7. Civil Society

Britain is often described as a "free" or "open" society. The influential political philosophies of people like Isiah Berlin and Karl Popper for example, rest broadly on the idea that the freedoms enjoyed in Britain (and similar countries) define its character. Legally protected rights to speech, worship, association and free trade are regarded as fundamental to the British way of life. No discussion of British Government would be complete without some sense of the kind of society in which it operates.

This essay will touch on the question of freedom and openness. Its main focus will be on the practical expression of these on Government: that is to say, the social institutions through which citizens can scrutinize, lobby and hold their public servants to account. These institutions are called "Civil Society". They are the means by which practical freedom is expressed and Government is kept open.

The context however is important, so this essay will begin with a more general picture of the kind of society Britain is. Central to the concept of freedom is the individual, yet Britain still has some significant group identities, as well as structural advantages and disadvantages. I will start with a brief review of race, social class and other potential identities in Britain.

Race in Britain

Britain's 10-yearly census uses a colour based system of classification, which it calls "ethnicity". While "race" is a more controversial concept, "ethnicity" can be thought of as simply whatever identity someone feels they have. The census therefore asks people if they consider themselves: White, Black, Asian, Mixed or "other". The 2011 results look like this:

White: 87.1%
Asian: 6.9%
Black: 3%
Mixed: 2%
Other: 0.9%

It is important to note that Britain's ethnic minorities (the "non-white" categories) are far from evenly distributed. They are overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas, particularly in London (the national total is 12.8%, while for London it is 40.5%). It is also important to note that sub-ethnicities exist within the "white" population. Of particular significance is the Polish population which has risen sharply since the EU open borders from 2004. About 1.4% identify themselves as "Polish" and they too are overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas.

Members of Britain's ethnic minorities are more likely to be in unskilled, poorly paid and less secure jobs. It is this apparent structural bias, the cultural transformation of some urban areas, and racial discrimination in employment and housing, which sustains "race" as a source of social division. Attention is occasionally heightened by incidents.

In April 1993, a black 19-year old, Steven Lawrence, was stabbed and killed at a bus stop in

South London. The five white teenagers responsible had deliberately set out to attack a black man. Despite witnesses and evidence linking them to other attacks, the Police did not prosecute the teenagers and a private action by the victim's family failed. It was alleged that racial bias and possible Police corruption had impeded the investigation.

The campaign for justice for Steven Lawrence helped to highlight other instances of institutional failure associated with racially motivated crimes. Eventually, thanks to new technological developments, some 18 years later, DNA evidence was found to convict two of those responsible. In the meantime, public and press investigations, including Government enquiries, exposed what was called "institutional racism" in the Police force. This means that while individual officers are either not racist or hide it well, the organization tends to show a bias, for example, by taking some crimes more seriously than others.

While events like these show that racism is still a real problem in Britain, they also say something about the value of an open society. Civil Society (which we will consider later) is like the cog between the people and the State. As one moves; as the culture evolves, the cogs turn and the State, perhaps frustrating slowly, nevertheless turns. Governments acted and the Police reformed. Civil Society, in this case, gave confidence to the people who were seeking the truth, it got laws changed and ultimately saw justice done.

The direct impact of race on Government is difficult to assess. In Britain, it is regarded as unacceptable to appeal to racial identities for political purposes. It may happen, implicitly, occasionally, for example, the opportunity to have the first non-white Mayor of London may have influenced some people's votes in 2015. Nevertheless, Sadiq Khan, who is the current Mayor of London, worked hard to ensure his "Asian" ethnicity was not a relevant issue during his election campaign.

There are of course, some openly racist political Parties in Britain. They however, never succeed in getting more than around ½% of the votes in elections. In 2010 the British National Party's vote peaked at 1.9%, but this was only when it had deliberately toned down its racist language.

