

The Impact of Power on the Mind of the Politician.

Introduction

My aim today is to use a psychoanalytic view of the mind to demonstrate why politicians, when they suffer the bad luck of winning an election and being in power, very often behave in extremely irrational and arrogant ways. I shall argue that the impact of anxiety is crucial and that their behaviour represents an interaction between personal attributes of character and a large group dynamic. I shall attempt to show what I mean by referring to some extremely helpful ideas that have come out of the psychoanalytic tradition.

My problem is that much of what I'm about to say has to be in the form of statements rather than a gently developing argument. This is quite simply because of the constraints of time. I hope that you can bear the wish to question these apparently bald statements until you see the full picture that I'm attempting to paint. My hope is that it will carry a flavour of recognition and common sense.

Development of the Conscious Mind

The simplest way of putting it is that the difference between us and the rest of the animal kingdom is consciousness. I would define the conscious mind thus:

I know that I exist.

I have a sense of my history because I can access memories.

I am able to anticipate the future through use of my memories and

I am capable of symbolic functioning.

I am able to face the reality as defined by Money-Kyrle:

I was conceived as a result the joining of an egg and a sperm from two separate individuals;

time passes and I shall eventually die;

I cannot get through life on my own, I need help.

This Conscious mind develops out of the Unconscious mind as a result of a process that I think is very like a computer programme that requires us continually to explain to ourselves what is happening to us. I believe this is a mutation of the curiosity and interest that you can see in the higher mammals,

Psychoanalytic investigation has shown that these explanations are in the form of images of ourselves in relationship with others or parts of others.

It is important to note that our explanations can only draw on what we already know.

Healthy development is the result of adapting our first explanations in the light of new experience.

The baby is born without internal defences, this means that he feels the full impact of his feelings (there are still occasions when *we* suffer this, so we know how overwhelming it is). Clearly what our baby has to do is to find a way to reduce the horrible impact of raw emotions and this leads to the creation of the 'defences'.

I don't have time to describe this now but I mention it because it leaves a sort of residue in the form of a sensitivity to the possibility of the *loss* of the defence system (and the consequent flooding of the raw emotion). This sensitivity in the face of a stirring of feeling is what we mean by 'anxiety'.

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The baby's first internal defensive system, created to reduce this anxiety, conjures an idea of the universe divided into sharp distinctions, right and wrong, good and bad. This view of the universe is accompanied by other phenomena which I summarise as follows:

RULED by the Ideal,
GOVERNING PRINCIPLE: Pleasure
ANXIETY one's own Survival,
LANGUAGE is that of Blame;
MENTAL STATE of choice is certainty;
SOLUTIONS are all omnipotent.
THREAT is difference, e.g.
 Help;
 Valuing.
RELATIONSHIPS are either mergers or sado/masochistic.

Melanie Klein was the first psychoanalyst to describe this state of mind and she called it the Paranoid/Schizoid position. I prefer to call it the Fundamentalist state of mind. One of the most important features of this state of mind is that it does not provide any place for thinking (by which I mean the process of transforming raw emotional material into symbolic representations that are available for psychic manipulation). Instead thinking (because it is predicated on not knowing) is hated and certainty is the only option. Certainty is linked to omnipotence and that puts you next to the *Ideal*.

Anxiety

I want to emphasise that the infant's sense of anxiety at this stage is anxiety about *survival*. Now, the infant does adapt this earliest view of the world he's living in and creates a more sophisticated defensive organisation which brings with it the capacity to contemplate the truth about the real world.

However, the power of this 'fundamentalist' state of mind remains and we will easily lose our more sophisticated 'internal structure' in the face of a sudden increase in anxiety. Sudden anxiety is always experienced as anxiety about survival, which is why we collapse into that original mental position organised around the management of survival anxiety.

The more reality-based state of mind requires the capacity to manage '*not knowing*'. Not knowing can be managed only by *thinking* and thinking requires the ability to *symbolise* so that raw emotional material can be transformed into a symbolic representations that are available for psychic manipulation. The point I'm making today is that all of these can break down very easily.

