

Getting politicians' hands dirty

BY THE TIME you turn to the back page of *SJ* you may already have had several days under the new government of the BWP (Bigoted Woman Party) or the NMDA (Norfolk Mallard Duck Alliance) both of which had been able to keep so well under the radar of the opinion polls that nobody knew they existed until it was too late.

But the chances are that we will be facing a future with some or all of the same old faces that have stared, smiled, grimaced, shouted, whispered, cajoled, enticed, or threatened us over the past few weeks.

And, having lived through more elections than I care to remember, I doubt if our ordinary lives will be changed much more than one jot by the fact that [reader please fill in the blanks] is prime minister. The last time we had a change of government I thought it would make a difference. In May 1997, after Tony Blair became PM, I wrote on this page (during a power cut in the office):

"There was a certain deep satisfaction in knowing that the Conservatives had been given a thoroughly good hiding. We woke up a little slowly the following day to find that the world had changed, and that this might indeed be a better, fairer country to live in.

"At the very least there must be something to be said for not having to put up any more with the unsmiling pronouncements of Lord MacKay [the then lord chancellor; his meanness to solicitors was as nothing compared to what followed under Blair and Brown].

"No doubt there is a risk of disillusionment setting in before the next election, when strikes break out, when taxes increase, and when legal aid rates fall still further, but just at the moment the inner peace created by a change of government resembles the peace of silence in a powerless office."

Disillusionment did indeed set in, so whatever your dreams about the post election world, be prepared to have them dashed; and if you want real change you will have to bring it about yourself with your own hands.

There is a new book out by ex think tanker (or are they called tank thinkers?) Matthew Crawford (*The Case for Working with Your Hands or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good*) who argues that there is more to life than the information



economy. He argues that life can be richer when working with your hands rather than sitting in front of a computer and that one should not look down on manual work: "The kind of thinking that goes on in the trades can be genuinely impressive if we stop to notice it."

Handy work

What he is describing mirrors some aspects of our professional lives as we drift relentlessly towards Tesco law where our documents will be generated by the same machine that spews out cash receipts and (if we are lucky) five pence a litre off the next tank full of fuel.

We have an old barn which is currently being renovated. Its ancient thatch has had a good shampoo and haircut, with brand new reeds from the Norfolk Broads on the roof of an extension to the barn. Richard and Danny, the thatchers, worked for weeks to produce a finished product that oozes charm and craftsmanship. Below them Phil and his wife Sue have been painstakingly digging out the cracks in the flint and lovingly repairing the 400-year-old walls with lime mortar and more flints they found in the garden.

And all the while I sit inside in my home-office secretly wishing I was on the roof shaping a hank of sedge. It is not just the joy of getting hands dirty or shaping a piece of wood that makes sense. If our economy is ever again to prosper, we, as a country, must

start making things that people will buy. Take the Eggskelter for instance. In the middle of Devon, an agricultural engineer could not decide what to give his wife for Christmas. In desperation he made a helter skelter for eggs, the principle being that new eggs are added at the top – thus ensuring that the oldest are always eaten first. The idea caught on and they have now sold thousands.

Were I starting a new government (it is so easy to wield power when you do not have it) I would follow Matthew Crawford's lead and decree that each one of us should spend a day a week in manual labour and – that includes members of the government.

Thus cabinet meetings should take place where there are spoke shaves, planes and lathes so that members of the cabinet can make cabinets as they contemplate our future, while at the Home Office ministers and civil servants alike can contribute to the country's wealth by making up kitchens, laying carpets and upholstering furniture. The Department for Transport can set about making cars – and British ones at that.

But what we should also see is a politicianskelter where the oldest, most clapped out politicians are replaced by the younger fresher ones behind them. But perhaps we have just seen one in action? You tell me!

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