

SIR JOHN
GRAHAM
LECTURE
m 2023

Rebuilding Trust

THOMAS W. SIMPSON



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Populists, elitists and the future of our democracy

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Ph (0064) 9 627 3261 | Fax (0064) 9 627 3264 | www.maxim.org.nz

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ABOUT MAXIM INSTITUTE

Our mission is to investigate the ideas shaping New Zealand, engage with our nation's leaders, and enrich our democracy

We're deeply committed to the people, land, history, and cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand. As a team, we work to produce rigorous research and present our recommendations to New Zealand's leaders and public.

We've produced long-form research on issues including intergenerational poverty, leadership in education, regional development, the effects of euthanasia legislation, and the barriers to employment for people with disabilities.

To increase the reach of our work, we host public conversation events throughout the year, speak regularly through media interviews and opinion pieces, and make all of our work freely available on our website. We also publish *Flint & Steel*, an annual magazine that examines the fundamental ideas shaping New Zealand's society and future.

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THE ANNUAL SIR JOHN GRAHAM LECTURE

Sir John Graham was an exemplary New Zealander who throughout his life displayed the consistency of character and care for others we hope for in the best of our leaders. Along with his well-known leadership roles as Captain of the All Blacks, Headmaster of Auckland Grammar, and Chancellor of the University of Auckland, Sir John inspired and led many organisations, including Maxim Institute.



Appropriately, he was recognised with a CBE in 1994 for his services to education and the community, and was further honoured when he was knighted in 2011. As a Founding Trustee of Maxim, Sir John Graham's deep love for New Zealand, his passion for education, and concern for those on the margins of life remain at the heart of our work, and we are honoured to be able to hold this annual lecture in his name.

In honour of Sir John's life of service and contribution to public life, the Annual Sir John Graham Lecture provides an opportunity to invite leading experts to contribute to public debate in New Zealand.

THOMAS W. SIMPSON

Tom Simpson is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Public Policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, and a Senior Research Fellow at Wadham College.

In 2017 he was named one of BBC Radio's "New Generation Thinkers." He joined the School from Cambridge, where he was educated (BA, MPhil and PhD), and was also a Research Fellow at Sidney Sussex College. Between degrees, he served as an officer with the Royal Marines Commandos for five years. He served in Northern Ireland; Baghdad, Iraq; and Helmand Province, Afghanistan.



In his work, including his book *Trust* (Oxford University Press), Tom has taken a particular interest in trust and how we can restore it.

RESPONDENT: PROFESSOR JESSICA PALMER

Professor Jessica Palmer is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Humanities at the University of Otago and is a member of the University's executive leadership team. Prior to that, she was Dean of Law at Otago. She teaches and researches in trusts and commercial law, and has regularly presented at seminars for lawyers and judges. Before moving to Otago in 2005, she served as a Judges' Clerk in the Auckland High Court and worked in a national commercial law firm. She is a graduate of Auckland and Cambridge.



Jessica also has several governance roles, including Chair of Laidlaw College, board member of Presbyterian Support Otago, and a Trustee of the Wilberforce Foundation. She considers it a privilege and a responsibility to serve the local community.

Annual Sir John Graham Lecture

Friday 15 September 2023

Thomas W. Simpson

Introduction

Kia ora, and may I start by saying what a pleasure it is to be here with you today. While this is my first visit to New Zealand, there is a surprising sense of familiarity in being here.¹ Brits, especially those in government, often like to describe their country as one that “punches above its weight,” but the description is perhaps truer here.

It is not just a pleasure but also a privilege to be invited to give this year’s Sir John Graham Lecture—in a return, after COVID, to more normal rhythms, and especially as it is the first with Tim Wilson as Executive Director. So, thank you, Tim, for inviting me, and thank you all for being part of tonight’s splendid event. I’m greatly looking forward to the conversation.

Our moment

I want to spend this evening talking about some societal and political challenges, which first became evident in the UK and US, but have become features of the landscape much more widely. Listening to New Zealanders, it seems that, even if these are at an earlier stage here than many other countries, they are now challenges you face as well.

Many have had a sense—for a few years now—that we are either in or have just passed an inflection point. But we do not yet have a clear sense of what lies the other side of it. The question I want to try to answer is what can be done to make sure that the pieces of society’s jigsaw settle in a way that promotes individual and societal flourishing rather than fracture, discontent, and anger.

The presenting issue is the experience of political polarisation. By this I mean a number of different trends, which in practice go together:

- **Sorting.** The decline of cross-cutting identities—so that racial or ethnic identity, economic, professional, and educational status, geographic location (urban/rural), religious identity, ideological outlook and party affiliation converge, with other identities subsumed to political affiliation.
- **Ideological conformity.** Views come in “packages.” Your position on individual gun ownership, for instance, predicts your views on tax, welfare spending, vaccine mandates, or euthanasia.
- **Ideological intensity.** Policy positions held are more radical.
- **Affective hostility.** More likely to have a negative view of opposing partisans, ascribing malign intent to their actions and bad faith to their character.²

As I indicated, political polarisation is the *presenting* issue. I want to suggest that the underlying issue, which political polarisation is both a symptom and a cause of, is the loss of trust. And the challenge we face is how to rebuild that trust.

What is the inflection point I have been talking about? The electoral earthquakes of 2016, with the referendum on EU membership in the UK and the Presidential election later that year in the USA, were the most obvious markers of a new era in domestic politics. They were felt as such at the time. (One commentator, looking back on the year at its end, tried to coin a new adjective, “what a 2016 of a year.”³) But, with a wider perspective afforded by a few years’ distance, we can see that the changes in society and outlook which led to those votes had been years in the making⁴ and have, if anything, accelerated since, partly under the conditions of COVID; and that those changes are wider phenomena. These changes have been especially evident in economically developed, English-speaking democracies. They have also occurred in a wide range of other countries, including across continental Europe and Latin America.

