

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 29

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 29 Monday 17th December 2018

Topics; "Is there such a concept as the National Interest?" And "Is the quality of politicians and their leaders adequate for the challenges of the 21st century?"

Is there such a concept as the National Interest?"

Summary

The phrase "in the National Interest" is indeed often used to justify policies. However after intense discussion about nationality, sovereignty and interest it was concluded that the phrase as generally used in a political context is empty rhetoric.

Discussion

The phrase should mean that a defined group of people, the nation, could be expected to benefit in some way from the something that is proposed as in the national interest, usually a course of action. Whether all should benefit equally, or that a majority would benefit and a minority would be disadvantaged, or whether the total of benefit would exceed the total disadvantage...none of this is apparent. In relation to the idea of nation, was it the entire nation, or some geographical subset that was to benefit? In relation to interest was it economic benefit, or could some other kinds of benefits, cultural or social for example be included? How these varying kinds of benefit could be summed or subtracted in the case of detriment would need to be explained.

It was noted the phrase frequently occurs in political discussion. It presumably indicates that person using the phrase considers that the policy advocated would be beneficial in some way to himself or herself and his/her immediate associates, and by extension possibly to others. It cannot be considered as the result of a rational process of evaluating the costs and benefits of the proposed measure.

Most political change involves winners and losers, and indeed often the losers are considerably more effective in their opposition than the winners are in favour, for many reasons.

It was concluded that if the only argument for something is that it is in the national interest, then very probably it is not!

“Is the quality of politicians and their leaders adequate for the challenges of the 21st century?”**Summary**

The discussion centred on the concept of a strong leader. De Gaulle for example was considered a very strong and interestingly therefore an effective leader. In the context of current UK politics neither leader of either of the major parties was considered to be either strong or effective.

Discussion

It seemed to be accepted without further discussion that a political leader should be able to achieve his or her objectives, or in other words to get his or her own way.

Good and effective leaders have to be strong in this sense.

Various leaders were cited as effective and therefore good leaders. Churchill, De Gaulle and Thatcher were recognised in this way. The association of a leader with a particular cause successfully achieved may be the way that a good leader is recognised, winning WWII for Churchill, restoring the dignity of France for de Gaulle, the Falklands and Trade Unions the battleground for Thatcher.

Some political leaders emerge from virtual ignominy, both Churchill and de Gaulle were not supported by public opinion until their emergence as leaders.

Of current leaders Corbyn is criticised as indecisive, and considered ineffective for that reason. May was seen as struggling with an impossible task, but the strategy of attempting to find a compromise, a middle way, where none was possible was seen as ineffective leadership.

The current political impasse in the UK was seen as requiring strong leadership to resolve, and there is so far no evidence of a strong leader emerging.