

Since I wrote quite an extensive introduction to the session in the briefing note I sent round, (which we will re-circulate to all those attending) I don't want to say much more. But, if I had been able to come, I would have hoped that the following might also be factored in to the discussion.

In our discussions of democracy we have sought to emphasise that it has local and specific meanings tied to particular places and traditions, but our interests in institutions and practices also means that we sometimes refer to these as having democratic elements even when they are not so described or understood by those involved. In the case of democracy the justification for identifying such elements as democratic often appeal either to more ancient traditions, or to modern perspectives. We know this is an uncomfortable tension – between a focus on local meanings and more general categories, and we have worked by trying not to place too much weight on the latter.

A similar problem, I'd suggest, arises in the case of 'Politics'. It has a variety of local meanings – some encoded in different languages drawing different distinctions, some less deeply engrained. But there is also a literature about politics and the political that is more general, makes certain claims about it being a distinct sphere of human activity, and tries to identify its core components. We can think, for example, of Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, and Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, or Bernard Williams's *In the Beginning was the Deed*.

It would be onerous to try to spell out the details of each of these visions of politics, so I will not attempt to do so. Instead, I draw on this literature to identify a series of dimensions of politics that might provide us with questions which can be used to press particular cases as to how they are responding to particular issues.

For Schmitt, Politics is above all a process of making claims about sovereignty over a particular territory and population, which reproduces in that assertion a distinction between those subordinate to the state and those outside the state – between, in Schmitt's terms, friend and foe.

For Arendt, politics is fundamentally a way of ordering plurality – not through power and violence, but through deliberation and decision. It is, in some respects, a moment of freedom, in which human beings chose their ends through collective decision.

In Rancière, the emphasis is on politics as a mode of resistance to an existing order from which they are excluded – 'Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world.'

Finally, Williams, in a similar mode to Schmitt, sees politics as the establishment of an order in which a claim of legitimacy is made to the population who are encompassed by it.

In each case, there is a concern to identify politics as a distinct domain of human activity – a particular kind of claim making and ordering, (or order challenging in Rancière's case) that is a response to the deeper problem that there is no natural order or division of people's into societies and states. There is an element of fiat in all political rule a limit to the extent to which we could justify doing things this way, rather than in a whole host of other ways. And each such decision and ordering creates winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies. There may be orders unruffled by conflict – societies marked by Durkheim's mechanical solidarity, for example, may not have politics – but in any reasonably complex and plural order, there is a need for authoritative allocation, prescription of rules, and the imposition of order. And, in so far as that is done, not simply through brute force and violence, but with some attempt to claim some legitimacy, we are in the domain of politics, both by asserting and contesting such claims.

In asking what is political round here, then, we might be asking a more objective, less local question, about what kinds of order are imposed, by what means, and in what ways are they accepted or challenged by those they attempt to rule. In some states, politics may be an extremely elite affair; in others it may be a more popular one. And one link with our interest in democracy concerns the extent to which forms of control, order and legitimization, in this period, come to have to contest and speak to a wider set of audiences and with less heavy handed accents than in former periods.

In so far as these more general reflections might be of use in thinking about politics in particular localities it is by asking what problems of ordering and authority they face, the extent to which they recognise them, the way that they respond, and the reaction to such responses.

For example, four dimensions of conflict might be distinguished. The first sees conflict as an inevitable consequence of the heterogeneous character of the social order, giving rise to class antagonisms, or to factions and groups competing for ascendancy. Such conflict results in disorder, exploitation, and domination (rule without willed compliance). Political rule uses institutions, rules and procedures to acknowledge in part the interests of the various groups while subordinating their pursuit to regulation by a common authority. The stability of such an order rests on the ability of those in political office to get those subordinated to acknowledge the legitimacy of the rulers or rules that constrain the pursuit of their interests. The more the political order must rely on coercion to constrain groups, the less complete its political authority and, in the long run, the more fragile it is. In some systems it is possible to secure such legitimacy only among a small sub-set of groups or

interests in the state, with others being coerced. The concern with social conflict and the need to balance the various groups and classes within a common authoritative order is at least as old as the middle books of Aristotle's *Politics* and plays a central role in Polybius and Machiavelli and in subsequent traditions of mixed government.

A second dimension of conflict is to be found in the struggle between individuals for ascendancy - where the motivation for this may be variously understood (as in the equivocation in Hobbes between the motives of competition, diffidence and glory). It sees politics as working towards solutions that substitute for the war of all against all the sovereignty of the state with its creation and protection of individual rights and liberties. In contrast to the class antagonism view, this account recognises a basic instability in the relations between individuals that requires authoritative ordering if outright conflict is to be avoided, and coordination if certain basic values or goods are to be realised. Here, political rule may attempt to secure legitimacy across the board by seeing the political order as providing a solution for competing interests that each accepts as a basic constraint on the pursuit of their interests because of the state's ability to punish transgressions; or, it may recognise that the creation of a sovereign state is itself sufficient to ensure that people will trust the state to defend their security rather than acting pre-emptively and competitively with respect to one another. Either account can look to Hobbes for support.

A third view sees the existence of institutions claiming public authority as itself a source of conflict between those who rule and those who are ruled. Political authority, then, also involves a dimension of attempting to organise the public powers to avoid conflict between those entrusted with public power and those subject to it. Here, the potential for those in public office to use their power, designed to resolve other conflicts, to advance their own interests and ends, gives rise to a set of concerns about how best to structure government and sustain its accountability so as to avoid it going rogue. Such considerations, although they play a slight role in accounts of mixed government, play a much more substantial role in theories of the separation of powers and checks and balances, and in theories of political representation and accountability - in which the aim is to ensure that power is exercised in ways that respect constitutional constraints within which it is generated. Although Montesquieu is generally recognised as having advanced the theory of the separation of powers, it is much more in evidence in the Federalist Papers and subsequent constitutional theory.