It is difficult, I think, not to see domestic turmoil around polarisation and rising distrust as connected with the much more recent inflection point we have passed in international relations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made inescapable, even to the most optimistic observers, that we are in a new era of not just competition but confrontation between authoritarian regimes and democracies. But, in the way that the elections of 2016 made it evident that some key changes had in fact already occurred, so too did Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The chaotic and deadly withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 signalled weakness, and was an enabling condition for Putin's decision.

More deeply, though, the West has looked internally divided for some years. Declining respect and weakness on the international stage are inevitable symptoms of political systems that are not stable domestically. And, if there is anything that is clear from the domestic inflection point of 2016, it is that the period since has been one of turbulence, febrility, and inaction, with the worry that the US, in particular, has become ungovernable. You do not need me to tell you that the UK has also had a volatile period.⁵

But—you might ask—is internal division not an essential characteristic of democracy? Is it not a feature, rather than a bug? The fundamental principle of democracy is that the individuals who exercise power do so because the public has decided that they should, at the ballot box. In that regard, democracy is a system of government with some essentially agonistic features. As Joseph Schumpeter described it, it is an organised competition in which candidates for leadership vie for votes.⁶ Further, to do so successfully, a politician does not need to appeal to everyone, or even, indeed, to a majority. They just need to be the person who is the least worst option, from the choice offered, to enough voters, to get that candidate over the line. Doing so successfully can often involve exploiting antagonisms and divisions—indeed, it can involve creating them—in order to mobilise your core support for as long as it takes to get them off the sofa and go to the polling station. In a two-party system where everyone votes, a candidate wins if they appeal to the voter in the middle of the ideological spectrum—the median voter. As turnout falls below 100 per cent and more parties compete for votes, it is not necessary to be so catholic. If they are successfully mobilised, smaller, potentially more radical groups of the electorate can yield a victory. The practice of democracy, then, is inherently competitive and antagonistic, involving minority viewpoints and caucuses exercising power.

While this is true, it risks obscuring a deeper truth, which is that democracy constitutively depends on trust.

Democracy and trust

Democracy's dependence on trust is most obviously seen when you consider the quite astonishing feat that elections are supposed to pull off. Elections look like a "vertical" deal, if you like, in which we, the public, choose which of them ["up there"], the politicians, should lead us. But more profoundly it is a deal made between *us*, here, "horizontally." Elections are conducted because *we*, collectively, need to be governed; because *we*, collectively, have the right to choose who we are governed by, rather than having that foisted on us; and because everyone here counts equally for one, and no one counts for more than one. But *I*, individually, when I go out to vote, accept a liability. If I lose to you—that is, your preferred candidate or party is elected to office, not mine—I must nonetheless still accept the results of the election and comply with the lawful orders and instructions of those who govern me.

When you think about it, this liability is quite extraordinary. Is it a sensible liability to adopt? Yes, it can be—but only if there is extensive trust. This trust starts with the system as a whole, but must extend also to the individuals who run the system.

I have to trust that the electoral process itself is trustworthy. The machinery of elections depends on officials carrying out their duties in fidelity to the process, without concern to their personal, partisan interests.

I have to trust that those who are elected into power will give up that power after their term of office, as and when the next election goes against them. (When a country transitions to democracy, it is not the first election that matters, but the second. Will that first leader ensure the second election is fair? Will they submit to its results? This is part of the insight of the Leadership prize established by Mo Ibrahim, that is awarded to heads of state or government in Africa, his region of concern, who serve their constitutionally mandated term and no more.⁷) This is, if you like, the "umbrella-norm" of democratic politics, but under it cluster a whole series of more specific, procedural norms, which ensure that democratic process can be carried out in a way that is fair. Parliamentary procedure, integrity in public appointments, civil service neutrality, policy towards the courts, public broadcasting, not gerrymandering jurisdictional boundaries and voting qualifications: all of these and many other areas

of public life depend on norms that are consciously non-partisan in their justification and operation.

Substantively, I have to trust that, while those whom I did not vote for are in power, they will not use that power in a way so egregiously against me that I could not conceivably have consented to a process that would lead to those outcomes—where the alternative, of literal fighting, would be preferable. While the day-to-day substance of democratic politics is a contest about what the common good consists in, I trust that those in power are, nonetheless, seeking the common good—minimally, that they are not out to destroy me, and more ambitiously, that they are able to recognise my good (as a constituent part of the common good), the stake I have in defining what that good is, and that they want to promote that good.

All of these are concerns that I, as an individual, have in making the “deal” that elections represent. But it is not solely self-interest that should lead me to be committed to democratic governance. Democratic governance matters not just because *I* get a stake in how society is run, and perhaps not even principally. (After all, the impact of my vote is negligible.) It matters because it expresses that there is an *us*, who are deciding together about how we should be governed. Just as much as territory does, the boundaries of the electorate define the boundaries of the polity, and they shape the sense of a “we”. Part of what it is for there to be a “we” is for there to be a collective marked by bonds of shared identity, of shared history, and of shared loyalty, all of which are characterised by and help to support a sense of civic trust.

