Trust in Public Life

On 10 November 2008, the British Academy hosted a panel discussion, chaired by Professor Peter Hennessy FBA, to consider whether public trust in our major public institutions has fallen as much as is widely suggested. The panellists were Baroness Onora O'Neill (President of the British Academy, who gave the 2002 BBC Reith Lectures on 'A Question of Trust'), Richard Wilson (former Cabinet Secretary, now Lord Wilson of Dinton), and Mark Thompson (Director-General of the BBC). In this extract from the occasion, **Richard Wilson** *considers public trust in government and politicians.*

THE DEPARTURE LOUNGE at Logan Airport, Boston, at 6 o'clock last Wednesday morning was deserted and rather depressing, apart from an Afro-Asian cleaner in the café area who was beaming at the world. I wished her good morning and she burst out, rather shyly, 'Have you heard? Obama has won!' We talked and, remembering that this evening's session was coming up, I said to her, 'Do you trust him?' She was very indignant and she said, 'Of course I trust him. He is my man. He is going to change my life.' Those were her actual words: I rushed off and wrote them on a piece of paper, because I found her delight very moving. But I was torn between my pleasure in her delight, and my fear that I knew the rest of the story already and that she was going to be disappointed. What I would like to do is to explore that cleaner's reaction. I want to offer you a sort of Sir Humphrey meets Onora O'Neill by way of my cleaner at Boston Airport.

I am going to begin with my conclusions. I am going to suggest that it is useful to distinguish between three things. First, public trust in public figures and institutions, by which I mean a willingness on the part of the public to believe that those individuals and institutions will behave in accordance with accepted principles and conventions when they are out of sight; a willingness to rely on them to behave properly at all times, or at any rate when they are on duty. I am not convinced that there has been a decline in public trust in this sense.

I distinguish that from public suspicion of the motives of people in public life and of the language they use. On this, I suspect (I can't prove it) that there has indeed been an increase in this suspicion and I would argue that in moderation, suspicion is healthy when dealing with power.

My third area that I distinguish is public expectations of what people in public life will achieve on their behalf. I will argue that this is where the real problems lie: not in a decline

