

REPLENISHING THE TRUST FUNDS



In the wake of the banking debacle and the revelations about MPs' expenses, there has been much comment about how 'trusted institutions' have let us down.

This has been overemphasized. The banking sector is notorious for its cupidity and ruthlessness – particularly since the last traces of gentlemanliness were rationalized away during the 1980s. Politicians have never enjoyed a very good reputation either. The record is scarcely better for other 'trusted institutions'. The only institutions now generally esteemed by Britons are the monarchy and the armed forces – and even their popularity is contingent.

There was greater trust in institutions once, peaking during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods but remaining strong until after World War Two. Queen Victoria helped to set extremely high standards in public life, which coincided with unprecedented levels of church- and chapel-going,

patriotism and the possession of an empire to absorb surplus energies. This fortuitous combination left an enviable legacy of social ease and a widespread belief that while the authorities might err, they were at least gentlemen and had the national interest at heart.

World War One had both a dysgenic effect and a devastating psychological impact. When Herbert Read asked in 1919 "O whither are you gone, my company?" he was referring to dead assumptions as much as slain comrades. The turbulent years between 1919 and 1939 did little to repair that damage, and much of whatever social capital was left was expended during World War Two.

Since then, the majority of politicians (even if well-intentioned) have continued to forfeit trust by thinking only in election cycles and by failing to tackle really serious problems. MPs were increasingly powerless anyway, as power was diffused to party machines, select

committees, quangos and Brussels, with elections merely exchanging one set of middle managers for another.

The anti-establishmentarian culture that sprang up in the 1960s has also made it impossible for many now to take seriously the once prevalent nostrums (Christianity, royalism, deference, nationalism) which held society in a loose but real cultural compact. Add to this the etiolating effects of mass immigration, internationalism, individualism and consumerism, and it is not so surprising that the Britain of Ealing comedies should have become the Britain of *Crash*; nor that *Dixon of Dock Green* has metamorphosed into a flak-jacketed firearms officer or swivelling camera.

The effective abdication of responsibility by erstwhile authority figures has caused the public to become disenchanted and detached, and loosened ancient communal bonds. We do not trust each other now, because we no longer feel we know each other, or have any shared interests. We are all individuals, making infinitely negotiable individual choices about everything. More and more of us are *Bowling Alone*, to borrow the title of Robert Putnam's 2000 study of modern alienation.

The expenses uproar has merely channelled pre-existing discontent, and provided all too obvious targets; it is important that we do not vent all our spleen on the individuals and let 'the system' escape unreformed.

The expenses imbroglio will not be forgotten quickly, but the sting will soonest be assuaged if politicians engage more with the public on such matters as job security, taxation, crime, immigration and education – and then *act* upon it.

This will almost certainly necessitate a cull of MPs, the reform of parliamentary procedures (including MPs spending more time in their constituencies, and less emphasis on party allegiances), a bonfire of quangos, the repatriation of powers from London as well as from Brussels and the introduction of Continental-style referenda and (eventually) proportional representation. It will mean defying the 'international community' and received opinion. More widely, it will necessitate the promulgation of a confident national identity (Western, European, Christian-heritage) that looks backwards without apology and forwards without fear. Trust depends on shared identity and similar aspirations; it cannot prosper in an environment where one cannot depend upon other citizens' actions and reactions.

Human beings need and want to be able to trust their fellows. So trust in Britain can theoretically be restored, but first we will need to be re-persuaded that our rulers are gentlemen (and ladies), with a genuine connection with and commitment to the citizenry, and this still estimable country. ♦