

# Polarisation, bubbles and blind beliefs.

- and where did all the anger come from?

*Mats Rennstam, September 2022*

There's a famous scene in *The Newsroom* TV series where news anchor Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels) delivers a speech on America's shortcomings to students at Northwestern University. At the end he rants (supposedly high on cough medicine) "So when you ask what makes us the greatest country in the world, I don't know what the fuck you're talking about! Yosemite?!!". Another sound bite is that the US is the most divided it has been since the civil war (which led to 7M deaths in today's numbers). Although Aaron Sorkin might have been a bit fast and loose with the facts here (considering the lack of polling data from the 1800's), it certainly seems that way, and that series first aired in 2013. What intrigues me is what's happened since then; the unarguable increased division over the last ten years. Not just in the US but across the world, and alongside it decreased tolerance and what feels like the death of *the healthy debate*.

This spring I actually visited Yosemite national park and yes, it certainly is great, but the profound impact it had on me felt unwarranted even by the majestic scenery. After dumping my bag by the fireplace in the log cabin, I stepped out on to the wooden balcony with only pine trees for as far as I could see and felt total bliss for the first time in years. The previous week's insane traffic in LA (and watching MSNBC and FOX reporting the same stories in diametrically opposed ways) probably contributed but even more so, a year of watching our local social media groups becoming increasingly vitriolic over the most banal issues. Normal people being intolerant and angry over things they had clearly done zero research on. Seemingly they just wanted to shout out "You, on the other side, you're wrong!!!". And before that there had been the storming of the Capitol, Catalanian riots for independence, reversal of Roe vs Wade, etc.; a bewildering six months.



Back home I decided to dig deeper and try to find out if we actually are getting irreversibly more polarised, or if this is just cyclical like most things. Or, am I wrong and this is only down to perception, due to our skewed feeds of information?

## Our belief systems

Let's start with the basics, how do we make our minds up about where we stand on things? Are our belief systems mainly inherited from our parents and other adults we grew up with, because we trusted and identified with them? Probably to begin with, although millions of teenagers out there would shout "Are

you kidding me, my parents are morons!" at this. A friend of mine once told me she would always vote for party X, no matter what. I tried to be clever and call her on this by asking if that would still apply if X would reintroduce capital punishment, make homosexuality illegal etc. This of course fell on deaf ears because "X would never do that.". This particular friend isn't blinkered though and does her research, just like me, or so I thought. I've long been an advocate of a sort of triage system to avoid people voting for a party just because they belong to a particular tribe (I can't think of a better word). Instead of voting X because that's what we think would be best for us (but is subconsciously based on what our bubble does or because we identify with being climate concerned, liberal, economically astute, young/old etc., take your pick), there should be a survey of the most important actual issues for us to answer. The system is preloaded with the policies of the different political parties on these issues and that will then tell you who you should vote for. This both backfired and proved my point when a Swedish public service channel introduced a similar service this year. Although I haven't lived in Sweden for 22 years I'm still allowed to vote there, but not in the country I live, pay my taxes and ran a business in, go figure. So of course I jumped on to the survey and found that A. I shouldn't vote for the party I thought I should and B. I couldn't actually give a 100% yes or no to many of the questions. "Should we increase nuclear power production until we have built up the wind and solar energy infrastructure?". Er, I need to get back to you on that. But case in point, eventually the results convinced me to disregard previous misconceptions, who my parents and friends vote for or what kind of person I want to be perceived as, and just vote based on the facts.

Now, in Sweden there are eight main political parties and not two like in the US or the UK (ish). It has geographical clusters of voters but nothing like America where you can spend your whole year without running into anything but fellow Trump supporters, or your whole career surrounded by democrats because your company is based in a major city or by the coast. Bubbles that of course can be very dangerous when just giving us one point of view. The internet was supposed to give us all the information in the world but seems to lately instead have become a tool for self-affirmation. Whatever your belief is, that's the place where you can be certain of finding others to not only confirm that you're right, but cheer you on. So if everyone around you believes in X, all your forums that you are part of and news channels you watch say that X is right, why would you ever consider Y? This is what public service media say is why taxpayers' money should fund their budgets; to deliver unbiased facts. However both the number of public service outlets and ratings are waning, and it varies enormously from one democratic country to another. In 2021 Reuters presented a survey showing that 46% of Brits "avoid the news". This was double the figure from just five years ago. In Sweden roughly 10% of the population watches the daily news show Rapport, in the UK around 6% watched BBC News at 6 last month and in the US, PBS barely gets 1%. There has been controversy in all of these countries regarding the independency of the reporting but to me there is an equally worrying trend, the lack of analysis. Less and less these channels (and print/online media too) are not asking the question *why*. If this is due to a fear of coming across as partisan, I believe the result is worse; leaving the viewers to speculate themselves on why this news event has taken place.