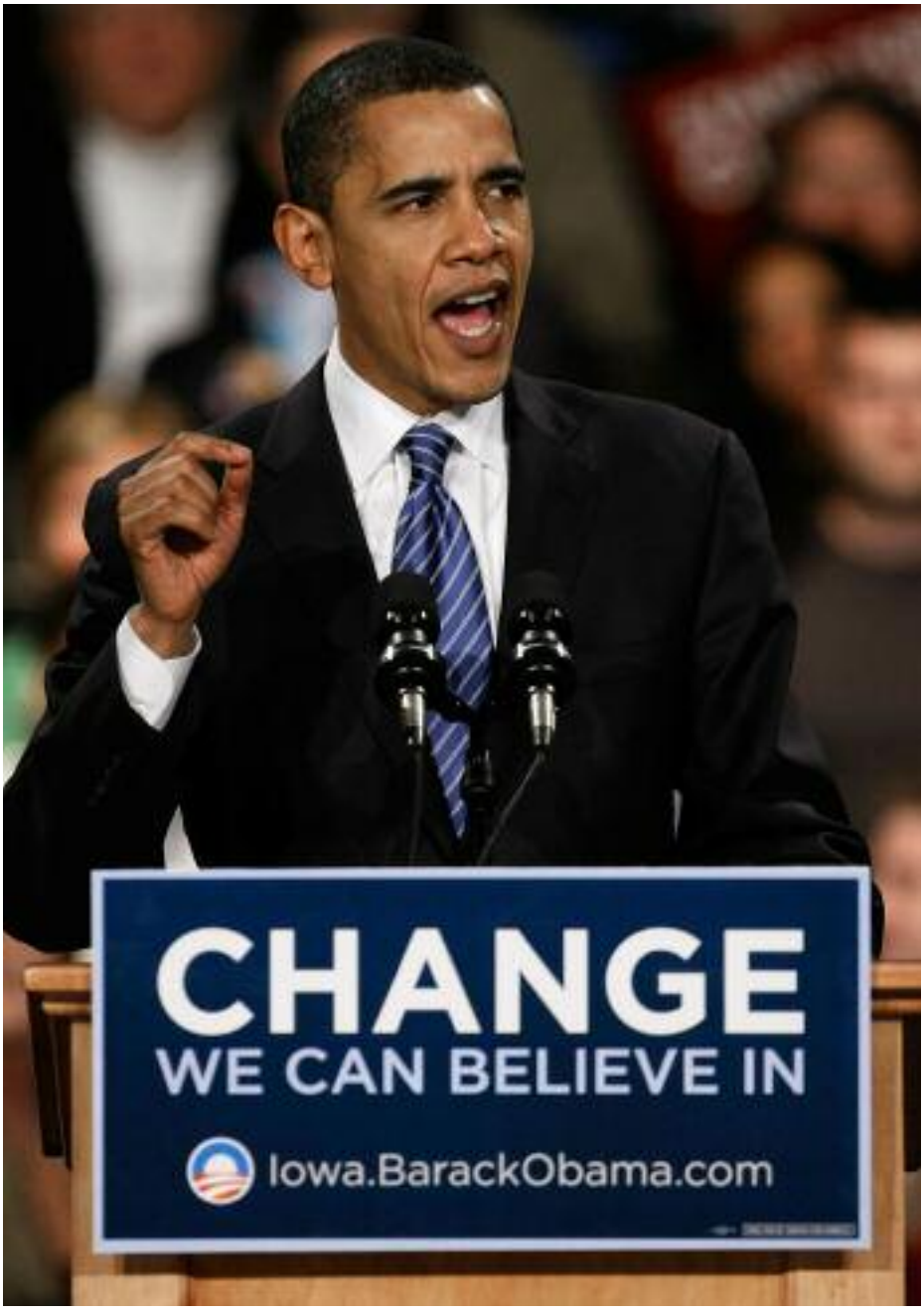

Figure 1: *Barack Obama promises 'change' in his campaign for the US Presidency.*

in public trust, but with disappointed public expectations, and that the basic challenge is either to promise less, or to find a way of delivering more.

Trust in public figures and institutions

Now I am going to take the headings one by one. First, trust in public figures and institutions. It is at least arguable that the public are, if anything, too trusting, rather than that their trust is declining. In the absence of a written constitution, the workings of many of our major institutions – the monarchy, parliament, government, the judiciary, the civil service, our armed forces – depend heavily on trust; that is, on a willingness to believe that people in positions of power are working in accordance with accepted principles and conventions when they are out of sight.

Onora O'Neill, in her fourth Reith Lecture, said that it had become extraordinarily hard to prevent the spread of information. But when I was working in government, I was often surprised at how little information leaked out about the business of government. The public know very little about what ministers say to each other in private when taking decisions; or about their discussions with their civil servants; or about what judges say to each other in private about cases before them; or about what politicians in Parliament say when they converse through the usual channels; or about what the head of state says when she counsels successive Prime Ministers, as she has done for over half a century; or about what our armed forces are doing beyond what those in power are prepared to tell us, which is usually guarded. The press, of course, sometimes obtain leaks; and there is Peter Hennessy in his helicopter; but they cover only a tiny fraction of the daily life of the public sector.

I happen to think that there is a certain sense in keeping policy discussion private. There needs to be room in which people can disagree or say silly things without feeling that it is about to appear in the press. There is a public good in that. More than that, to try to monitor everything that went on in private in public institutions would be beyond the power of anyone. I find Onora O'Neill's analysis on openness and transparency very persuasive.

Even so, there are times when our watchdogs, Parliament and the media in particular, allow those in power considerable latitude. We are, for instance, surprisingly casual about constitutional matters. One of the purposes of a constitution is to regulate the distribution and exercise of power by the institutions of the state. In many societies, this can be a matter of the keenest interest, even of life and death for citizens. And yet in Britain we have undergone, with very little public comment at the time, a quarter of a century of major constitutional change. It has included, for instance, entry into the Common Market and the EU, devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, reform of the House of Lords, the introduction of human rights (or should I say human duties) legislation and freedom of information legislation, and the introduction of a plethora of different forms of voting systems. While the changes took place, the public took relatively little apparent interest. They were hugely trusting. Most comment has only come later, often many years later.

