.4%) and 2010 (65.1%), it remained historically low. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The Hansard Society’s *Audit of Political Engagement 10 – The 2013 Report,* May 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See *Membership of UK political parties* House of Commons research note by Feargal McGuinness, 3 December 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See *Trade Union Membership 2011* by Nikki Brownlie, published by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. The Electoral Reform Society reported (news blog, 3 April 2012) that at the 2011 elections for no fewer than 24 district councils, 10% or more of the seats were uncontested. In Eden in Cumbria, half the Councillors were elected unopposed. According to BBC Wales (Politics News, Vote 2012: *Almost 100 Welsh councillors returned unopposed before elections*, 1 May 2012), in last year’s elections in Wales, the ward of Bryncrug in Gwynedd had no candidates at all. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The Hansard Society (ibid). The survey also found that while 63% concede that if they are dissatisfied with political decisions they have a duty to do something about it, only 29% think that giving ‘citizens more of a say’ would bring about significant improvement in the political system. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. By GfK NOP; see *Britain's happiness in decline*, BBC news, 2 May 2006 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Notably in *The Challenge of Affluence: Self Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950* (OUP, 2006) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Offer’s argument is by no means novel. Adam Smith, considered the prophet of modern capitalism, was also something of a co-operator. He wrote 250 years ago in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that “how selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it”. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Richard Layard cited this evidence in his lecture *What would make society happier?* given at the London School of Economics on 3 March 2003. Four years later, the *World Values Survey of Great Britain* reported that only 28.5% of respondents agreed that ‘most people can be trusted’, and as many as 67.4% believed that ‘you can’t be too careful’. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Happy Danes are here again* published by the Faculty of Economics, Cambridge University; 17 April 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Reported in *The Sunday Times* (4 February 2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Avner Offer draws attention to the evolution in trends in consumption, from labour-saving devices (like washing machines, microwaves and vacuum cleaners) which free our time for leisure and companionship to devices (such as PCs, smartphones, DVDs and MP3s) which consume our time and divert us from social relationships. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Professor Susan Greenfield goes further in highlighting the need for research into a potential consequence of our new relationship with the internet and social media. In [*New Media – Making or Breaking Connections?*](http://www.speakerscornertrust.org/forum/forum-for-debate/)an online debate with Professor Stephen Coleman published on Speakers' Corner Trust’s website (March 2013), she warns that ‘mind change’ - the adaptations our brains could be making in the ways in which we encounter, understand and cope with the world around us - could be as much uncharted territory as was climate change 30 years ago and perhaps as important to our futures. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. [*The Development of Free Speech in Modern Britain*](http://www.speakerscornertrust.org/forum/occasional-essays/)by John Roberts, Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Communications at Brunel University, published by Speakers’ Corner Trust March 2011).

**With thanks to Alice Newcombe for her insightful comments on the first draft of this lecture.** [↑](#endnote-ref-31)