So the astonishing liabilities involved in democracy highlight the largely hidden elements of consensus that are required for democracy to work. Democracy is, on the surface, antagonistic and competitive. *Under* the surface, it is reliant on a reservoir, or well-spring, of trust. Democratic governance is continually drawing upon this source of cohesion and unity in order to function properly—to command the allegiance of its citizens. Without such trust, it ceases to make sense for me, as a citizen, to see the government as legitimate and myself as bound to comply with law and policy.

There is a distinctive phrase from the British constitution that captures well this inherent tension. The main opposition party in Parliament is formally termed “His Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition.” At its best, the Crown represents something “above” or “outside” of politics, which enables it to unify the polity despite the day-to-day hurly-burly of disagreement and contestation. That there is an Opposition illustrates the antagonistic nature of politics, but that conflict is held within the

context of an underlying, pre-political consensus, to which the opposition is “most loyal”. Monarchy as such is not required to express this pre-political consensus—and indeed, there is an exuberant irrationality about a monarchy, much though I personally value the British version.⁸ But if power is to be exercised legitimately and not just as a show of force, each country needs to have a settled, pre-political consensus that sets the frame for and authorises the exercise of power, and this is especially true for democracies. In America, it is the Constitution that is the symbolic focus of this loyalty; in New Zealand, perhaps it is the Treaty of Waitangi, more than the Crown, that plays this role. The symbol itself is not the decisive thing. The decisive thing is the set of norms and attitudes, including social and political affections,⁹ by which a people are bound together and which constrains how political power is competed for and how it is used.

I have argued for the significance of trust on the grounds that it is necessary for democracy. High levels of trust matter in many other ways, to the degree that you might describe trust as the “secret sauce” of successful countries.

Social impacts of trust

Why does trust matter? There is an array of research now that shows why trust matters.

Start with *political* trust specifically—that is, trust of the institutions and people in a society who exercise power. High levels of political trust make you more likely to support new or expanded government programmes, especially if that programme is likely to cut against your material interests or ideological concerns,¹⁰ and especially if the policy has an effect only in the long term.¹¹ Conversely, low political trust leads to support for “challenger parties”—those which radically reject the mainstream, incumbent parties.¹² (Is this a bad thing? In moderation, perhaps no; widely and persistently, yes.) Levels of political trust also predict compliance with the law on such matters as varied as paying taxes, claiming welfare payments to which one is not entitled to, paying transport fares, and complying with COVID-related public health regulations.¹³ Indeed, during the pandemic it became almost established wisdom that “COVID is less deadly where there is trust.”¹⁴

These are impacts of *political* trust. *Social* trust also matters, by which I mean the degree of trust that people have, in general, with regards to others in their society. Start with the economic implications of social trust. Generalised trust

promotes economic growth and international trade, and increases the productivity of firms through decentralisation. In high-trust societies there are efficient public institutions, more likely to be welfare states, lower levels of corruption and crime, and lower levels of mortality. There is more charitable giving and volunteering. Most endearingly, wallets that are “lost” in the course of an experiment are more likely to be returned, with the money still inside.¹⁵

Given all this, it is unsurprising that those who have reflected on trust have continually talked about it in superlatives. It is like the air we breathe;¹⁶ the cement or glue that holds society together;¹⁷ “part of the deep grammar of any society;”¹⁸ or “the bond of society.”¹⁹ The story is told of Confucius, that when asked what government needed, he replied: “Enough food, enough weapons, and the trust of the people.” “If you had to go without one of these three, which one would you give up?” Confucius replied: “Weapons.” “If you had to go without one of the remaining two, which one would you give up?” Confucius replied: “Food. From ancient times, death has been the fate of everyone. But without the trust of the people, the government cannot stand.”²⁰

Polarisation and trust

I started this evening by suggesting that political polarisation is the presenting issue that we face, but that the underlying issue is one of a loss of trust. Let me now connect the two.

It is common when talking about trust to observe that, when we trust, there are two things we focus on: the *competence* of the person trusted, and their *motivation*.²¹ In working out whether someone is trustworthy, we want to know if they can do what they are being trusted to, and then whether they want to. And, of the two, it is motivation that matters most. We are forgiving when people let us down because they are well-meaning but incompetent. It is much harder to forgive when it is a lapse of bad faith.

The distinctive feature of polarisation is the relentless rhetorical focus on the malign intent and character of the opposing partisans that it gives rise to. It is not just that your political opponents have a different vision of the common good to you. It is that *they are bad people who hate you*, with the corollary implication, not always stated (but not needing to be), that you cannot trust your opposing partisans. It is no surprise that under conditions of polarisation adherence to democratic norms

begins to break down. This is true of left-right polarisation as well as populist-elite polarisation.

Populist rhetoric, which pitches a pure people against a corrupt elite, foregrounds the claim that political leaders have betrayed public trust.²² The converse is also true: elite-favouring rhetoric starts off by appealing for trust, with slogans that can be used to obscure value-based divergence (“trust the experts”, “follow the science”). Under conditions where that trust is withheld and direct opposition is expressed, in protest or at the ballot box, that rhetoric switches surprisingly quickly to accusing the opposed section of the public of, at best, culpable ignorance—think of the political energy put into fact-checking. And on more contested issues, elite-favouring rhetoric has shown itself well capable of accusing large sections of the public of character vices and prejudice. Polarisation is deadly to civic trust. It is like acid eating away at the foundations of the polity.

