

PAUL'S POLITICAL COLUMN

With **Paul Atkinson**

I wish I could shut up, but I can't and I won't.

Desmond Tutu

Of course I understand that constantly looking at life through a political lens is not most people's cup of tea. Not everyone either wants, or can bear, to wake up each morning and take in the latest government machinations around the Covid pandemic. UK Home Secretary Pritti Patel's desire to tag asylum seekers or store them in Albania, or the reaction on Twitter to the previous night's 'Dispatches' report on the Department for Work and Pension's appalling treatment of people on disability benefits.

How many of us can bear to look climate crisis in the face for more than a few minutes at a time? How many more examples of excruciating poverty and the violent extraction of life's resources by the rich, here and around the world, can we allow into our day before we bring down the shutter on rage and madness to get on with our everyday lives?

In the early weeks of the pandemic I suggested to an email list of therapist colleagues that they might want to sign a petition calling for the government to get on with building locally based test-and-trace capacity, to help us all feel we could do something to manage the fear that was flooding so many minds. Only one person responded. He couldn't see what this had to

do with being a therapist. He realised it was trendy in our profession to be on the left, but he thought the best we could do for our clients was to not undermine their trust in Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government.

A year earlier, someone I had been supervising for several years, and who I considered a friend, contacted me out of the blue to say I now needed to denounce Jeremy Corbyn as an anti-semitic, as the case was conclusively proven. If not, she was no longer prepared to collude with my anti-semitism.

Both events, to very different degrees, injured and outraged the rather thin-skinned and righteous wrapper of my politico identity for a while. The second was by far the more upsetting and difficult to process. Years of trust, affection, mutual learning and shared humour at the existential absurdity of life was permanently laid waste in two short email exchanges.

In fact, neither instance was personal, even though they got under my skin. The first was a reaction to the striking of a political note in an otherwise politically anodyne professional forum; the second, a mindless if lethal outrider of Israeli/Palestinian politics. Both carried the assumption that an establishment

position must not be challenged, and both foreclosed on discussion.

Left politics in the profession leans heavily towards theory, not practice. It always has. In the psychoanalytic world I trained in (and in the world of student politics in the 1960s), intellectual politics was what counted, not class identity. Today, independent-sector counselling and psychotherapy in most ways constitute a standard professional environment in terms of work ethic, aspiration and middle-class life style.

When we set up the Free Psychotherapy Network (FPN) in 2014, I had a vision of loads of therapists in private practice offering one free session a week to people on benefits and low incomes, under the banner of a political manifesto protesting and wanting to do something about two-tier access to counselling and psychotherapy: Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) short-term behavioural for the majority; open-ended relational for the few. It hasn't worked out like that. It is a wonderful project, attracting a small but steady inflow of passionate practitioners, and gathering a global reputation as a progressive therapy project. But it has never had more than 80 therapists offering sessions through its website.

Among professional colleagues and friends, offering free therapy is often greeted with suspicion, dismissal or criticism. It's just (ex-Prime Minister David) Cameron's 'Big Society'; charity covering for government austerity cuts. Paying for the service of the therapist creates the mutual exchange between equally valued adults. The fee is part of the working boundary, essential to therapeutic process. Working without pay is heroic, self-sacrificing, martyred, saintly, naive, adolescent, 'woke' and idealistic, and has a shadow the size of a double-decker bus. People will just exploit you, manipulate you, devalue you, treat you with contempt or guilt. They will feel patronised and used. They

won't feel able to criticise you, be angry with you and hate you. They won't bother to turn up. You're just being goody two-shoes – how grown up is that?

Don't talk politics around the dinner table, they say! Recently, I had a bad spell of repressed class rage and turned into a raving politico at a restaurant table with a mate – a warm, loving psychotherapist friend with a penchant, nevertheless, for good-humouredly taking far too seriously the sophistications of critical theory and poking me around with them. I normally tolerate what I can't help feeling to be his subtly patronising contempt for my political being – matched, to be sure, by my own quiet contempt for his armchair politics. On this occasion, I was feeling a little overwrought and became very rude – about his income, his mortgage, his pension, his holidays abroad, his beloved car, his appreciation of the arts, and his passion for philosophy and social theory. I ended on the best of notes, by telling him I thought his life was empty. So not good!

Not everyone is a politico, but some of us are. Just as attempts to moralise about being 'more political' are really out of order, most of the time, attempts to reduce the drives of a political animal to denied shadow should really be kept to a minimum, and preferably enjoyed only between good friends. Recognising and understanding the power of money in our lives, and needing to earn a living as a counsellor or psychotherapist, are not the same as measuring the value of therapeutic relationships (to the therapist or the client) in the language of market transactions.

Politicking in practice, of course, is just ordinary life in an alternative box. For me, it has little to do with Westminster or the organised political left. If I feel the need of a label, it is usually 'libertarian socialist' or some such. In a way, it's simply the professing of what I think of as the common good; something that will be very like the

way hundreds of thousands of people go about their lives.

I see free clients at my local community centre, and am talking to them at the moment about their plans for a 'mental health' garden and café project. I gave a talk in Bath to therapists on 'What is the UK's mental health crisis trying to say to us?',¹ on the social determinants of psychological pain. I was really struck by how many people in the audience had a social/political practice as part of their work as therapists. A friend and I went up to Newcastle the following weekend to do a men's workshop with a group of young working-class fathers, supporting each other through the stresses of becoming parents in their teens.² Amazingly, it was part of a show at the Baltic by an artist interested in 1970s men's groups.³

Also, in November I facilitated a group for the Philadelphia Association's community and psychotherapy courses – a brilliant initiative from Andrea Heath and colleagues at the PA. This is a terrific bunch of students, from every background – interested and involved, in different ways, in combining work in community settings with therapy thinking and radical philosophy. The session I run is simply called 'Consciousness raising'!⁴

Meanwhile, a group of us have been planning the launch of the uACT (universal Access to Counselling and Psychotherapy) campaign at the end of January, for which a staggering 320 people had registered before Christmas. You can too – here.⁵

Everything I do under the heading of 'My Political Practice' is simply me trying to be creative with small groups of like-minded people, in furthering my understanding of the common good. Nothing to write home about. Nothing to get your knickers in a twist about. Just don't try to stop me.

Notes and References

- 1 'What is the UK's "mental health crisis" trying to say to us?...', The Analytic Network, Bath Royal Literary & Scientific Institute, Saturday 13 November 2021; see <https://tinyurl.com/mteect44> (accessed 17 January 2022).
- 2 North East Young Dads and Lads Project; see <https://www.neydl.uk> (accessed 17 January 2022).
- 3 Steve Rose, "They wanted to end masculinity": the artist inspired by anti-sexist men's groups', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2021; see <https://tinyurl.com/ywc4nzzf> (accessed 17 January 2022). The *Guardian* reporter headline and emphasis on anti-sexist men's groups made us wince.
- 4 Philadelphia Association, Experiential Course in Community and Psychotherapy; see <https://tinyurl.com/2p8sdd82> (accessed 17 January 2022).
- 5 Paul Atkinson, uACT Campaign Launch; to book, go to <https://tinyurl.com/2p9cuwew> (accessed 17 January 2022).

About the contributor



Paul Atkinson has been wild swimming in the intersection of psychotherapy and political activism since the early 1970s – admittedly with many spells of apathy, despair and watching telly. He has five grandchildren, and helped set up the

Free Psychotherapy Network.