One could argue that, rather than a loss of trust by the public in public institutions, what we have seen over the last decade has been a loss of trust in the public on the part of government. Widespread surveillance on closed-circuit television, routine searches at airports, police monitoring of our cars, prolonged detention without trial, constraints on physical contact between teachers and young pupils, the passage of anti-terrorist legislation so wide that it can be used to confiscate the assets of Icelandic people who are clearly not terrorists. All these and many other things are, no doubt, directed primarily at terrorists and criminals, but they can be interpreted as indicating that the government does not trust any of us, and yet the public meekly accept these things and trust government not abuse their power.

It is not that the public are apathetic. There is a public appetite to know more about what goes on inside our public institutions, and a lot of curiosity about public figures. There is a public willingness to be involved in making a contribution through voluntary activity. The growth of the voluntary sector over the last 25 years is one of the un-sung stories of this country. In Cambridge University alone, 8250 staff and students gave up 370,000 hours of their time for voluntary work in 2006/07.

There is, of course, genuine concern if something appears to have gone wrong, say through the cash for honours affair. Once roused to anger, public indignation is a terrible thing. Many a politician has suffered when their private behaviour has crossed the line of what is regarded as publicly acceptable. But these are exceptions. My point is that the public are, on the whole, remarkably tolerant and that our public life is still largely built on trust.

Suspicion of motives and language

Let me turn to my second point. I would argue that people are fundamentally trusting, but that they are also increasingly inclined to be sceptical about the motives and language of people in public life and public institutions. There is a widespread perception, fair or unfair, that people in public life want to win and to retain power, and therefore they will say whatever they need to say in order to make a good impression of themselves and to portray their opponents in a bad light. For instance, professional news management in government nowadays gives a lot of thought to definition. The American writer Thomas Sacks said, 'In the animal kingdom, the rule is eat or be eaten. In the human kingdom, define or be defined.' Much of modern political language in exchange illustrates this. We hear it every week in Prime Minister's questions, the battle to define or be defined. The public gradually learn this and filter what they hear to allow for it.

It is important to understand why public figures and institutions behave as they do. They carry out their business in the glare of publicity and in the face of intense adversarial politics. Their jobs are very difficult and demanding. Power and influence often depend on reputation, on an individual's perceived effectiveness in what they do; their ability to form good relationships and their ability to perform persuasively in public. These things are not easy to achieve in jobs which frequently require unpopular choices and the simplified explanation of complex issues. We are all familiar with what results. Lying is rare, I would maintain. But there is a constant pressure to engage in half-truths which ignore embarrassment, spin which makes a story sound better than it is, and

Figure 2: *Participants at the 'Trust in Public Life' panel discussion: Lord Wilson of Dinton, Professor Peter Hennessy FBA (Chairman), Baroness O'Neill (President of the British Academy), and Mark Thompson. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.*

invasions and jargon which avoid admission of failure.

It would not be accurate or fair to label every public pronouncement in this way. There are other motives in public life, including a wish for public service, and a desire to do good or to achieve a particular policy end for altruistic reasons. It is important to allow that motives are often honourable, and that even the most manipulative language may contain the truth. But the growth of professional news management has, I suggest, been paralleled by increased sophistication in the way that public pronouncements are received by the media and the public. So we are in a bind.

Increasingly professional news management is matched by an increasingly suspicious audience. I see no easy way out of this. More use of plain English would help. So would a requirement on the press to public corrections of inaccurate reporting with the same degree of prominence as the original error. But on the whole I would argue that the bind which I have described is the price which we have to pay for a lively, messy democracy and that only the workings of democracy itself can get us out of it.

Disappointed public expectations

My third point related to expectations aroused by politicians and the fulfilment or disappointment of those expectations. The public do have an instinct to project their hopes and longings onto their leaders. Those projections may be unrealistic, but if widely shared they can have powerful political significance. A politician who can understand the mood of the public and give voice to it in a way which mobilises support, is hugely powerful.