Where is New Zealand in this journey? Historically, New Zealand is a high-trust country with both very significant levels of social, “horizontal” trust within the population—where New Zealand is at the top end of the international scale, not quite an outlier like Norway (74 per cent) but nearly as high as Sweden (64 per cent) at 59 per cent.²³ It also historically has had high levels of political, “vertical” trust in relation to government institutions, with one source putting New Zealanders’ trust of their national government at an astonishing high of 84 per cent in 2020.²⁴ This high degree of trust was recruited, successfully, in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, the timing of which likely contributed to that astonishing figure. A rally-round-the-flag effect is well known, in which people come together in a crisis and report strong feelings of solidarity. Language around a “team of 5 million” ably turned this into support for counter-COVID measures. Clearly those policies have become more controversial since, with vaccine mandates being especially polarising and with lockdown policies having disproportionate impacts on indigenous groups. The result of this is evident in recent declines in political trust with, in New Zealand, over a 10-point drop between 2021 and 2022,²⁵ and by most accounts, a more bitter and fractious mood around the upcoming election than for some time. This short-term movement in New Zealand is consistent with a wider and longer-term pattern in the countries I have been referring to. The US is the cautionary tale here: trust in government “to do the right thing” has cratered, from 77 per cent in 1964, nearly 4 in 5, to 20 per cent, or 1 in 5, today.²⁶

Restoring trust

If this is the challenge we face, what can we do to sustain and restore trust?²⁷ To do so, we must address “the money question”. There are two explanations for the distrust brought about by polarisation. One explanation says that the distrust is fundamentally irrational, a result of uneducated and ignorant sections of society being exploited by fake news and social media algorithms, which pander to public prejudices and generate unjustified hostility, especially towards those in politics and government who are working under difficult circumstances for the national good.

An alternative explanation says that the distrust is rational, a response to those in power being unduly insulated from the consequences of their policy decisions, who defend their positions in the language of justice but whose political priorities are really the expression of their class-based material interests and social preferences, and who not only do not understand others’ interests, values, and concerns, but at times actively despise them.

On this analysis, there is a “laptop class” and a “tactile class.”²⁸ The laptop class spend their professional lives manipulating symbols, are geographically mobile, adept at forming and ending fluid relationships, tend to have socially progressive values, and exercise social and political power. The tactile class spend their working lives building physical things (or growing them), tend to have an instinctive concern for the givenness of human nature and the rootedness of the flourishing life, and celebrate commitment—conservative values, if you like. Core to this outlook is the awareness that reality is *resistant*—it cannot just be moulded according to one’s will. Recognising the “reality of the real” means accommodating oneself to limits and learning to thrive within them. The tactile class has also been politically marginalised during the decades of liberal “consensus,” tending to be poorly organised and to lack identifiable, compelling public leaders, and the means available to them to challenge the way power is exercised have been limited.

This analysis does not locate the division in terms of party politics, either. In two-party systems, in the early stages of populist rebellions, the laptop class tends to dominate *both* incumbent political parties. This reflects the fact that they tend to dominate the organisations which exercise power, which are found as much outside of government—in the wider public sector, large businesses, media, charitable sector, and academia—as inside.²⁹

Given these two explanations—one which locates popular suspicion of political elites as irrational, the other as rational—the money question is then: which of these explanations is right?

In addressing this, a first point to note is that it is not easily answered with data. Political science is excellent at reporting public perception of issues and good at identifying correlation between different phenomena. But our question here concerns what is objectively important and which expectations are normatively valid, and so is fundamentally a matter of political judgment. A second point to note is that one's own standpoint is likely to influence which explanation one favours. If you are a member of the laptop class, the first will seem plausible; if you are a member of the tactile class, the second will.

With those qualifications, let me venture to offer my opinion. I hope you won't be frustrated when I say I think both explanations are correct, containing fundamental insights. The distrust we see in so many countries is partly irrational and partly rational. But if you push me to get off the fence, it seems to me that the latter is the more important explanation. I occupy a slightly unusual position in that I live among the laptop class myself and can probably be counted as a paid-up member, given that my days are spent manipulating symbols in a top-tier university, which I am proud to belong to, and which is a bastion for reproducing the national and international elite. But in terms of personal instinct and outlook I am a member of the tactile class. Living among the laptop class, I know that the intentions of most of its members are good and so the name-calling that tends to accompany populist movements must be rejected. But the populists' substantive point seems to me correct: that the people who currently exercise power reflect a slim portion of the population and have some distinctive material interests and ideological preferences that are not shared by wider portions of the public, and in important respects are in tension with or rejected by them. For as long as this remains so, distrust is likely to grow, and with it polarisation.

If this is correct, the fundamental challenge we face for restoring trust in the face of political polarisation is to renew the elite, so that those in power have an instinctive understanding for a genuinely inclusive common good. Targeting misinformation and reigning in the destructive effects of social media will be contributory efforts, and there is independent reason to engage in these. But by itself they are unlikely to be enough.

The task of renewing the elite is not a new one. As World War 2 turned from existential crisis for the democratic world to the death throes of the dictatorships, intellectuals in Europe and the USA turned to consider what the task of post-war reconstruction should involve. Beyond the material task of rebuilding homes and infrastructure, the recurring theme was the task of education.³⁰ The catastrophe had arisen due to political decisions made by people; it would be people, not primarily constitutions or technologies, who must be responsible for sustaining a just and stable political order. The French intellectual Jacques Maritain is representative of this turn. He wrote:

I say that the person of common humanity is not possessed of a less sound judgment and less equitable instincts than those social categories which believe themselves superior, and that—not because he is more intelligent but because he is less tempted—he has less chance of going astray in the major issues which concern him, the common man, than the so-called elite of informed and competent and rich and high-born and highly cultivated or highly cunning persons who have cut themselves off from the people, and whose political imbecility, baseness of soul, and corruption are today astounding the universe.