Class in Britain

A recent, large social survey has produced a new system of social class categorization favoured by many social scientists. It is based on correlations of wealth, social connections and taste, and reveals the following classes in British society:

- The elite – The wealthiest 6%. They went to private schools and the top universities, and are twice as rich, on average as the next class down.
- The established middle class – 25% of the population. They work in the traditional professions and are the most well-connected socially.
- The technical middle class – 6%. This is a new class that works in science and technology. While their parents came from the class above they are not as well connected and have less classical and more modern tastes.
- The new affluent workers – 15%. They have a similar income to the class above but come from lower class families.
- The traditional working class – 14%. They work in old labour-intensive industries and own

their own homes.
- The emergent service workers – 19%. While all the classes above tend to have property and feel secure, these workers are younger, work in insecure service jobs and rent their homes. These people are more likely to belong to ethnic minorities.
- The precariat – Poorest 15%. These people are the least socially connected and most insecure. They are unemployed or have a low income and low skilled jobs. Their income is typically ½ of the class above.

While a system based on wealth, social connections and taste, matches what most people mean by "class", the survey shows a relatively weak correlation between them. For example, the two "middle classes" ("established" and "technical") have similar wealth but different tastes. Rather than contradict the common definition and argue that there are two middle classes, it makes as much sense to say that the stereotype is wrong. If the correlation is an illusion, it is fair to argue that there is no such thing as "class" as it is commonly understood.

Today, if someone insists on the importance of class it is likely that they are influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx. In a 2005 BBC radio 4 poll he was voted the most influential Philosopher of all time. This influence carries over into how many British people see social class. In the classic Marxist view, the "elite" (in the six-class schema mentioned above) are the "ruling class", whose values are disseminated through society and whose interests usually prevail in politics. These interests clash with those of the "working class", who are the majority of the population. How this class maps on to the six-class schema is not clear.

Perhaps because of the historic influence of Marxism, the mix of stereotypes and the various schemas of Sociologists, the language of "class" is a little vague and usually avoided. Meanwhile, relatively few British people are happy to describe themselves as Marxists, and Marxist Parties do not do well in elections. This suggests that many British people may recognize the historic contribution of Marx's ideas but are skeptical of politics directly derived from them.

The sociologist Richard Sennett has argued that class identities have declined because work is now, and increasingly, short-term and task-oriented. Whereas people used to stick to one, or at most a few jobs, now it is common to switch relatively often. Data for the US (which it is reasonable to assume is not too different from Britain) shows that for most of the 20th century, doing more than five jobs in a lifetime was exceptional. Today the average number of jobs in a lifetime is eleven.

This change has weakened Trade Unionism and the idea of loyalty to a profession. According to Sennett, it has even reduced the value we give to professional self-improvement. All in all, it is hardly surprising that such changes would reduce the sense of class identity. This does not mean that people do not have an answer to the question of what class they belong to. It means that they see the social hierarchy as fluid and their position in it as temporary, as well as irrelevant to their tastes and not politically decisive.

It is interesting that the recent wave of public anger following the financial crisis of 2008 was aimed, not at the ruling class, but at a profession. The word "banker", the once respected, or at least neutral description of a job, became a term of abuse. Some semblance of a generalization

did occur, although without reference to "class". There was widespread criticisms of the "1%", that is to say, what is perceived to be a self-serving and irresponsible super-rich minority.

The respected journalist Robert Peston, in his book "Who Runs Britain?" describes a group of financiers whose astronomical salaries have caused them to lose touch with what money means to ordinary people. They move vast sums of money around the world and have no qualms about avoiding taxes. They simply don't understand why people are angry when they award themselves huge bonuses. Meanwhile, their appeal and loyalty amongst shareholders keeps them in their jobs.

Another respected journalist Jeremy Paxman wrote about a slightly different kind of elite in his book "Friends in High Places". He noted how the wealthiest people in Britain keep the positions of power amongst themselves. Through a small number of very high fee-charging schools, like Eton and Harrow, through the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and on into the world of private clubs, people from the same privileged background maintain their own exclusive social networks. By association alone: who you know, what school you went to and what clubs you belong to, they promote each other in the worlds of business, finance and politics.

Other identities

In June 2016, Thomas Mair, a white British man, approached his local MP saying "Put Britain first". He then shot and stabbed her. Mair's psychological problems had until then, only manifest themselves in an obsession with Nationalism and Fascism. His world view was one of heroes and villains; violent patriots and liberal traitors. He saw himself as British, and with a duty to rid Britain of undesirables: foreigners, immigrants and those who help them.

His victim, Jo Cox, was a humanist and humanitarian. She was not only a dedicated MP, but worked for peace and international development. She defended the welcoming into Britain of refugees from the Middle East. In Mair's deranged mind she was the worst thing imaginable, a traitor: a British person who didn't subscribe to his identity and who failed to put the interests of him and his kind first.