It is well known that trauma disables the capacity to symbolise. Often the loss of symbolisation produces the phenomenon of flashbacks that replace the capacity to dream; a much more direct and frightening re-experiencing of events. If we cannot symbolise and, therefore, cannot think, what is the alternative to thinking? It is certainty (often expressed as Action) which is the preferred process of the fundamentalist state of mind. I have already said that certainty derives from an illusion of being 'with the omnipotent' and this is often represented (and I don't mean symbolised) by rules. The belief is that as long as you have

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complete understanding of the rules, all you have to do is follow them. If you don't have any rules, you have a problem. An illustration of what I mean here is the attitude of the 'Creationists', for whom the bible is not symbolic and metaphorical but *factual*. I shall return to this phenomenon that transforms beliefs into facts in a minute.

Perhaps you remember George W Bush's reaction to the news that a second plane had just hit the Twin Towers (he was visiting a primary school reading class); I think that this is a good example of that phenomenon. Bush is sitting on a platform with the teacher who is demonstrating a particular reading method with her class. Between teacher and Bush is an easel on which is a copy of the book from which they are reading. One of his aides comes up to the president and whispers in his ear; we now know that this is the news that a 2nd plane has crashed the twin towers. Bush nods but remains immobile on his seat. The teacher appears to be concerned but, seeing that the president isn't doing anything, she returns to her job. After a while Bush leans forward and picks up the copy of the book from the easel and starts to look through it.

People have unfavourably compared Bush's immobility to the standard response that any of his security men would have made in similar circumstances. The reason why this is interesting is because, as with the military, the training these people receive is designed to provide them with rules that they can follow in traumatic circumstances. *These are not people who are thinking*, but the rules they follow enable them to recover a capacity to think. Indeed it is an interesting challenge to work out the best training to provide a path back to thinking; we are all aware of those military organisations that appear to want to stop their personnel from any capacity to think at all.

I wonder if the way that Bush reaches for the book that the class are reading is a way to find something certain, possibly some rules (because the teacher is applying rules to the business of reading) for him to cling onto in what must have been a very lost and terrifying experience.

Significantly Bush does not find his way back to a capacity to think, *his* 'recovered' state is classic 'fundamentalist'; he replaces thinking with certainty and omnipotence: "If you're not with us, you're against us." A statement he went on repeating as he justified the omnipotent solution to the problem, the war on terrorism.

Group dynamics.

Wilfred Bion, in his book *Experiences in Groups* (1961), describes the phenomenon of a group's obsession with finding a leader; he believes this is an unconscious defence against the experience of anxiety. He says that the members project their own thinking capacities into the leader which allows them to be free of the anxiety that they would otherwise feel.

Bion's description of how groups function is that mostly they don't and the reason for that is that anxiety propels groups to find ways of avoiding that anxiety. In this sense groups behave like individuals. Weirdly, when you consider that anxiety is probably the main measure of being alive, we tend to look to find ways of avoiding it.

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Just to remind you, thinking is not something natural to human beings but it *is* a consequence of normal development. Discovering how to think and, particularly, discovering how to recover the capacity to think are the signs of maturity.

What is true about the individual appears also to be true about groups, it requires *work* to achieve and maintain the capacity for thinking.

In a recent paper on ethics I referred to an experience that I had many years ago when I was teaching group work to nurses. I often used a classic role-playing activity. This involved asking participants to wear paper hats each bearing a name of a typical role that might be observed in a group, such as, "group leader", "good group member", or "saboteur". Clearly, since no-one could see his/her own hat, the only person ignorant of the role assigned would be the one wearing that hat. The group was then required to conduct a discussion appropriate to their professional background with the single proviso that they must treat everybody in accordance with the role indicated on their hats.

