Disruption, disorder and progress

Essay Three in Lord Howell's trilogy on the Communications Revolution

This is my final try (at any rate for the moment) to divert much deeper attention to a central feature of our altered lives and circumstances. It is pervasive, growing all the time, global, national, local, highly political, right at the front door, deeply influential in all our daily existence, lifestyles, hopes, fears and attitudes. Yet amazingly few, especially in the political and policy spaces, appear ready even to acknowledge, let alone address, adjust to or set about repairing and responding to this completely fundamental transformation.

Contrary to the views of many pessimists, and   *pace* WB Yeats[1], the centre of orderly society *can* just about hold, *provided that* those in authority and places of influence recognise the radical alteration (and blurring) in relations between the State and civic society — and indeed in human relationships in almost every sphere — that has been brought about by the technological upheaval of the last five decades.

Let us be clear – and honest. This is an upheaval far greater, deeper and more disruptive even than the 18th and 19th century Industrial Revolution with all its immense political and social consequences, and with the resultant crisis of democracy shaking every institution and reshaping history.

Everyone knows we're facing an age of disorder and potential disintegration, but the proviso above is critical. Far too few in politics, the

media or the "influencer class", recognize the causes or the consequences if we just drift on. Something akin to a new Enlightenment is called for, with the philosophers stepping forward where the politicians are so clearly failing. The parties merely trade abuse and accusations, while the world rolls away from them (and us).

I draw on two previous recently published essays in *TheArticle,* shaping and defining the issues. The first one was on the real and deeper causes of present discontents and the need for a new era of Enlightenment, a new kind of John Locke essay on human behaviour, despite the obvious eventual shortfalls in the ambitions of the original 17th and 18th century opening movement.

The second essay was on whether the centre can be held in modern societies, to which the answer is "Yes" — provided that the dangers in present trends are recognised, analysed truthfully and thereby accurately and effectively repaired.

We are speaking of the nature of human relations – relations between people and in the very heart of families, relations between the sexes, relations with institutions and communities, relations, between the individual and the apparatus of state, changes in the nature and role of "the state" itself, relations within the nation state, relations internationally between nations and peoples and interests – requiring quite new forms of international interface and connection (to which the global diplomatic establishment has barely caught on).

All are in a state of flux. All pave the way for multiplying grievances, for "placard politics" in place of argument, for dissent shading into hate, and for UN-representative democracy to worm its way in.   All these trends are already being fundamentally twisted in new directions by the communications revolution, the loss of deliberation in the immediacy of online response, the ugly intolerance of polarisation, the   demands of uninhibited transparency, the evaporation of trust and respect for anyone or anything, the freezing of rival opinions into unarguable religions, shutting down all debate and suffocating freedom of speech and expression.

It is the microprocessor, constantly growing more powerful (as predicted[2]) that has changed the definition of national security and the means of defending it. It has changed attitudes to the environment and climate,

changed the entire energy scene and transition, and created a new universal balloon of misinformation. This is now being further inflated by the misuse of AI.

Start making a list – it will be hard, even impossible, to finish. The tiny microcircuit has completely transformed learning, leisure, sport, gaming, food and eating. (Even three meals a day is now on the way out.).

It has altered all relationships at the heart of politics and administration, the procedures and connections which make the machinery of governance work. It has recast the business of being old, the business of being young, coarsened every cause and charitable instinct, blurred most distinctions between fact and fakery, agreed truth and disorienting misinformation.

The microcircuit has altered attitudes to government authority and official figures, to parents, to schooling, to religion, to almost all finance, public and private, and the handling of money, to the moral order, or even what that "order" is meant to be.

To recognize these and numerous other dangers would at least enable response to them. But if only this were so. We could then begin to pick out of this patchwork of good and evil, the best areas to preserve and the zones to remove as soon as we are able. We could then begin to piece together again, world-wide and in collusion with like-minded allies, broken links and ties, making ever unfolding new technology our ally, rather than the enemy, in the process.

Alas, most of our foreign policy thinkers, and even more those across the Atlantic, are just not in this game. They are still playing on chessboards in the age of the world-wide web.

On the world scene is it interesting to learn (from *The Catholic Herald*) that the Vatican now sees two sorts of international networks with real lasting qualities, amongst the jumble of fora, defence leagues, treaties, assemblies, agreements largely inherited from the 20th century and the 70 years aftermath from the two horrific world wars. Those two global survivors are seen to be the Catholic Church (unsurprisingly) and the Commonwealth!

I had the lucky chance, more than a decade ago, to converse with the late Pope Benedict XVI about the then 53 country membership of the Commonwealth, with two and a half billion people (larger by far than the Catholic Church) and new member states lining up to join. (There are now 56.) He was clearly impressed by that number and I was in turn impressed by the way he went on round the room, murmuring reflectively as he shook hands with others, "53 countries". Perhaps he saw what breathless Western policy wonks and instant media commentators miss again and again, that the humble chip has empowered a new sort of world-wide populism – obviously fragmented but nevertheless altering the balance of power between people and rulers, between the masses and the inward fortresses of state officialdom, just about everywhere.

The Pope must have seen, as others have not, that the old "glue" keeping nations and alliances together had crumbled. He and those around him must have begun to realise that the new binding agent holding nations in friendly unity, as well as holding individual societies and races in an internal framework of common loyalties, lay more in the use of soft power, in continuous dialogue, exchange and understanding at every level of society. This is now technologically easy and possible every hour of the waking day, and the night, and far less in the hands of governments alone.

This is the more fluid international pattern of the digital world future, in contrast to past painfully negotiated treaties, yesterday's dogma about purposes and common values, or past hand-on-heart melodramatic commitments about common security or "being with you to the end". This is all the old wooden language of the archaic state, when the real call is for the new and more subtle and resilient language of peoples.

That may be why wise heads round the world see the growing and lasting relevance of the Commonwealth model of networking as the century progresses.

2024 is going to be a year of elections in numerous countries – not least ours here in the UK, and of course the American one, which could blow the world apart. Of the dozens of other elections, some will be fairly conducted, others will be blatantly rigged. But all will trade in surface perceptions, deploying rear-view mirror arguments around outdated dilemmas such as capitalist versus socialist "systems", Western "leadership", class warfare, trade protection, conventional "troops and rockets" defence, parading the

dogmas of the past in face of the vast and unfamiliar threats clouding the 21st century landscape.

Of course, our Philosopher Kings will never be assembled, and if they were, would all disagree. But in the deep ruminative channels of discussion throughout the UK, often far from the public gaze, thoughts may be taking a new shape. The seeds and remnants of the practical but also philosophical angle which Voltaire admired so long ago may still be there embedded in the British character and mindset.

It is now unavoidable that there have to be deep changes of approach, and that common ground has to be found, between and within political factions and parties, on which to proceed. Whoever forms the next Government, most of the major issues of our time are well outside the control of Westminster — or any national government. Even within the domestic arena, the patterns of power to change direction, to innovate, to touch the levers of growth which are believed to exist, are now in practice mostly outside the State's diminished reach.

Instead a policy establishment and a Parliament aware of its own limitations and of the hugely amplified power (positive and negative) of the people in the digital age is still well capable of ensuring that the Centre of society and the nation can hold, and that order and a well-mannered public debate can continue to be combined with freedom of thought, speech and ambition.

[1]WB Yeats – The Second Coming : "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is lost
The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity."

[2] Moore's Law. The number of transisters in an integrated circuit doubles every two years.