I say that the inspirational leadership which the people need must always live in communion with this people, which is giving indefatigably of its labour and its blood. Now, whether we will or no, the new leadership must come from the depths of the nations. It will be composed of the working and peasant elite, together with the elements of the former leading classes which have decided to work with the people. The essential problem of reconstruction is not a problem of plans. It is a problem of humanity, the problem of the new leadership to come.³¹

We stand at a different inflection point in history, but one that I think has no less clarity about it. Maritain's call to renew the elite, so that those who make decisions better understand and reflect those who are affected by those decisions, seems to me to be as true now as it did then. How this should be achieved is a difficult question with no easy answers, and I look forward to discussing how this should be achieved. But let me speak autobiographically for a little, if I may.

One of my most formative experiences, before pursuing a career in academia, was some time serving with the UK's Royal Marines Commandos. It was only five years—not long, but this was during my early 20s, an important time of life—and they were busy years, with tours of Northern Ireland; then Baghdad, Iraq; and Helmand

Province, Afghanistan. This may surprise you, but my most terrifying moment was not, in fact, on operations, but was arriving for training. Driving up to the training centre, which was surrounded by barbed wire and men with guns on the gate, my heart was in my mouth. Years later my father told me that, after dropping me off, he stood in the car park and wept. My bunk mate had joined the Corps at 18 as a Marine, promoted to Corporal, and had now been commissioned: he knew the ropes and pulled me through the shock of the first 10 weeks of training. (He's now a farrier.) The "batch" of young officers (the term used) included two who had come from Cambridge; four who had commissioned from the ranks; an aspiring poet; two Jamaicans sent by their armed forces to train with us, who ended up during the course colder than they had ever known; and one who had grown up on an Aberdeen council estate. Royal Marines officers trained at the same camp alongside the marines, and had to pass more demanding tests on the Commando course. For the marines, the first Commando test was a 9-mile speed march in fighting order; for the officers, the march had to be completed and then a troop attack conducted. The last test was the 30-miler across Dartmoor, in daysack and fighting order, in eight hours for the marines but seven hours for officers. The result of the training was powerful. We did not just acquire a set of skills. It changed who we were. We were cohesive, loyal to each other and those in the wider Corps, hardened, ready to deploy.

Of those I trained with, all have deployed operationally, most multiple times; five have gone on to command units (the equivalent of a battalion); two Military Crosses have been won (one of the actions was described to me by another member of the patrol, who reported, "you wouldn't believe it if Hollywood made the film"); one OBE awarded; one now lives with crippling PTSD as a result of his service in Afghanistan; one lives with life-changing injuries after being blown up on patrol in Afghanistan and now has three artificial limbs; one died as a result of injuries sustained when he was blown up, again in Afghanistan.

Why do I share this? There are two lessons that I, at least, have drawn from that time, and which I think are more widely relevant now.

The first is a lesson about leadership, and particularly public leadership. Leadership is not a quest for likes on social media. It is not a project in self-fulfilment or self-actualization. It is not something you dip in and out of when it suits you. Leadership is fundamentally an act of service, of those whom one leads, and it is therefore right that leaders are held to higher expectations. Those higher expectations were made explicit in the tighter times set for the Commando tests. More importantly, they were

implicit throughout the Royal Marines, with leaders at every level expected to go the further mile, work harder, be self-sacrificial. Those demands ensure that, at an instinctive level, the question the leader is asking is not, “what’s in this for me?” but “what is the common good here?” And achieving that is sometimes costly. Soldiering shows especially clearly that serving others is sometimes self-sacrificial, but that is true in other ways, which are often no less significant, for all forms of public leadership.

There have always been contrary pressures that would undermine an ethos of public leadership. But that ethos is, I think, under significant strain now. We live in a culture in which calls to authenticity (“you be you”), self-definition, and putting yourself first (“self-care”) are reinforced by a highly image-conscious media and dominate over those of service. Self-focused ideals have a place, at times, but the primary and enduring call for our leaders is to put the common good over personal good. Claiming rights is easy; the hard part is fulfilling them. That is why Edmund Burke asserted that, “There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom. ... Wherever they are actually found, they have, in whatever state, condition, profession, or trade, the passport of Heaven to human place and honour.” The test Burke proposed for the process by which public leaders are selected should be that it should have a “tendency, direct or indirect” to select the person who has “a view to duty.”³²

Where do such leaders come from? This was, for me, the second lesson of my time in the military, and it concerns the power of institutions.³³ Powerful institutions do not function primarily by providing incentives to their members, who exchange labour for pay. Rather, institutions can be *formative*, shaping the character of those who join them and spend their working lives in that institution, helping to ensure it pursues its *telos*, its goal. Good institutions have an ethos, a DNA, that is more than just what its individual members bring with them. In becoming part of that institution and loyal to it and its goals, you take on that ethos for yourself.

As well as being formative, good institutions are *unifying*. They take people from diverse walks of life, diverse backgrounds, sometimes diverse aptitudes and tastes and then unite round them a shared purpose. One of the most reliable ways to build the kind of trust that withstands polarisation is to spend time face to face with members of the differing group, and to do so in a context where there is shared purpose.³⁴ To renew the elite, we need institutions that draw people from across the laptop class and the tactile class. Schools can do this, but there are constant *de facto* pressures to social separation. Churches and religious institutions are other

institutions which, at their best, cut across the educational divide. Bringing in a form of national service may be one policy solution.

Good institutions, then, are formative. They are unifying. And finally, they are *selective*. They provide a context in which people can prove their competence and character—their trustworthiness—in sustained commitment over years, with those who do so promoted for leadership. In vouching for the trustworthiness of their members, good institutions provide a basis for which people can be launched into public leadership. This applies both for institutions that serve the nation and those that serve the neighbourhood.