This proved to be a really powerful exercise. It was fascinating to observe how quickly people's roles seemed to take over and the power of attributing a role to a person was demonstrated by how difficult it was for him or her to get out of it. The most poignant example of this was usually portrayed by the person given the role of "comic". At first, this could be a quite gratifying role because people laughed when the "comic" spoke, and he or she had an instant reward for making things seem better. As time and the group process proceeded, however, the comic was never taken seriously. The more the person in role struggled to get the group to recognise that they were trying to make a serious point, the more hilarious they appeared to be. In fact it was because this experience was so disturbing that I stopped using this way of teaching (it took too long to get the participants to "de-role" which, although emphasising the point that I wanted to make, seemed too problematic the way of approaching it.)

The reason that I want to quote this experience is to emphasise the level of difficulty that we are addressing when we think about the relationship between a leader and the group. Becoming aware of the role one has been given within a group does not enable one to release oneself from that assignation. In fact, the only way to change the role so given is to continue to behave according to an internal sense of self, in the knowledge that the members of the group will gradually come to see the difference between their expectation of the person, based upon their belief about his or her role, and the reality of how he or she behaves.

In other words it is essential to ridding oneself of a role or feeling that one has been given unconsciously that, first, one becomes aware this is happening but, second, one has the internal (or external) support to simply continue to be oneself.

Groups operate as if controlled by a *group unconscious*. Having said that, it does seem rather intimidating that no sooner do we get used to the idea that we have an unconscious mind of our own, we are now faced with the thought that we can be drawn into roles on behalf of a group unconscious which, like our relationship to our own unconscious, we do not notice.

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The obvious question is how do individuals get drawn into representing something on behalf of the group? The answer provided by Bion and others who followed him is 'valency'.

Bion used this term, drawn from Chemistry, to describe an individual's tendency, in a group, to prefer one over another form of defensive organisation (what Bion called "basic assumption modes"). Since then many of us have extended this term to refer to individual psychological vulnerabilities (like Jung's idea of the wounded healer). It is as if our vulnerabilities act like hooks that the unconscious process attaches to. If we know about our vulnerabilities, and this was Jung's point, we will be able to recognise when that part of us has been triggered and this will give us a very good insight into what might be going on unconsciously.

So I have described how people get selected to play a particular part and I have already said how difficult it is to disown the role that one has been given. There is a particular dynamic that makes the point rather well; my wife, Mary Morgan, did an institutional placement as part of her marital psychotherapy training. She did her observation with the Police. They became very used to her presence in and around the station and on one occasion, when she was observing the activity around the desk (where the public meet the police), the officer behind the desk decided to go off for a while and said to her to look after the desk while he was gone. This happened very quickly and she was unable to stop him leaving, so she found herself behind the desk of the station. Then members of the public arrived and she was immediately aware of the enormous surge of power and authority that she was filled with. It was not necessarily easy to see the mechanism of the projection although some people were acting in a clearly submissive way, but the impact was so powerful that she couldn't avoid noticing it. She found herself thinking about the impact that this must have on young men and women, often straight out of school. It made sense to her of the other observations she had made, for example the humour they used in the face of what should have been extremely disturbing experiences out on patrol. The combination of the enormous projection of Power and the impact of equally powerful anxiety acted as if to trap these naïve policemen and women in a situation in which they had to deny the full impact of their emotions by embracing the role they'd been offered of omnipotence. This is a serious trap because any further development of anxiety will serve only to reinforce the defensive arrangement and one can see how easily the belief develops of a hostile external population attacking one.

In a moment I shall be looking at the particular valency of politicians. For the moment I need to refer one more psychoanalytic concept; that of:

Unconscious Beliefs

Britton (1998) described a concept that I find extremely useful in understanding the way that our minds function he called it Unconscious Belief. He describes how he first encountered this phenomenon as a small boy having that experience that many of us will remember when a slightly larger boy told us that there was no such thing as Father Christmas. Britton, rather precociously, seemed to realise that not only that he had taken it to be a fact that there was a Father Christmas, he also wondered what other apparent facts would turn out to be merely beliefs.