### **Culture wars and the growing anger**

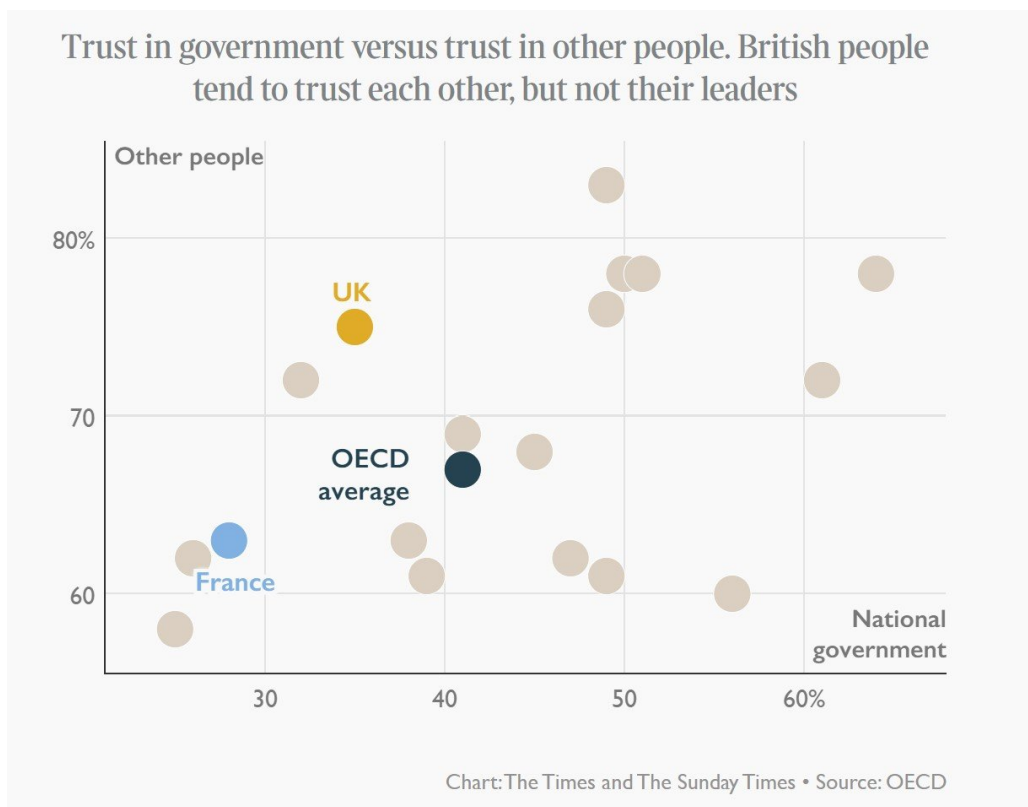
Does any of this matter when most of our day-to-day lives haven't changed much at all over the last years? Yes it does. In the US a poll showed 45% of Republicans being supportive of the storming of the capitol as it was happening. Afterwards when the clips had been shown of what looked like the start of a revolution (but against fellow Americans this time, not the British), this dropped to 18%. The latter is still an alarmingly high figure but the former shows the kneejerk responses we give without thinking things through. In Spain, UBS estimates that the polarisation over independence for the Catalonian region, has costed Spain three billion Euros in lower investor belief and 40,000 jobs.

Before the Brexit referendum there were a lot of "Fake news" and very few independent guides to base your vote on. Follow-up interviews with pro-Brexit voters showed them saying that they'd just wanted to send a message, not to actually leave. Subsequently campaign lies on both sides were exposed and the debate in pubs and at dinner parties got so infectious that you couldn't mention the B word and so, the healthy debate died.

