

Utter certainty prevents learning, says Hugh Greenway

I could never be an MP even if I wanted to. It's not that there are too many skeletons in my cupboard or that I have a history of dodgy expense claims; although, heaven knows, I am far from innocent. My trouble is that I like changing my mind, because it tends to follow from having learned something. The political world we live in, however, tends to thrive on certainties.

These days, it is unacceptable in many walks of life to say "I don't know", because it implies weakness. I could not be an MP because I like trying different ideas on for size and I react very strongly to being told what to think. The very idea of a 'party line' on something is inclined to make me want to test it. Political leaders, ministers and business leaders are feted for clarity of vision, strength of purpose and certainty.

But look at the mess that all this certainty has got us into.

The case against uncertainty is that it leads to inaction but I do not believe this to be true. Look at the history of science and invention. It can be summarised as: **observe something, think something, test something, rinse, repeat.** Or, as the rather brilliant Honda adverts put it recently, "What if?"

This antithesis of certainty has generated most of the beneficial advances in the history of mankind.

Yet we are currently riding a bandwagon of politician-beating because our elected representatives turned out to be not massively dissimilar to those that elected them – us. The irony of journalists having a go at politicians for the size and relevance of their expense claims would be delightful if it wasn't so depressing. I am amazed that no politician

has yet to put in a Freedom of Information request for the expense claims of the *Telegraph* or, if that proves too difficult, the BBC (as it is funded by public money).

Our orgy of disgust distracts us from actually learning anything. Because so many are convinced that all politicians are corrupt, very little space is being given to the situation that gave rise to the current

events – essentially that it was considered politically dangerous for MPs and lords to be given decent pay rises so instead they were 'unofficially' invited to fill their boots on expenses. Hot on the heels of blaming the bankers for the world economic crisis, we blunder into another knee-jerk response.

I suggested in my column last month that we are all partly to blame for the credit crunch. Likewise, we are all implicit in this current crisis of confidence in the political system.

So what is the learning point?

"It is impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows."

Epicurus

If you want to learn anything, you must first accept the possibility that you may be wrong. What I don't understand is why this is so difficult. To entertain the idea that you might be wrong is not emasculating, it is invigorating. It is not difficult, it is spectacularly easy. It does not mean that you are not allowed to have strong opinions, indeed you are welcome to them and encouraged to pursue them passionately until the facts suggest otherwise. At which point – and this may be the sticky issue – you should concede as graciously as your pride will permit.

"When the facts change, I change my mind.

What do you do, sir?"

John Maynard Keynes

Yet even this does not hurt anywhere near as much as one would expect. If we want the world to be a better place, we must accept our part in creating the one in which we live. Then and only then can we start to learn from our mistakes.

"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts."
Bertrand Russell ■



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