What happened was an extreme and horrific effect of a certain kind of identity. On a world scale it is not that unusual. Somewhere in the world at this very moment someone is fighting, killing or dying, for no other reason than membership of a nation. That this happened in Britain less than two years ago is a reminder that Britain has not yet escaped this primitive mentality. Despite all the progress that has been made, nationalism remains a potent force in many people minds, and a dangerous one in the most vulnerable.

So what progress has been made? It is probably fair to assume that in the age of imperialism, British nationalism was strong. From 1877, when Britain took control of India, to 1914, when the Great War began, confidence that the British Empire was a supremely powerful, civilizing force in the world was high. Stories of noble British adventurers, dragging the world out of ignorance, idleness and immorality, were read by every schoolboy. When war broke out in 1914, nearly ½ million men volunteered within 2 months. By all accounts, the mood was optimistic, patriotic and enthusiastic.

Although Britain was victorious in the 1st world war, the price paid was very high. The sense of imperial destiny seemed to wither with the realisation of its cost in blood. It is significant that the horror of the 1st world war is still solemnly commemorated in Britain every year on Remembrance Day, November 11th.

In the 2nd World War, Britain fought against a form of Nationalism that had reached psychopathic levels. The lesson many the British people brought back from the experience was that blind subservience to one's country brings only death and destruction. The post-war age was also the post-imperial age. A new global economy was developing and more and more British people were becoming individualistic, tolerant of others and skeptical of Nationalism.

By the time we reach the 1970's "British Nationalism" had become associated with relatively small, extremist groups. In mainstream politics the phrase "flag-waving" had come pejorative, while the Union Jack itself was evolving into a popular fashion accessory, symbolizing youthful energy, modernity and tolerance.

In 1982, when Britain went to war with Argentina for the recovery of the Falkland Islands, there was a surge in popular nationalism. It seemed to surprise many people by stirring up primal emotions and defying the long-term trend. While the wave passed briefly it nevertheless revealed how sentiments can lay dormant. Resurgence can't be ruled out. A little has surfaced recently in the long struggle over Europe.

In 1999 the United Kingdom Independence Party (or UKIP) won a seat in the European Parliament. It now has thirteen. In the 2015 British election it got 12.6% of the vote, becoming the 3rd biggest party in Britain and getting its first MP. The two pillars of its program: opposition to the EU and the reduction of immigration, found their perfect moment. Distrust of EU institutions and concern over its open borders lead to the 2016 decision to leave. Predictably UKIP's support has since waned and it has suffered internal divisions.

Meanwhile, the two main Parties have moved to address those concerns. The Conservative Party in Government called the referendum and is taking measures to meet its promise to reduce immigration. Even the Labour party has deployed some soft patriotic rhetoric. While an MP and Labour Education spokesmen, Tristram Hunt called on the Party to be "much clearer about our love and affection for the signs and symbols of modern England". Hunt, by the way, has since resigned over political differences with the Party leadership.

In my view, the growth of international travel, communication, immigration, trade and multi-national production: that whole process that is called "globalisation", has weakened that form of emotional nationalism that rests on racism and xenophobia (the fear of foreigners). Even UKIP has tried to make its anti-immigration message "respectable", that is to say, free of any overtly racist language.

The phrase "I'm not racist, but…" has become an embarrassing cliché in modern Britain. It evokes an overlap between the acceptable language of tolerance and concealed prejudices. While overt racism is relatively rare, the ubiquity of "politically correct" language means we simply do not know how concealed it is. As an example, I heard one UKIP support on the radio say he was not a racist, but wanted "to get rid of the immigrants and get more jobs for our own kind." The

sense of "our own kind" that poisoned the mind of Thomas Mair still exists in Britain and may yet be a force in the world.

Populism

After the Presidential victory of Donald Trump in the USA, a lot of people have been talking about "Populism". Heather Grabbe, from the Open Society European Policy Institute, argues that the word is being used too broadly. She defined it more narrowly by saying that populists "claim that there is a corrupt elite, and there is "we the people" and these two things cannot be reconciled and they are fundamentally at odds with one another."