There are, however, two dimensions to this aspect of public trust. One is the leadership which inspires the public trust. To a large extent this is a matter of overcoming the suspicion which I described just now, and voicing public concerns in a way which resonates with the public. The large majorities won by the Thatcher and Blair governments suggest that there is no decline in the willingness of the public to trust, if the rhetoric and personalities match the mood.

But the other half of the coin is the need for such leadership, once it has won power, to deliver on its promises. If I had more time, I was going to quote figures that show the degree to which Stalin is still trusted in the Soviet Union. Public trust is undoubtedly a complex matter, but such cases are rare. For most ordinary political leaders, the challenge is to satisfy the expectations which have been aroused, and to avoid a reckoning at the next election which might come if there had been much disappointment.

It seems to me that this is where the real issues arise. The problem is not about a decline in public trust, but about rising public expectations of government and the corresponding struggle of people and institutions in public life to fulfil those expectations and to avoid disappointment.

There is much to debate here. In many ways, the questions are more about management than politics, or at any rate, more about the relationship between management and politics. How can public service be improved without the incentives and disciplines of the marketplace? How can the needs of good politics be reconciled to the needs of good management? – because, believe me, they are not the same. Why do manifestos seem to matter so little once a government has been elected? Why do political leaders so frequently promise more than they can deliver? Do they need more training for the job, or do we all need a more realistic understanding of what the public sector can deliver?

These are real areas for debate, and they are more important than any decline in public trust as such. Policies for improving the performance of public services have been a major preoccupation for central government for decades. Either the public sector should promise less and perform less, or we need some breakthrough in the way our public services are run, which does not involve the micro-management which Onora O'Neill has described so effectively.

To return to my cleaner in Boston, I am not worried that her trust in Obama will decline.

Figure 3: *Mark Thompson and Richard Wilson.*

The very fact of his election is, in some way, a vindication of her trust in him, and I would not be surprised if the American election last Tuesday was an event which she will remember with pleasure for the rest of her life. What bothers me is that he may have promised more than he can deliver, and her expectations of him may be disappointed. Time alone will tell.

Richard Wilson was Secretary of the Cabinet in the early years of the Blair government, from 1998 to 2002. Lord Wilson is now Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, non-executive chairman of the banker C. Hoare & Co., and a non-executive director of BSkyB.

An audio recording of the whole 'Trust in Public Life' panel discussion can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events

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THE PANEL DISCUSSION on 10 November 2008 took place immediately after the BBC had been hit by a storm of controversy following the Radio 2 'prank calls' broadcast by Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross. Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC, who spoke about 'trust in the media', opened his remarks with a reference to the recent episode.

The first thing I wanted to say is that I am almost in a category of one, in a sense of being the leader of a major media organisation who sends out its investigative journalists and its film crews and its men and women with microphones, but also sometimes finds himself absolutely on the receiving end of all of the above. I have both sensations. I have the sensation of being the Editor in Chief for the BBC, and trying to co-ordinate and lead the BBC in the way that it holds other institutions in this country to account. But sometimes when we get it wrong, which we do from time to time – and sometimes, as we did in the matter of the Russell Brand Show, we get it pretty badly wrong – I find myself absolutely in the same spot as the politician, or increasingly the banker perhaps now, arriving on the pavement to discover two or three hundred people. When you open the door of the car, one of the photographers hops into the car, and you say, 'Do you want to drive off, or should I?'

That sense of the all-pervasive attention of the British media in the matter of trust and accountability is interesting when you are on the receiving end. Two thoughts from me. Firstly, paradoxically, when there are problems with trust in institutions in which people lay a great deal of trust, the terrible thing that is public indignation becomes most intense. People really do, understandably, get indignant when they feel that trust has been betrayed in almost any way.

Secondly, after the events of the last couple of weeks, my own sense has been that, although it can be punishing and it can feel pretty uncomfortable and tough when a public institution makes a significant mistake, I don't think it is unfair or unreasonable that it should be held to account. And I say that having been very recently on the receiving end of it.