NY Times journalist David Brookes recently wrote "If WW2 had happened today, the US would have lost. We no longer have the national cohesion or confidence in the institutions or each other." Polarisation prevents long-term solutions for complex problems like health, climate change and the threat of a third world war. If we only see the opposing parties as pure evil, it will be impossible to solve them because we need to be united over them to do it. Or in the words of a perhaps surprising commentator on American politics today, actor Matthew McConaghey; "We seem to have turned the two-party system into some sort of orthodox religion. If I'm on a different side to you, then I'm evil." This is why watching those news shows in the US before Yosemite was so disheartening, it truly seemed that each side thought that if the other side won, it would mean the end to their lives as they knew it, not just four years of slightly different policies until the next election.

Many see an actual split of the US as the only solution. In an essay by the pen name Rebecca in the conservative journal *The American Mind*, the author states that the current division is so irreconcilable that red and blue states should be declared where they would be allowed to set their own laws and taxes. Only the currency, military and (of course) the Olympic team should remain national. This seems crazy to most of us but to a European, only a little more mad than being so entrenched in party politics in 2016, that the US would elect a misogynistic mammon worshipping person calling Mexicans rapists. And this regardless if being a woman, true believer or Hispanic.

Culture wars is nothing new but Nexis show that articles in the UK mentioning it increased by 800% from 2010 to 2020. However it's more of a kaleidoscope than the US, finding common ground over the NHS and equality questions, or at least it was.



### The death of healthy debate and how much can we blame Social Media for, really?

Twitter and Facebook et al make more money the angrier we are. Because when we're angry we engage more, therefore we see more ads et voilà, they get paid more. So why wouldn't they encourage anger. Like the NRA they of course say that it's the gun owner that fires the gun, not the gun itself. The storming of the Capitol however would've been an unlikely result of discussions in bars and living rooms. There also seems to be a growing blur of the virtual and real world that has nothing to do with political stand points per se. And with more and more people having "grown up online", the way they behave on social media increasingly spills over into real life, often with scary consequences.

Numerous of teachers and students have been attacked aggressively, both verbally in assemblies and physically, by large mobs because of expressing a view the mob didn't agree with (or had spent time reflecting over). The resulting mental breakdowns, resignations and sometimes suicides of the victims afterwards surprise the mob, because they haven't done anything different to what they would normally do online. Or worse, they're indifferent because the victim had it coming and it was the mob's civil duty to be both judge and jury in the name of making this a more liberal and better world. In post event interviews you often hear liberal justifications, despite this being a dangerous trend towards a more intolerant society where free speech is not accepted. As one of many examples, I can recommend reading The Atlantic's take on Erika Christakis and her husband stepping down as teachers at Yale. This after student outrage over her not thinking it should be the university's job to police what people wear at Halloween. There are far worse examples but it's a good one for getting your head around why the intellectual debate may be under threat. As the provost of University College London said earlier this year: "We have reached the point where universities need to start teaching their students how to discuss controversial topics without shouting each other down. How to disagree well."

So we have a cracking cocktail of misguided individuals lashing out mistaking disagreement for disrespect; instant anger without reflection (because that's ok online); bullying instead of productive debate, topped up with a tool where you can do all of the above en masse. Social media didn't make the cocktail, but it's a pretty effective enabler.

### **Truth and lived experiences.**

"Lived experiences now trump facts" stated journalist Matthew Syed in a Times article recently, and never was it more true than during Covid lockdown. When the second of my friends claimed that masks don't work because they knew someone that had been infected despite wearing one (occasionally), I could sense my old statistics teacher rolling in his grave. Actually I don't know if he's dead but with the last couple of years' blatant disregard for facts, and mistaking correlational data for causal, it wouldn't surprise me if he packed it all in. Trump of course personified the move towards truth being a question of angle and narrative, but Democrats have too and it's certainly not a new phenomenon. The phrase spin doctor originates from the 80's, but the practice can be traced back to ancient Greece.

It's easy to laugh at the most audacious examples, "The cheek and balls on them!", but it feeds our contempt for all politicians, including the good ones, and that's bad for our democracies. Yes hold them all accountable but with the current constant abuse, who would want to become a politician? However much they burn to make the world a better place. And if we don't feel that we can trust politicians, we'll feel better off trusting our local bubble and lived experiences, even if that small sample of data isn't even remotely statistically secure.

In 2021 a Swedish survey showed a high level of acceptance to Covid vaccinations amongst respondents with African and Middle Eastern background. But the subsequent actual take up rate was much lower than the average national figure. Further analysis showed that many of the respondents were from countries where the default attitude to authorities were to tell them what you think they wanted to hear, but then do the opposite. The final analysis of this group was that it therefore sadly had a much higher death rate from the virus.