This definition captures the essence of populism; it is the division of society into two camps, the elite and the people. The populist then claims to represent the people against the elite. Donald Trump frequently talks about "Washington", by which he means a tax-hungry, power-hungry, snobbish, liberal bureaucracy. He frequently implies that Washington is indifferent to the interests of the American people. The clash of interests seems to be fundamental and irreconcilable and Trump is militantly committed to one side.

Grabbe goes on to say that "in an open society [populism] is a real problem, because it means that you can't go for the kinds of compromises and negotiations between interests that are the essence of democracy." This, I think, is not necessarily the case. Politicians who rise on populist rhetoric can, and often do, compromise. The real issue is not whether this clash of interests can be reconciled, but whether it exists at all.

Many political commentators in the USA were startled by Trump's victory. They asked "how was he able to win the Hispanic vote, despite being so negative about immigrants?", "How was he able to win women's votes, despite his dubious attitude to equality and sexually assault?" This way of thinking is so ingrained in US politics that few bothered to question whether these groups are actually good predictors of how people vote.

One pollster/social scientist who called the election right, pointed out that the mood of voters tends to alternate between the desires for progress and stability. As a result, voting tends to oscillate between the two main Parties. Lesser factors may influence the degree of oscillation, but whether or not people are in the mood for progress or stability tends to prevail. In short, when the time is right, a Democrat will give way to a Republican, and vice versa, more-or-less regardless of what either side argues for.

The simplification of the choice may continue as Americans, like British people, become less bound by racial, class and other identities. The common staples of political discourse in the US: the "blue collar vote", "black vote", "gay vote", "women's vote", etc., may become things of the past. While occasional issues and events may unite these groups, "urban tribalism" in general is dying. With it will go the old game of targeting, wooing and winning votes by the block.

The common staples of political discourse in Britain are not these urban tribal categories, but rather of "middle class" and "working class" loyalties to the Conservative and Labour Parties, respectively. Earlier I mentioned how these identities seem to be breaking down. As this happens the same potential for populism, currently being tested in the US, exists in Britain.

In the new age of information, the potential for a more participative, rational and better-informed democracy exists. However, it no longer feels as though information is flowing from reliable sources, but rather swirls like a maelstrom in which we can't steer. Populism redirects our need for group identities into a kind of super-simplified tribalism: we are all "the people" and all of our problems are traceable to the self-serving elite.

If it is true that the people and the elite have singular conflicting interests it is perfectly justifiable to champion the one against the other. If, however, these common interests are an illusion, if for example, decision have to be taken that trade off the interests of producers and consumers, farmers and retailers, financiers and homeowners, the insured and the uninsured, for example, the trick will be exposed. The only beneficiary of Populism is its ascendant leader, and sooner or later there will be compromise and fall.

Perhaps the greatest danger of the Trump Presidency is not so much the man himself as what it signifies for an "open" society. In building his support, Trump has repeatedly referenced "the internet" as his source of information. He has portrayed "the experts" as privileged, patronizing and manipulative. He has spoken of the vested interests of scientists, the media and liberal "Hollywood" (the entertainment industry). In short, he has dissolved the institutions of Civil Society into the elite and declared them all his enemy.

What is Civil Society?

When Kofi Annan, as UN Secretary General, said: "peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving Governments, international organisations, the business community and civil society" he alluded to something few people clearly understand. The first three are obvious, but the fourth is a little nebulous, yet if as Kofi Annan suggests its role is a necessity, it certainly warrants some attention.

When people think of civil society, they generally think of campaigning organisations and the "voluntary sector". I don't think Kofi Annan meant it in this limited sense. One definition goes: "Civil society is a public space between the state, the market and ordinary households, in which people can debate and take action". This sense of a fluid interface where scrutiny, dialogue and participation occurs, more accurately captures the broad, positive sense used by people like Kofi Annan. It nevertheless remains a little abstract.

In my view, the "space" referred to in this definition can mean any way that people can express themselves that is independent of institutions of power, that is to say, it does not challenge the role of Governments (or other statutory bodies) but informs them. Motivation is significant in my definition. Civil society is that part of society that isn't exclusively attending to its own interests, nor does it seek power. Rather it tries to nudge the exercise of power toward a public good.