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I think that it is safe to say that all of us will hold a certain number of unconscious beliefs. The problem is that, because they are unconscious, we don't know that they are merely beliefs; whatever consciousness there is of these phenomena will ascribe to them the quality of facts. For example a man who grew up being constantly beaten up by his father might well develop the unconscious belief that all men are dangerous but he won't know that he believes this, he simply treats all men as potentially dangerous. You can probably see how this sort of attitude tends to become self-fulfilling. It is also self-evidently true that this kind of phenomenon fits well with the fundamentalist state of mind because it is a certainty not available for any kind of challenge. I think that it is true to say that much psychoanalytic treatment could be described as showing patients that something they took to be a fact of life is merely a belief and can be tested rather than accepted without question.

Our conscious mind is created by images that represent our 'explanations' for what is happening to us. Usually these explanations are modified by experience but sometimes they remain unmodified; such explanations then assume the status of unconscious beliefs.

Such conscious representations of unconscious beliefs that we might be aware of appear as 'facts'.

Unconscious beliefs, because they are 'certain', protect us from the need to think and, therefore they reduce anxiety.

So I shall now attempt to show how these ideas help us to understand the impact of power on the mind of the politician.

Politics and Power

First, what is the politician's valency?

Machiavelli was not the first person to understand how to manipulate the public but he was one of the first in the West to write it down. I think everybody in this audience will be aware of the neoconservative approach which is to set up a false enemy in order to create massive anxiety so that you can offer a leader who will assuage that anxiety by providing certainty. Sometimes these anxieties that we are being attacked from outside appear to be true, which always offers an opportunity for leaders who will provide that certainty which the fundamentalist state of mind requires.

Within my lifetime the role and the identity of the politician has changed enormously. It is difficult to tell exactly when this happened, although my experience suggests that it began with Thatcher, but then I usually think that these things began with Thatcher.

The change that I'm thinking about is the one from politician as somebody who, having already had a career somewhere else, comes to politics in order to give something to the community into the modern version of a politician for whom politics has been a career choice probably since before he went to university.

The problem about this is that the political club that politicians belong to reinforce the idea that politicians are somehow the best people to run anything. So, even before the impact of the group (in other words the projection of power into the role), there is the beginning

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of an identity as the Omnipotent Politician. I am suggesting that this is their valency and it is also their 'unconscious belief'.

Andrew Lansley might like to claim that this does not apply to him but, following his BA in politics at Exeter University, he joined the civil service where he was Norman Tebbit's private secretary. The move into politics, therefore, was seamless. I select him as my example because throughout the period from 2004 to 2010 he was Shadow Secretary of State for Health. It was during this long period that he decided that he knew best how to run the NHS. I hope you will forgive my turning to the NHS, it is an organisation close to my heart although an organisation that no longer exists since Lansley's Health and Social Care Act 2010 took away the requirement on the Secretary of State for Health to provide a National Health Service. Not a lot of people seem to know this.

The means by which he attempted convince everyone that the NHS required reform was to turn evaluation of care into evaluation of the financial background to care. There are good reasons for this, first, finance and accounting, because they are the language of economics represent the training of the politician (and remember we fall back on 'rules' to help us in situations of anxiety). Secondly we are all vulnerable to anxiety about our own economic situation.

So Lansley and his colleagues, buoyed up by an unconscious belief that they, as politicians, have an omnipotent ability to manage all professional enterprises and, for him, specifically the NHS, produced staggeringly flawed plan for reorganisation.

So, 'omnipotence' is their valency, it is their unconscious belief, which means they take it to be a fact. You will recall that I said earlier that the fundamentalist state of mind in which attachment to the ideal (omnipotent) is an identifying feature, hates difference because it is felt to be a threat (obviously, if you are different to me, and only one of us can be with the ideal, you are challenging my position). So I offer this memory of an occasion when Lansley was challenged as evidence of this phenomenon. By this stage his White Paper had become the Health & Social Care Act. After a shocking period of silence, the professional organisations eventually pulled themselves out of their stupor and realised that something very dangerous was going on. For example, on 13 April 2011, 96 per cent of 497 delegates at the Royal College of Nursing Conference backed a motion of no confidence questioning Andrew Lansley's handling of NHS reforms in England. Later that day, Lansley met with 65 nurses at the same conference, and apologised by saying "I am sorry if what I'm setting out to do hasn't communicated itself."