Back to Mr Syed's article where he says that we are "increasingly pitting "my truth" against "your truth; instead of the actual facts." Could this be where much of the aggression comes from? Syed again: "If we cannot dispute the "lived truth" of an opponent, what is left except attacking his character." So, we're playing the man when we should be playing the ball. He offers this as a "tentative explanation" for why our culture is simultaneously becoming more vapid and vicious. No tentativeness needed Matthew.

### **What else is changing out there?**

Speaking of correlations, what other trends are we seeing, could any of them be causal to our problems discussed? Over 100 years ago sociologist Max Weber predicted that the role of religion would decrease in line with our development, welfare and rational thinking. Eventually, belief in a higher power wouldn't be needed to give meaning to our existence. And Max didn't even know about Love Island, "likes" or padel tennis! If we look at the number of people that say they are religious, the figure is decreasing everywhere, regardless if this is down to a more enlightened and rational society, or that we'd rather Netflix and chill on Sundays.

The US is an anomaly here for the Western world. To understand why, I recommend reading Jon Sopel's "If only they didn't speak English." Church membership in America was at 47% last year, compared to 10% in the UK. The downward trend is the same though, just delayed. As recent as 2000 the US figure was 70%, a dramatic reduction. Another difference is beliefs amongst the religious in the US compared to e.g. Sweden (where 20% say they believe in a God). A vast majority of Swedish church members say that they are absolutely pro-choice and pro-gay rights. In the US, not so much. Can unwillingness to hear other sides of an argument and believe in facts be connected to religious beliefs? Because what the Bible, Koran and Torah say can't be questioned? Not if the religious part of populations are decreasing dramatically, not increasing. Could it be instead that blinkered engagement in politics has replaced religion for some of us?

When Trump got elected, the strongest support was amongst voters who identified as Christians, but weren't practising any more. A smaller but growing group of supporters were QAnon followers, and when listening to members being interviewed, it sounds very much to me like reverential devoutness to their cause. Despite the farfetchedness of some of their theories such as the country being controlled by a satan worshipping cabal of paedophiles, the PRRI (independent religion research) survey of Spring 2022 showed an increase in QAnon believers from 14% last year to 17%. And if you found that chilling, the same survey showed that 9% of Americans believed that violence would be necessary to save the country. That's 23 million adults. There is also a growing belief in crystals, feng shui and quasi religions. Last year over 40% of American women and roughly 30% of men said that they believed in psychics, reincarnation and/or astrology (I had to triple check the figure to believe it). And there was Max believing religious decline would be due to a more enlightened and rational society.



### Is technology making us angrier?

Imagine you or your child have a rare disease that your local doctor has never heard of. A few clicks online and you will find forums with fellow sufferers making you feel less lonely and maybe even providing you with help. The internet can be fantastic in bringing us together but also terrible in not just bringing outliers together, e.g. men struggling to attract women, but also fuelling their anger. Online Incel groups started out to help but ended up cranking up the bitterness and inciting terrorist attacks. Without the websites neither the good or the bad would have happened. It seems impossible to have one without the other.

British comedian David Baddiel said in an article late last year that "We're not conversing any more, we're broadcasting. And if you add to these millions of broadcasters, platform algorithms encouraging friction for economic benefit then; boom!" Baddiel put himself in an MRI scanner to see how his brain reacted to abusive tweets about him (badly) and went off social media for a bit. This made him feel better yet, like an addiction, he was soon back on. I recognise this having vowed to go cold turkey numerous times myself, e.g. after the Cambridge Analytica scandal and every week when there's been extra many posts of people's dinners. But, I like being in touch with friends from all over the world, and forums have shown particularly useful when moving to a new city. I defend myself (to myself) that at least I try and adhere to a rule of

three: posts need to be informative or entertaining, and always true. However, what's entertaining is of course subjective and if I'm informative about a travel destination, do others see it as a gloating "look at us we're on a glam holiday" post?

Speaking at conferences about benchmarking I often used a quote from Swedish arch bishop KG Hammar: "All devilry begins with comparison". And what has been the biggest change to our social lives in recent times? We now receive 100's of "postcards" weekly, showing us others' perfect lives, as opposed to the handful of physical ones per year that we used to get.