The final type of fundamental conflict is that between units of sovereignty. Seen from this perspective, politics is centrally concerned with the maintenance of its sovereignty within a territory and/or over a nation state, and the practice of politics is irretrievably connected to negotiating and sustaining that sovereignty in the face of competition from other groups or states. War is always potentially a component of political rule. This realist account of politics is clearly presented in the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth century 'decisionists' - most notably Carl Schmitt for whom 'The high points of politics are

simultaneously the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognised as the enemy.'

From each of these perspectives, political rule is centrally concerned with the creation of order and the subordination of conflict. Most modern states face elements of each type of conflict and their politics are orchestrated around the attempt successfully to regulate these conflicts so as to produce conditions for the acceptance of their claims to authority. Indeed, we can press some of these issues further by looking at these four types of potential conflict and the way that failure to control and regulate them can compromise political authority. To simplify, we can distinguish four areas where conflict can subvert political rule - in the access to or allocation of office, the formation of policy, the implementation of decisions, and in direct challenge to the basic authority of the state; and we can also distinguish, in the light of the above discussion, four potential types of agent, individuals; groups, classes or factions; members of the political order, the bureaucracy of the political élite; and competing powers or states. (see Figure 1).

Clearly, there are other possibilities - such as the involvement of foreign powers in dynastic struggles to influence succession to the throne in medieval and early modern Europe, or the kind of faction-based struggles around elected office and Tribune and Senatorial decision-making in the late Roman republic for which the term 'electoral malpractice' seems rather inadequate. But the point of the matrix is to suggest the range of types of conflict that require resolution if the political order is to rule authoritatively, rather than collapsing into the exercise of power on behalf of one individual, group or class over all others. If political rule essentially concerns the creation and exercise of authority, then that authority is both rendered necessary by these forms of conflict and must offer a way of resolving such conflict that stands some chance of securing legitimisation from those it regulates.

A further feature of political rule needs emphasis. The very creation of a political system changes the context of action for members of a society. The establishment of a state, even the establishment of a body of armed men who seek to impose their will on others, dramatically affects the salience of existing conflicts and may generate new conflicts. Those who rule seek to impose an order on a community through the establishment of institutions and by the formation and execution of policies, but the very existence of such power will generate attempts to influence its exercise by those subordinate to it and/or who hope to gain from doing so. The relationship between conflict and the political system is not, then, a case of a relationship between two independent factors - a problem and a solution. Rather, the components are inter-dependent, locked together within the particular history of the state in relation to its people, with the tasks that face a political order often being a legacy of its own past actions. That this is so inevitably complicates the nature of politics, the demands on political agency and the task of evaluating political conduct - men and women act against the background of a history in which the interaction between conflict and order generates distinctive problems and solutions that can be understood only historically and cannot be side-stepped.

There is then a question of how these issues and questions relate to the language of politics and talk of politics. Clearly there is some relationship – if probably a variable one. What we might say is that where there are areas of contestation and where there are attempts to secure and impose authority, political language becomes highly freighted and charged – a vehicle in itself for the process of claim and counter-claim, contestation and the desire to legitimate. One symptom of this dimension of politics is a struggle in and over language and its associated forms and rituals, even if that language often closes and disguises the underlying conflicts in various ways. And it means that people's claims and utterances have to be read, not just for reference and content, but also for rhetoric and symbol, and in the light of, and against the background of the claims that are being treated as natural elements of the political order. Moreover, it seems likely that 'politics' and 'political' might be largely negative terms – might be used, that is, to indicate dissent and division and contrasted with claims to the public good, the republic, the demands of order etc. In this sense, a good deal of the core of politics might be the attempt to depoliticise issues and to deny politics and division by asserting claims and value that appear to transcend faction and difference.

A further related issue concerns the emergence of the idea of legitimate opposition. Only slowly in the 18th Century in Britain does opposition become accepted as a legitimate expression of partisanship. Opposition as a challenge over the extent to which actions of policies serve the interests of the public or good of the country is central; but the idea that there are fundamental disagreements over such issues, that people can legitimately be partisan without having to wear the gloss of a more general or universal claim, is not quickly accepted. When the idea of 'His majesty's loyal opposition' emerges at the beginning of the 19th C it is not clear to me that this in itself recognises that depth of division. Rather, it looks much more like an agreement to a set of rules and procedures for contesting legislation and holding government to account within a political system that is not itself open to fundamental question – that is, it is another attempt to delimit the sphere for political disagreement, rather than a recognition of the disagreement that is (on the more philosophical accounts presented here) fundamental to politics. But it may be that that depth of disagreement can never be recognised and legitimated – that it becomes threatening to the order itself, as having revolutionary or insurrectionary potential – and that when politics 'settles' it always tends to settle around a consensus on institutions and procedures within which degrees of difference can be tolerated.

Figure 1.

Area of Subversion:				
	Access to Office	Controlling Policy	Blocking Implementation	Denial of legitimacy/Resistance
Individuals	Bribery, campaign funding, buying votes, nepotism	Inducements and threats directed to office-holders	Non-compliance/free-riding	Lawlessness
Agents Factions/ in Classes conflict	Electoral malpractice, gang warfare, intimidation	Patronage/class rule	Non-cooperation/class war	Terrorism/ revolutionary movements
Bureaucrats/ Élite	Raising thresholds of entry, exploiting access to public opinion	Oligarchy	Elision of formal controls	Coups
Foreign Powers	Funding of status quo or of subversives	Exploiting dependency or venality/trans-national state capture	Support for non-compliant groups	War