If democratic Governments are put in power by a majority, they do, to some extent, represent majority opinion. Yet in diverse, free and open societies, we would not want Governments to represent a majority as if it were a single block. We want Governments to act on the plurality of values and views within society. There must therefore be some means to express minority opinions. Besides this, all majority opinions start out as minority opinions. Without a way to

express and nurture them, society could stagnate.

Concretely then, how are minority opinions expressed? It is relatively easy in Britain to set-up or join organisations. Also, if you have a job in certain professions you are relatively well-placed to have a public voice. I think therefore, civil society can be thought of as having the following five parts:

- NGOs
- The legal service
- Education and academia
- Journalism
- The arts and entertainments

It should become clear from this (and become clearer as we explore the meaning of civil society further) that "partnerships", particularly with Governments, are *not* a good idea. We can however, I think, generously interpret Kofi Annan's meaning to be that of mutual respect and acknowledgement of each other's role. It should also be clear why Populists like Donald Trump, and secretive Governments, can be skeptical or even directly hostile to civil society.

Finally, before we look at the five parts of civil society in Britain one-by-one, it is important to acknowledge their impurities. In particular, it should be noted that organisations that are independent of Government have to be independently funded, and hence can be misdirected by the private interests of their donors. This should never be allowed to excuse the suppression of a minority opinion, but is worth bearing in mind when evaluating one.

NGOs

There are 170,000 registered charities in Britain. If you exclude all those that aren't political or economic, and all those concerned with training, sports, recreation, etc., you have only a tiny fraction that can be described as NGOs. One research project used the definition: "an NGO is a non-violent organisation that is both independent of government and not serving an immediate economic interest, with at least some interest in having socio-political influence". By this definition they identified 1,800 organisations in Britain.

Examples of some prominent NGOs in Britain included Anti-slavery international, Liberty, Mencap, NSPCC, Royal British Legion, Save the Children, Shelter, Vegetarian Society, Which? and the World Wide Fund for Nature. These can all be thought of as charities, foundations and campaigning organisations.

A slightly broader definition of NGOs would include Religious, Community or other Belief-based organisation. Examples of each would be Churches, arts and philosophical clubs, such as the Humanist Society. These organisations fit the first part of the definition but don't, as a general rule, fit the second. They are independent of government and don't serve an immediate economic interest. They are not usually interested in socio-political influence except in regard to their freedom to operate.

Also on the edge of the definition are Professional organisations, such as Trade Unions and

Business groups. They may or may not stand for immediate economic interests, but as a general rule, argue for what they believe is for good for society or the economy in general. I think it is fair to class all these organisations as NGOs and part of civil society. It should be born in mind however, that NGOs are not pure. They have an interest in self-preservation, may be influenced by private interests, and some are more sensitive to those interests than others.

The Legal Service

Civil society requires the "rule of law". By this I mean that civil society needs a Constitutional commitment to the idea that executive power is not arbitrary power and governments are not above the law. Governments must act within the law, but this raises the question of who can hold them to account.

Civil society requires a legal service that is independent of Government. This means that Judges stay out of Politics, and Politicians do not control Judges. Apart from public scrutiny, this is primarily achieved with institutional ethics. Put simply, the primacy of the rule of law is taught to trainee lawyers as a fundamental principle. The British legal service thus sees itself, and is widely seen, as a profession above politics.

Unlike some other countries, the USA for example, powerful positions in the British legal system: Chief Judges, Prosecutors, etc., are not elected. While this limits their accountability, it is also thought to limit tendencies toward populism (which are common in the USA). In general, the institutional ethic is preferred over elections.

Nevertheless, there may be some signs of a creep toward the American model. The "democratization" of one aspect of law-enforcement has occurred recently. From 2012, regional Police and Crime Commissioners have been elected in Britain. Their role is to oversee the Head of the Police service and direct the service's funding.

In a strictly formal sense, Judges are not wholly independent of Government. Constitutionally their appointment is an executive function and was historically performed by the Lord Chancellor (a member of the government appointed by the Prime Minister). Since 2005, ostensibly to separate Executive and Judicial state functions, this job has been done by the Judicial Appointments Commission. While the Commission is effectively self-selected, its Chair and majority must always be lay people (not legal professionals). The rationale is to balance between accountability and legal knowledge, without government interference.