Yet we bizarrely crave what annoys us.

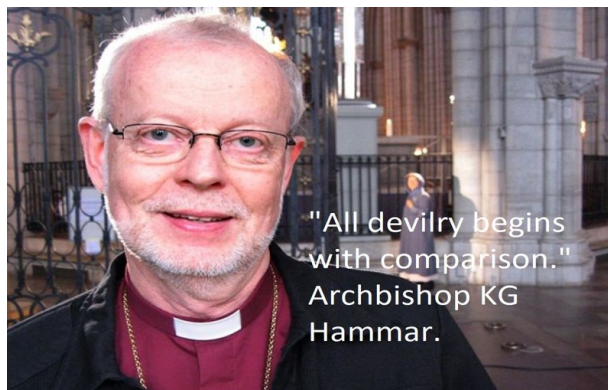
I remember a guest lecturer being invited at university to talk about what captures peoples' interest. He was an editor of a major tabloid newspaper and asked us what headlines we thought sold the most copies. We guessed sex scandals and murders correctly but completely missed *lists*. He gave us examples like "See how you compare to the average for.. times per week you have sex, house prices in your area, salaries in your sector, health" etc., if the headline had anything to do about how we compare to others, circulation shot up.

Are we at least doing something about fake news? In Sweden the "Swedish Psychological Defence Agency" was set up this year to prevent foreign powers influencing public opinion. One of the things they discovered was that the viral news that social services were disproportionately taking Muslim children into care, had been made up and spread from abroad. But before it could be debunked, there were demonstrations on the street against these believed systematic anti-Muslim actions. You will have read about Alex Jones finally getting fined \$45M in punitive damages. This after spreading tons of conspiracy theories in the US through his network Infowars. What finally brought him down (one hopes) was claiming that the Sandy Hook school massacre where 26 people died, mainly children, was a hoax. A scam staged by the government to tighten gun control laws, hiring actors to pretend to be grieving parents. The judge told him at the conclusion of the trial "Your beliefs do not make something true". I can't personally see how Alex Jones could have believed in the thousands of lies he spread, he just didn't care as long as it pushed a bigger agenda. But many of his followers will have, because it came from him and similarly, because it was in their own interest. Truth has become irrelevant, it's about using any means necessary to further your side of the argument. The ends justify the means because we know we're right and the country is (as we've seen on the news) going to hell in a handcart. Except it isn't. But, did someone say self-fulfilling prophecy?

### **Are things actually a lot better than we think?**

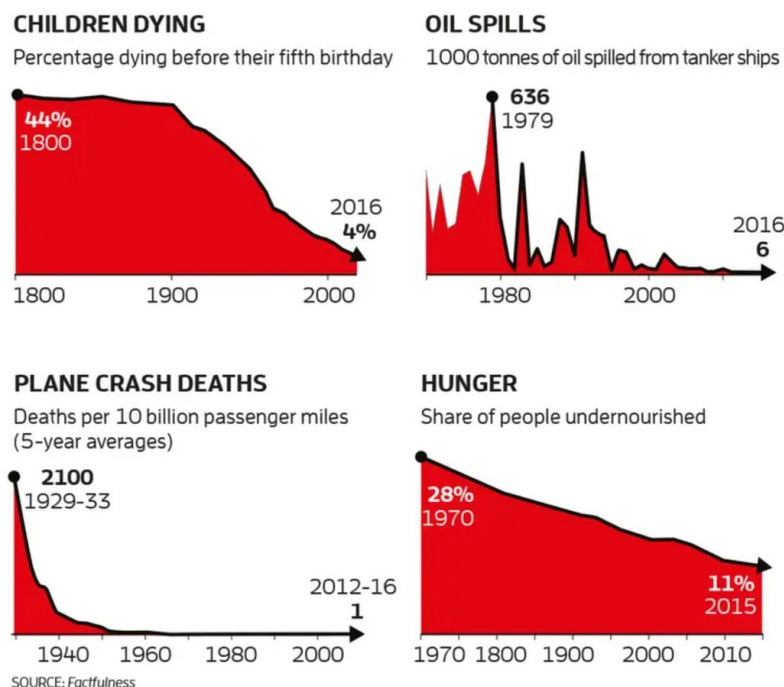
Tom Dixon of think tank More in common comments on social media's negative impact on us saying "Social Media hands the microphone to those people down the back that just heckle. But they're only a handful of people. 80% of tweets come from 2% of the population." Most of the time we are unaware of this, we think it's the general consensus. Could this be where our newfound anger comes from? We think the world has gone mad but actually, it's only the nutters in the back and sometimes they're not even real. An acquaintance of mine who's in PR says she can easily spot the ones who enjoys throwing a hand grenade in to Facebook forums, then sit back with a smile and a drink to watch everything explode. Apart from communication being her area of expertise, she also knows this because she used to do it herself, for fun over Cosmopolitans with her girlfriends before going out.