Renewing our institutions is not the only way in which we forge a new consensus, with trust at its core. I have not addressed tonight the role of economic reforms in promoting greater productivity, an inclusive prosperity, and rewarding work, in the richest sense, and a set of policy proposals on those issues must be central to a viable populism.³⁵ I have also said nothing about the role of the family in promoting an ecology of trust. I am aware that the Royal Marines are not a universal model. My concern here is to focus attention on a narrower question, but one that I think is nonetheless critical: how do we ensure that our societal leadership, political and otherwise, serves the whole public?

Let me close by saying, finally, that these themes are perhaps particularly apt for a lecture dedicated to Sir John Graham. While Sir John first made his mark captaining the All Blacks, with a World Cup currently being contested and an under-performing English team, I obviously feel very uncomfortable talking about rugby. So, it was his career as an educator that I turned to when preparing for tonight. A video of him addressing his final intake of boys to Auckland Grammar School in 1993 captures the sense of standards that he clearly held himself to, and those around him. “Our expectations for you are very high. We expect you to excel. We expect you to do your best. To do that, you gotta keep up with the pace.” I would have been within a year or two in age of the boys who were sat in that auditorium, and I felt a judder go up my spine on hearing Sir John speak, which I’m sure they felt all the more. And that seemed to be a constant theme. On his first prizegiving speech as Headmaster in 1973, 20 years previously, he stated, “The School will continue to value hard work,

discipline, involvement in cultural activities and sport as a firm base upon which young men can establish their own personality and values.” Sir John expressed, for the Grammar School, the same core challenge that I think now faces many of our societies: how to be unapologetic about excellence, itself part of a principled framework which unites us, and within which pluralism is possible. We now face the challenge, in our time, of confronting the erosion of trust that I’ve described. If we want to hand on societies that nurture the young to be adults, they need to know they can trust us, one another, and our institutions. This work must start now. Thank you.

Response to Tom Simpson

Rebuilding trust: Populists, elitists, and the future of our democracy

Friday 15 September 2023

Professor Jessica Palmer

Greeting

Tēnā koutou katoa.

E mihi ana ki te mana whenua o tenei rohe Tamaki Makaurau.

Te kaikōrero matua Tom, tēnā koe.

Te whanau o Maxim me tō manukura, Tim, tēnā koutou.

Te manuhiri tenei pō, tēnā koutou.

Ko te wiki o te reo Māori tenei wiki. He taonga te reo. Ko te tuakiri o te tangata whenua. Anō hoki te reo ko te kotahitanga o tō tātou tinana. Kia kaha te reo Māori.

No reira tena koutou katoa.

Introduction - Uncertainty

It is a real pleasure to be here tonight and equally so to have had the chance to reflect on Tom's address in advance and how it might apply particularly to our part of the world.

These are interesting times. Historians will say they are not unprecedented times, but they are certainly not what we have been used to.

- The **global pandemic** exposed us to state actions we have not experienced for generations, and it has left us wary of government control.
- We now face **significant economic hardship** that is reaching into both our public and private sectors.
- Regardless of where we may each stand on the issue of **climate change and global warming**, it is hard to deny our physical environment is in growing need of our protection and care.
- And in our beautiful land, we are experiencing a second (and in my view very welcome and much needed) **renaissance of te āo Māori** that is asking of us all questions about this nation's identity and how our systems of governance and leadership can and should be structured.

Times of uncertainty and change challenge our willingness to trust.

We know from several local and global surveys that trust in most of our core societal institutions is down. Trust in Government, NGOs, the business sector, the media, and our churches is dropping. And we are seeing signs here of the polarisation that Tom mentioned.

Two Features

In my view, the dynamics of distrust and polarisation are being exacerbated by two additional features in our landscape:

1. The **means of communication** we use to interact with one another have fundamentally changed and at a pace more rapidly seen in history than previous communication revolutions, even, I would dare to suggest, more significant than the arrival of the printing press.

Our modern platforms enable communication with very low barriers to entry. Communication is now:

- Instant (but with no time for reflection, and of a quantity too massive to keep abreast of)
- Unrestrained (with no moderator/editor, and social norms fundamentally altered—much easier to say things when online and not face to face)

- Self-perpetuating (echo chambers have developed both by human action and by algorithms)
 - As such, making us vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation.
2. An **increasing identification** with smaller, more defined and perhaps more exclusive groups than our broader local and national community. These identities may be formed in reference to our politics, our religious and spiritual beliefs, our ethnicities, our gender identities, and more recently our position on mandates and vaccinations.

This is regularly referred to as identity politics, but I want to be careful to avoid such a term that can carry negative connotations. Finding a group or groups to which you feel particular affinity and connection can be life-changing and life-giving. It can also deepen the richness of the wider society of which the group is a part. We are creatures in need of community. A civil society is a tolerant one and tolerance presupposes we will have different views and perspectives.

However, the exclusivity that arises from some of this grouping is problematic. The narrative can become, “You who are in power are not like me and cannot possibly understand me, and hence you cannot govern in my interests (even despite your best intention to govern fairly). You and I are simply too different from each other for me to trust you.”

Our propensity to more exclusive groups that perpetuate this belief will threaten the fragile democracy upon which our society functions if it results in our inability or unwillingness to trust anyone not in our group. As Tom said, core to democratic governance is an “us” deciding together how we should be governed and an “us” represented by those elected to Parliament, but that sense of a collective “us” is under significant threat.