While the appointment of Judges is still technically an executive function, the Government always accepts the Commission's recommendations. The independence of the legal service is thus maintained by a combination of an institutional ethic and complex systems of appointment to statutory bodies. Ultimately however, public awareness of the value of independence is vital. This is yet to be tested by any Government defying the Commission's recommendations.

In general, because the British legal service is seen as independent, people can take action against governments, businesses and other people, with some degree of confidence. The legal service does not have power itself, but serves to curtail the excessive power of others for the common good. It is part of civil society in so far as it performs this function.

Education and academia

The two oldest and most prestigious Universities in Britain are very old. Oxford and Cambridge were founded in 1096 and 1209 respectively. Within a few centuries, Grammar schools were established, designed to prepare young boys for these University (the Universities' high requirements for English and Latin is why they were called "Grammar" schools). Winchester, Eton, St Paul's and Rugby were established from 1382 to 1567. Because these were theoretically open to everyone (as opposed to the in-house private tuition enjoyed by aristocrats) they became known as "public" schools. They are in fact, private and very expensive.

The struggle to democratise education has been a long one. A Parliamentary bill of 1807 for example, proposed that local authorities would be responsible for two years of education in a child's life, for one year at each of the 7th and 14th years. This modest proposal was rejected by Parliament on the grounds that too much education would make people dissatisfied with manual labour.

By 1870, with campaigns highlighting how Britain was falling behind its European rivals, compulsory education for 5-10 year olds was introduced. By 1891 schools were free, and over the following century the school leaving age gradually rose. It is now 16. The reforming post-war government introduced "Comprehensive" education, making sure that every family had easy access to local schools.

Universities have also expanded. In 1920 British Universities graduated 10,000 students. This year, the Open University alone, graduated over 10,000. The gender balance has also changed. Before the Second World War, there were more than three times as many men as women in University. Now there are slightly more women than men. All this means that Britain has, compared to many other countries, an old and well-established education system. It has a relatively well educated population in all generations.

The value of this is twofold. Firstly, governments have relatively easy access to good scientific research and advice. Because a significant proportion of the population has a relatively good understanding of science, governments will also feel some public pressure to take research into account. Secondly, individual academics and institutions can have a public voice. They can lobby government and through the media, influence public opinion.

Journalism

Ever since the birth of the European print industry in the 15th century, British people have been publishing their opinions for political reasons. In the early days it was mostly religious pamphlets, but by the time of the Civil War, in the 17th century, they had taken on a distinctly radical, political character. Daily newspapers were born at the end of the 19th century, mixing stories with advice, gossip and advertising. They were nevertheless, opinionated and partisan.

The owners of the mass circulation "tabloid" papers, such as the Daily Mail (founded in 1896) were courted by politicians. They were rewarded for presenting the right opinions. The founder and longtime owner of the Daily Mail for example, Alfred Harmsworth, became Lord

Northcliffe. Of course, from the start many had wealthy backgrounds, but owning a newspaper was a way of adding extra political influence. Their power is reflected in phrases like "Press Barons", or the more up-to-date, "Media Moguls".

The British media is still politically aligned, for example, the Times consistently supports the Conservative Party, while the Guardian tends to support Labour. Nevertheless, there is a tradition of independent journalism in Britain. Journalists like Martin Bell, Gemma O'Doherty, Heather Brooke, Christopher Hitchens, Mark Thomas, etc., write critically about the abuse of power. They are seldom directly criticised by politicians, who fear being accused of political interference with the media.

Populists are not entirely wrong when they describe the media as "liberal". Journalists and the public in general, are largely aware and supportive of the overriding liberal principle of press freedom. The 18th century writer, Voltaire summarized it like this: "I may disagree with what you have to say but I will defend to the death your right to say it". By this principle all shades of opinion can unite in the common defence of journalistic freedom.

Populists are however, very wrong when they portray the "liberal" media as part of an establishment conspiracy against the people. In fact, by allowing all opinions to be expressed, a free press allows populism to thrive. Several of Britain's tabloids: the Mail, the Express, the Sun, etc., often appealing to fear and resentment and claim to represent the people against corrupt elites.

Despite the common acknowledgement of free expression as a principle there isn't consensus in Britain on how to protect it. In 2006 the British government enacted The Racial and Religious Hatred Act. This followed a number of attacks on Muslims in the wake of international terrorist incidents. Previously, the Police could arrest people for promoting racism. Now they could also arrest people for promoting religious intolerance. This exacerbated an already problematic idea.