Researchers like Professor Hans Rosling in his book Factfulness, and Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Institute at Kings College, show us that we more often than not misinterpret where the world is heading. Almost everything is improving and we've never had it so good (on average). Infants survive, cancer survival rates has doubled since the 80's, greenhouse gases have halved in the UK since the 90's and unemployment is at a record low. What about crime, surely that's up because we feel unsafe? Almost all



crime rates are down with e.g. the murder rate in the UK down 30% since 2000, yet Ipsos Mori and Duffy show us that a majority of us think it's the other way around.

Both Duffy and Rosling state that there are two main reasons behind this phenomenon: First, our brain focuses on negative information. It is a legacy from our cave dwelling days when if we didn't, we'd be dinner. Negative information stir up more emotion in most of us which leads to more engagement and more clicks. This is why media feeds us more negative stories, it simply sells more than declining rates of teenage pregnancies, hunger or poverty ("If it bleeds, it leads."). This combines nicely with another trick our brains play on us to feel the world is going to hell; our "rosy retrospection". Psychology studies show that we edit out bad things in our past because it's better for our mental health. The downside is that summer holidays in the past seem much sunnier to us, and more poignant for this article; people were nicer and the world a better place. Professor Duffy says we can't stop this instinct, but what we can do is be aware of the bias and thus reduce the impact. I would add to this the aforementioned lack of media asking *why*. Even with a majority of doom and gloom stories out there, if we were told more about the reasons for them and possible solutions were discussed, we wouldn't be left with quite such a frustrating feeling of futility and think that overthrowing the government or separating the country is the only remaining way forward. Duffy touches on this saying: "There is a great risk with wrongly believing that all is lost. This leads to fatalistic inaction, or worse, provides fertile ground for extremists."



### Why has politics become so acrimonious?

Of course there will be some growls over opposing parties' moves, but disgust? In the UK, The London school of economics shows us that 68% of Labour voters feel disgust for Conservative voters, and 48% vice versa. Voting used to be class and asset related, affluent people voted right and poorer left. Now however, large groups of lower educated, old age and rural voters lean right and younger higher educated voters go left. But this does not explain the increased anger, nor does the increasing gap between the rich and the poor (1% own 50% of the world's assets, the poorest 80% share 5% of them). In fact all of those groups feel they are getting a worse deal than everybody else. They can't all be right.

Are we maybe too political these days? Voting secrecy is still in place but becoming pretty redundant if everyone is broadcasting their views. And now companies are being dragged in. Sport and business has traditionally stayed clear of politics but no more. The latest challenge being legal ramifications of their health benefits. Companies in the US such as Citi, Disney, Apple, Walmart (America's largest employer) etc. will cover employees' expenses for going out of state for legal abortions after Roe vs. Wade was overturned. States like Missouri are trying to make this illegal and Florida Senator Marco Rubio is to

introduce a bill that stops companies claiming tax deductions for these staff benefits. How will staunch pro-life supporters feel about working for these companies, and pro-choice for others? Every aspects of our lives are being politicized and it is no wonder many feel that living is becoming a minefield.

In the US, it now depends on what state you live in if you can join a union, get free healthcare, have an abortion or marry your same sex childhood sweetheart. This is hard to get your head around for someone living in the UK, but there are similarities. If you have fertility problems it will depend on what NHS trust you belong to if you're going to get help having a child through IVF. And if you live in Glasgow, you will on average live 12 years less than if you're a resident of Westminster, London. Pretty shocking statistics for a first world country.