In other words, once recruited into the role of managing everything, politicians become overwhelmed with persecutory anxiety and experience these feelings as attacks coming from 'out there' (us!), so they become preoccupied with defending against this assault, e.g. blocking freedom of information, human rights etc, and becoming more dictatorial in their departments, for instance creating more and more checklists and boxes to tick.

However... This only happens because we, the electorate, create a 'dependent' group-state-of-mind. It isn't simply that politicians are to blame, the electorate also seek certainty (yes, even the middle classes – how else does John Humphries retain his job when all he does is to insist that it is possible to answer 'yes' or 'no').

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I think we might see this in the following analysis of the recent election.

There are some salient points.

The first is that none of the Polls anticipated the actual result.

The second is that the Liberal Democrats were virtually wiped out.

I think an important feature was the overwhelming win in Scotland for the Scottish National Party.

And the background to this is the result of the 2007/08 Financial Crisis.

First thought, the maths behind polls are pretty straightforward, there is a 95% certainty that the error in any poll will be 3%.

The result of the election suggests an error of 6%. This is statistically possible but, given the numbers of polls taken before the election, unlikely.

It is self-evident that polls rely on accurate information for their own accuracy. This leaves us with these hypotheses:

The polls were all suffering a 6% error

The public were lying

Voters changed their minds at the last minute.

I suggest that the latter is the most likely.

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In that sense it is very similar to the 'last minute' change in direction of the Scottish independence vote (18/9/14). In both cases the electorate moved to a 'conservative' position in the face of the unknown.

In the UK election the lib dems were essentially eviscerated, UKIP was ignored and the labour party humiliated, leading to a flight away from Coalition and back to one-party rule.

I want to add one more thought to this description; David Cameron's demeanour throughout most of the campaign which only changed when the media commented on it and he had to provide a facsimile of enthusiasm which was completely exposed with his 'Freudian Slip' of claiming that his football team was West Ham, when he was supposed to be supporting Aston Villa. I take it as a reference to something phoney and what was phoney was any enthusiasm for a continuing coalition.

This fits with my own experience of that election as the most boring that I can remember.

My suggestion is that the coalition forced politicians who are, for all the reasons I've outlined, more comfortable in a paranoid/schizoid state of mind to face the much more grown up but also more tiring business of discussion and negotiation to run the government. You could say that the Lib Dems came to symbolise the requirement for 'thinking'. I've said before that, in a fundamentalist state of mind, thinking is hated and attacked. I think that Cameron's clear weariness was an expression of his response to a further 4 or 5 years of 'Coalition' (meaning thinking). He, like everyone else, believed the polls and had no enthusiasm for it. In the event neither did the majority of our countrymen and women.

What I am saying is that the anxiety that hit the public when the polling stations opened and voting began was enough to make people move back into a wish for certainty. It is a well-documented that, however tortuous a regime in which you are 'contained', the alternative, freedom but unknown, is rejected in favour of the status quo. Once you are back in the container, you can flirt forever with the alternative, which is my belief

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about why the Scottish National Party won all those votes ... because it wasn't an actual vote for independence!

Summary.

I have argued that the effect of Power on the Mind of the Politician is to pull him or her into a fundamentalist state of mind in which the view of the world is essentially paranoid and the solutions to any problem are omnipotent and certain.

Politicians have a particular Valency for this role, a belief that they are the best people to manage all systems.

However the electorate are as much implicated in this arrangement because of the way that, at a group-unconscious level, we require our leaders to create a world of certainties and predictability. The group-unconscious acts to avoid change.

You could say, as others have done before me, that we get the leaders we deserve.

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