Can a tolerant society be intolerant of intolerance? To some extent, yes, but by taking measures like this Britain was touching a dangerous boundary. Strong opinions often offend and those offended may argue that those opinions are incitement to hatred. People could end up being criminalized for their opinions, perversely in the name of tolerance. While some leeway may be granted for racial hatred, religion on the other hand, is an opinion. The law should not be used to protect an opinion from offence.

Another problem with press freedom is the problem of privacy. In 2005 the government commissioned an enquiry after frequent complaints to the Police of journalists violating personal privacy by "hacking" into mobile phone records. Although the report strongly criticised this behaviour, no action was taken. While some saw this inaction as reflecting an unduly close relationship between government and the media, others pointed to widespread public apathy. It should be noted that all those whose privacy was violated at this stage, were celebrities.

Then in 2011, it was revealed that some victims of crime had also had their phones hacked. Public anger now surged and the government needed to act. They created the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), a public body to regulate the industry. Many people argue that IPSO (which has media representatives on it) is too sympathetic to the industry to be effective.

There continues to be debate in British politics concerning how to achieve satisfactory "press regulation".

It is also necessary to mention that Britain has a large and well-funded state-owned "public service broadcaster". The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is very well respected internationally for the quality and integrity of its reporting. It is committed in principle to political neutrality. Nevertheless, while it is unbiased with regard to mainstream political views, it could be argued that it is not sufficiently critical of them.

Finally, there is the problem of the close relationship between media companies and politicians. Recently there has been a trend towards what is called "news management". The main political Parties now employ PR specialists (sometimes disparaging called "spin doctors"), who drill politicians and supply stories directly to the media. This, as well as other social ties, is a factor compromising independent journalism in Britain.

The arts & entertainment

A surprisingly powerful influence on the conduct of British government is wielded by the entertainment industry. Britain has a very strong tradition of social and political satire going back a very long time. At least since Jonathan Swift's 1729 essay "A modest proposal", British people have used mockery and comedy to influence public opinion. Swift's proposal was to feed the children of poor people to the rich. His intention was to show how clever words can hide absurd ideas and to show, by exaggeration, how indifferent to suffering the rich had become.

The effectiveness of this method inspired many satirists through the years, particularly in the form of cartoons, such as the highly influential magazine, Punch. With the rise of Television, particularly since the 1960s, popular satire has become an integral part of the British political scene. Today, many people get most of their news from TV and radio programmes such as The News Quiz, The Now Show, Have I got news for you, and Mock the Week.

Beyond this general effect on public opinion, individuals within the entertainment industry can use their public image to promote ideas. Recently for example, Joanna Lumley, a famous British actress, campaigned for citizens' rights for former soldiers from British overseas territories. In 2016, TV chef, Jamie Oliver, lead a campaign against the overuse of sugar, which contributes to the growing level of childhood obesity. The campaign called for the government to impose a special sugar tax aimed at improving the health of young people.

Conclusion

It has been said that we now live in a "post-truth" society. The ubiquity of information in the information age has made it difficult to sort fact from fiction. It seems that now, more than ever, we don't know what or who to believe. US President Donald Trump notoriously cites "the internet" as if were an authoritative source. He appeals for people to believe what their gut instinct tells them, a perfect recipe for confirmation bias. By suggesting that experts have vested interests and serve the liberal elite, Trump's populism undermines civil society.

Race, class and national identities exist in Britain. Nevertheless, despite horrific incidents and

occasional resurgences, these tendencies are historically diminishing. "Identity politics", as it is sometimes called, is slowly and unevenly giving way to individualism. Populism may co-opt old identities but it is, in essence, a simplified tribalism of the people versus the elite. The decline of identity politics doesn't rule it out in Britain. Resisting it depends on the strength of civil society.

It is reasonable to describe Britain as a free and open society, although not without reservation. The practical expression and guardian of this freedom is civil society: the NGOs, legal service, education, free press and entertainments industry. Through civil society independent and alternative voices are heard. Britain still has points of conflict and injustice, and civil society reflects them, that is to say, it is not above corruption, self-interest, prejudice, etc.. Nevertheless, it is because of a strong civil society that honest assessments of British society, like this one, are possible.

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