### More misconceptions and what we can do to turn the tide.

The young are all highly concerned with climate change right? Wrong. Ipsos Mori showed us recently that 23% of 18-24 year olds are concerned, and 42% of 55-64 year olds. The latter are also putting their money where their mouth is, being more likely to buy local produce from that nearest farmers' market, whereas the former are more likely to put Mexican avocados on their toast. Europe wide, baby boomers (born 1945-65) are almost twice as likely to pick climate change as our biggest challenge than generation Z (1997-2012). Keep going Greta! But include the 20-somethings in your speeches. On the flipside, the perception was that the young of the UK would not care about the elderlies during the Covid lock down, after all they had nothing to worry about so this wasn't their problem. But the opposite happened and tremendous consideration was shown.

What about age and politics, "if you don't vote left when you're young you don't have a heart, and right when you're old or you don't have a brain"? Well, in the UK today, older people are twice as likely to vote Conservatives and vice versa for Labour. But this didn't actually use to be the case before Brexit and "culture war" mentions in media boomed.

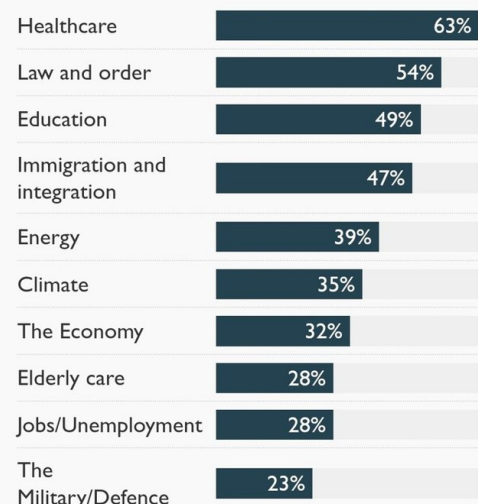
As a non-Brit in the UK I see examples everywhere of people voting with their tribe instead of basing it on what they think of specific issues. Or, they base their vote on complete misconceptions on what party would be the best suited to solve the issues they care most about. And this is where the disgust for politicians and ennui with politics in general comes back in; we're just to fed up or lazy to bother finding out the facts. Yet this is our one shot at influencing all those things we shout about on Facebook being so *WRONG!*

Tribe mentality can turn out bizarrely differently from country to country. Joining the EU back in the day was supported mainly by the right in some countries because it was about trade. In others it was seen as collaborative and mainly supported by the left. Nuclear power was similarly "lefty" in some because it was cleaner and progressive, but hated by some countries' left because of the radioactive waste and the right just focusing on more cost efficient energy production. New ideas are often more accepted by "Conservatives", and incentives to work shunned by the "Workers' parties". They're outdated labels, words and colours. Dear first time voter, try and forget about left, right, blue or red. Pick the issues closest to your heart and find the facts about who will address them the best, ignoring the views of the bubble around you. Do remember though that the economy is an overriding issue that needs to function for funding improvements to the rest. If you can't find someone that fits the bill, start your own party.

So. It's not religion (entirely) behind things taking a turn for the worse, not age, not the income gap, not media (ok, some), our brains (dito), nor social media (well, quite a bit). So what is it then, pollution!? Well, in

### Voter concerns

#### Key issues for Swedish voters





fact our reaction times are slower than in Victorian times which is attributed to air pollution. But no, I believe it's a perfect storm of all of the above and we have the challenge of righting a tanker that's going to be very slow to change the direction of. But here's my **starter for 10**.

- If we rolled out independent electoral triage quizzes, it would help us base our voting on where we stand on issues, not which tribe we belong to.
- Remember that things are better than they seem, improvements sell fewer copies than negative stories. And the opinions you see online are not those of a majority but of a small percentage with a large bullhorn, and quite a few are from bots.
- Make "big picture" books like *How to spend a trillion dollars*, *Factfulness* and *How bad are bananas?* mandatory reading in school. Start holding courses on campuses and in workplaces on how to "disagree well", spot fake news and finding the facts.
- We need to collectively try and push journalists to not just relay news events but always be asking *why*. And keep holding politicians accountable but stop despising them just because of their profession. We need competent people to want to do the job.
- When something makes us angry, let's play devil's advocate to ourselves; what if I see it from their point of view first? We're all complex creatures with different backgrounds and views, so we will never be able to make everyone see things our way, never.
- Thus, democracy isn't always ideal, but to the people that can't abide it; let's encourage them to move to an autocracy. Alas, there are plenty of them.

Hang on in there!

*Mats Rennstam, Moraira Sept 2022*

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