These two features of our modern landscape—the communication revolution and identity exclusivity—combine to unfortunate effect: our tendency to identify with smaller confined groupings is reinforced by the mechanisms of online media and its algorithms. In some respects, and sadly so, a larger world of ideas and interactions opened up to us through the online world has in fact had the reverse effect, of narrowing the world for many of us to hear only what we already know and want to hear.

It seems to me that our loss of shared identity is feeding our lack of trust.

This loss of shared identity is not absolute. We are still a collective for some purposes, especially in relation to international conversations. For example, we still want to see ourselves as similar to or able to aspire to other nations whose living conditions we covet – we regularly hear both commentators and policy makers urging us to become like Nordic countries in particular. And we will continue to believe we are the best rugby and netball players in the world, even in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Yet, we also see cause for hope and unity. Record numbers of people from all walks of life are learning Māori alongside each other in wananga programmes across the country. Local organisations are playing an increasing role in the provision of social welfare. Some of the most effective mobilisation of aid and assistance following the East Coast cyclone earlier this year came from local iwi and marae. And the climate issue has seen a growing number of young people seeking to actively participate in democracy to effect change.

Solutions

So what might the solutions be?

Tom has advocated for a renewing of the elite and with a particular emphasis on the importance of leadership and institutions.

For my part, the answers must be multi-modal and multi-pronged. The increasing division of our society into identity groups suggests to me we all are in need of renewing a shared identity and a common good. And the means of renewal need to arise out of and apply across the full breadth of our centres of cultural production: government, businesses and unions, the media, our marae, our houses of worship, universities, and NGOs.

What will be NZ's settled consensus, as Tom put it so well?

- Can it be the Crown here? Unlike the UK, the Crown does not presently enjoy a settled and reassuring role. For too many, it currently represents the exclusionary and oppressive aspects of colonialism.
- Can it be Te Tiriti, whose presence for more and more of us is to be celebrated now? If that is to be so, we must accept that its content and meaning are not settled and discussion should be welcomed on its origins and its meaning.

These are not to my mind insurmountable obstacles. Indeed, if handled well, they can enable us to construct some meaningful layers of shared identity and hope.

Can we revise the notion of the common good so that it is more nuanced to our place here in Aotearoa New Zealand and shaped by an understanding of the varying experiences and needs of the wider populace?

These conversations need to occur at a national level, yes, but I would invite you to find where these questions also arise in your own everyday roles and your spheres of influence, and encourage you to step into the conversation. It may be as simple as encouraging discussions with your children or grandchildren about the environment or the elections, for example, and modelling what it is to care deeply about our country. It may be fostering the learning of te reo so that you and those around you are introduced to a different way of knowing and seeing the world. For some of you, it is a calling to step into difficult leadership positions to serve with courage, with vision, and with care. For such a time as this.

Our institutions must be places of diversity but they must also be places committed to pursuing the common good, founded on respect and an ethos of enquiry. We need a reinvigorated contest of ideas and a healthy and vibrant public square. We will also need to broaden the cultural modes of debate that we use to ensure a range of voices is welcomed and heard. We will need to work together to avoid the chilling effect of silence which, ironically, in spite of all the noise around us, seems to me to be creeping in.

Closing

I will close with two final offerings to this evening's conversation from the beautiful Te Wai Pounamu South Island that I am blessed to call home presently.

First a news update from the Clutha District (the capital of which is Gore if you are struggling to place it). Just this week, Stuff.co.nz reported that Mayor Bryan Cadogan (elected Mayor in 2010 and second longest serving Mayor in NZ) had three times in the past week been out repairing broken election hoardings which he says most often appear to be damaged by people rather than by wind and storms. (I will forgive you all for thinking that foul weather might be typical of that far south). Cadogan, describing himself as centralist and not aligned to a particular party, repairs hoardings across all parties because he believes in democracy.

For democracy to work, he says, “we’ve all got to show respect, there is nothing more insulting from a visual perspective than the constant stomping on the billboards. If you’re walking home from the pub drunk, and you’ve made a 30 second mistake... that’s like whatever, but if you’ve got up in the middle of the night to knock over by stealth the one sign you really hate—you’ve got a problem. Is that all you’ve got to offer democracy?”

What is it that we in this room have to offer democracy in a time and in a nation where we are becoming and need to continue to become more tolerant and more aware of the needs of each other? And perhaps, just as important to answer, what does democracy offer us?

And secondly, a gift from the iwi of Kai Tahu, the tangata whenua of Te Wai Pounamu. It is a whakatauki—a proverb.

Ko te toa i a tini, i a mano o te takata
We possess the strength of the many. It is the bravery of a multitude,
of thousands of people.

No reira ngā mihi mahana ki a koutou, tēnā tatou katoa.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This is not doubt due, in part, to the prominence of some extremely impressive New Zealanders in Oxford.
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- 3 Peter Lewis, 'What a 2016 of a year. Never again', *Guardian*, 20 Dec 2016.
- 4 Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, London: Pelican, 2018.
- 5 Although the UK constitution remains capable of creating strong executives, so that the country is not quite ungovernable, there have also been extensive periods in the last few years where we were effectively ungoverned; witness the Theresa May administration.
- 6 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London: Routledge, 2010 [1942].
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- 8 Interestingly, monarchy 'appears to be one of the most robust determinants of social trust in cross-country analysis'. Christian Bjørnskov, 'The Political Economy of Trust', in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Choice*, vol. 1, edited by Roger Congleton, Bernard Grofman, and Stefan Voigt, 628-48. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 643.
- 9 Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- 10 Marc J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. T. J. Rudolph, 'Political trust as a heuristic', in *Handbook on Political Trust*, ed. Sonja Zmerli, and Tom W. G. van der Meer, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017, pp. 197-211.
- 11 Alan M. Jacobs and J. Scott Matthews, 'Why do citizens discount the future? Public opinion and the timing of policy consequences', *British Journal of Political Science* 42/4 (2012): 903-935.
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- 13 Natalia Letki, 'Investigating the roots of civic morality: Trust, social capital, and institutional performance', *Political Behavior*, 28/4 (2006): 305-325. Sofie Marien and Marc Hooghe, 'Does political trust matter? An empirical investigation into the relation between political trust and support for law compliance', *European Journal of Political Research*, 50/2 (2011): 267-291. Anna Petherick et. al., 'A Worldwide Assessment of Changes in Adherence to COVID-19 Protective Behaviours and Hypothesized Pandemic Fatigue', *Nature Human Behaviour* 5 (2021): 1145-1160.
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- 15 Christian Bjørnskov, 'Civic Honesty and Cultures of Trust', *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 92 (2021): 101693
- 16 Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978, p. 31. John Hardwig, 'The Role of Trust in Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy* 88/12 (1991): 693. Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays in Ethics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 98.
- 17 H. B. Acton, *The Idea of a Spiritual Power*, London: Athlone Press, 1974, p. 14. Trudy Govier, *Dilemmas of Trust*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998, p. 6. Jason D'Cruz, *Humble Trust*. *Philosophical Studies* 176/4 (2019): 935
- 18 Geoffrey Hosking, *Trust: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 22
- 19 John Locke, *Essays on the Laws of Nature*, ed. W. von Leyden. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954 [1663], p. 213.
- 20 Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Annping Chin. New York, NY: Penguin, p. 182.
- 21 Onora O'Neill, *A Question of Trust*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Thomas W. Simpson, *Trust: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023

- 22 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 66.
- 23 World Values Survey, 2022 wave.
- 24 Welcome Global Monitor 2020. <https://ourworldindata.org/trust#how-do-countries-around-the-world-compare-in-terms-of-interpersonal-trust>. Other sources report New Zealanders' trust in their government, more specifically, 'to do what is right' and 'to solve national problems' at 59 and 61 per cent respectively. Hubris, nemesis and polarisation by gender and political ideology: Results of the 2022 IGPS Trust Survey, Simon Chapple & Kate C. Prickett. IGC Working Paper 22/05, Figure 1.
- 25 Hubris, nemesis and polarisation by gender and political ideology: Results of the 2022 IGPS Trust Survey, Simon Chapple & Kate C. Prickett. IGC Working Paper 22/05.
- 26 Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022, Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>
- 27 Trust is multi-causal, so there are a number of different measures that could be taken with the aim of rebuilding or sustaining trust. My question here is the more limited one: how do we restore trust in the face of the pressure of political polarization?
- 28 I take the terms from Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2023.
- 29 The 2016 Brexit referendum is strong evidence for this analysis. As important as the result itself was the sense of shock and outrage that the result engendered. I frequently heard the comment, "this doesn't feel like my country anymore". The shock revealed the lack of understanding of a fundamentally different, non-cosmopolitan orientation towards being British. That orientation had had only marginal mainstream political representation, with the leaders of both main parties campaigning for Remain. The outrage unmistakably revealed a sense of entitlement, that "we" were the people who exercised power, and it was "our" preferences that should and would prevail politically. And, for 15 years, those preferences had prevailed, and had begun to shape a country that felt alien, or just neglected, to large swathes of its citizens. For over three years, until the 2019 election, this sense of outrage motivated a credible attempt to overturn or nullify the results of the referendum—a profound assault on democracy and a source of shame for my country, in the way that Donald Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 Presidential election in the US is shameful. (At the time of writing, a leading figure in that attempt is likely to be the UK's next Prime Minister—a surprising parallel to the situation in the US.) The educated, culture-creating, power-mediating parts of society had forgotten that they shared the country with large parts of the public who saw things differently.
- 30 For an excellent survey and discussion, see Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- 31 Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson, London: Bles, 1945, pp. 51-2.
- 32 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, London: Penguin, YEAR: PAGE.
- 33 I use 'institutions' here in the colloquial sense, as organisations founded for a particular purpose, such as a religious, educational, professional, or charitable goal. This contrasts with the more technical sense familiar in political science, in which institutions are sets of formal or informal social rules and procedures that constrain and structure individual action.
- 34 As the contact hypothesis posits, now the subject of many decades of research. See Shelley McKeown and John Dixon, 'The "contact hypothesis": Critical reflections and future directions', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 11 (2017): e12295.
- 35 The importance of an economic foundation to a successful populism is evident in the conclusion by the social critic, Christopher Lasch, to his most important work, *The True and Only Heaven*. The populism that Lasch is there concerned with are those political movements derived from the late nineteenth century People's Party in America, which sought to defend the material interests of small-scale producers, both farmers and artisans, against the emerging large corporations. This political tradition, of 'petty-bourgeois morality' combined with 'economic radicalism ... asks the right questions, but it does not provide a ready-made set of answers'. The question it asks is, 'what was to replace proprietorship as the material foundation of civic virtue?' This remains unanswered. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1991, pp. 525, 531-532.



MAXIM
INSTITUTE

PO Box 49 074, Roskill South, Auckland 1445, New Zealand | 49 Cape Horn Road, Hillsborough, Auckland
Ph +64 9 627 3261 / Fax +64 9 627 3264 / www.maxim.org.nz

