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Danny Dorling Q&A: ‘The job of a professor is to profess’

The leading geographer talks to Karen Shook about how to learn from your audience and help build a better politics too

Danny Dorling, Halford Mackinder professor of geography at the [University of Oxford](#) and author of [A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier](#) (London Publishing Partnership), weighs in on data and democracy, wealth and well-being, happiness studies and mortality rates, knackered MPs and academics’ responsibility to engage, #RhodesMustFall and 12 reasons he’s felt hopeful in the past 12 months.

In the foreword, crossbench peer Lord Adebowale says your new book is “a call to discuss things that have become uncomfortable to politicians”. Is this because politicians find it hard to think in the longer term that such solutions demand?

Yes. The book starts off talking about death a great deal, including the death of our parents and how we are allowing so many of those deaths to occur prematurely in

poor-quality care homes, or when the old are living alone. Solving these issues would be difficult. It would require reorganising our priorities. It would require seeing how unusual we are, compared with other European countries, in terms of how little we have chosen to spend on healthcare. It would require a change that would take more than a decade to implement outside of a time of crisis.

It may be that many politicians do not see such things as important. As yet, no politician has remarked upon the implication of the 5 per cent rise in deaths in England and Wales in 2015 compared with 2014, or the nearly 9 per cent rise in Scotland over those same 12 months.

Perhaps they think such things are inevitable? Perhaps they assume that one of their public officials will step forward and explain what has occurred on their behalf? Perhaps they think their old age will be comfortable even if that of so many of their constituents will not be? Or perhaps they do not understand the significance of these numbers?

But it is not hard to argue that we need a better politics than we have, and the story of these deaths is just one of

many issues the book tries to address, by showing the effect on the rest of the population of allowing so many to suffer unnecessarily in comparison with what is normal in most other affluent countries today. Have we become so short-sighted in the UK that we do not see what our final years are likely to be like if we continue along this path?

Do UK voters believe a better politics is possible? Or have most of us decided that disengaging from the process is the only sane course of action?

Disengaging from politics is a very popular option – more popular than it has ever been, especially in local elections. Almost everywhere, more people don't vote at all than vote for any one of the political parties. That has not always been true. But it was also not the case in Scotland in 2014 when the highest proportion of people who have ever voted in a national election or referendum turned out to vote on Scottish independence because they had a real choice offered to them. If you offer people a genuine choice, then the disengaged become engaged. However, that choice has to be a choice that would actually result in action, so a single candidate standing in

a single seat can never draw out so much engagement, because no matter how different and refreshing they are, their election will have little overall impact.

Since 1974 in the UK, the main three political parties have moved to the Right. The UK no longer has a Conservative party. It has a party that uses that name, but that no longer belongs to the main conservative group in the EU, the European People's Party group. The Liberals moved so far to the Right that they were able to work in coalition with those far-Right politicians. Labour notoriously became New Labour. Given such a narrow choice, is it any wonder that increasing numbers of people, especially the young, chose not to vote, or to vote for other parties?

The book draws on data from the British Household Panel Survey, and indicates that what makes people happier or more unhappy is often not what we expect. If this is the case, will we always make the wrong choices in life and at the ballot box?

These findings are only surprising when you first read them. Very quickly they appear to be common sense –

and that is because they are the common sense. They are what people most commonly feel and react to. Good health makes us far happier than being wealthy. Not being able to house ourselves securely does create misery. Being able to start a family does make us very happy even if being a parent, later on, is not always as joyous.

It is possible to convince people that immigration creates their problems or that a lot of wealth would make them much happier. With the latter, this is because being able to save a small amount of money does make people a lot happier. However, as the Office for National Statistics reported for the first time in 2015: “Levels of property wealth and private pension wealth were not found to be related to levels of personal well-being.” Before that study was reported, you could not have been sure that that was the case.

We are not all stupid, but we can be misled, especially when studies have not been undertaken or the results are not widely disseminated. At the ballot box we are presented with an archaic voting system and a very limited set of real choices. Until one of the two major

political parties promises proportional representation in its manifesto, we will continue to be unable to vote as we might like.

Are politicians any more interested in listening to academics than to members of the public? And is your time as an academic well spent in engaging with and advising politicians?

Politicians are normally exhausted. They do a very good job of appearing interested, but most are tired when they talk to you. They try to do too much and they are often workaholics. They are usually very committed people who also quite like being in the limelight – and some are driven by liking that attention a little too much for the good of the rest of us. But my overall impression of politicians is that they really would like to be remembered for having done a good job, if not a brilliant job, and so they do listen because they do not want to make mistakes. And they do often dream of being one of that tiny minority of politicians whose names are still remembered after they have died – not for some scandal, but for being on the right side of history. I suspect a few dream of having a statue made in their likeness.

The job of a professor is to profess, to declare openly what you believe to be true and to admit that you were wrong when you discover you are or when others demonstrate you are wrong. Given that, there are a great many people you should be engaging with if they wish to engage with you – for mutual benefit. Furthermore, if you are a social scientist and interested in understanding and explaining British society, politics, economics and geography, it is very hard to do that without some understanding of politicians and policymakers.

Participant observation can also be enjoyable and can help you make fewer mistakes as an academic. Every time I give a public talk, someone teaches me something new by asking a question I had not anticipated. Every time I meet a politician I learn something I did not know or hear them say something I did not expect them to say.

The whole sum of human knowledge is not held in books, papers and datasets just waiting to be analysed.

Is there anything in the past 12 months that has made you hopeful?

I felt hopeful in May 2015 when people in Scotland sent 56 MPs representing a very different politics to Westminster. The last time such a political earthquake occurred was in the General Election of 1918 that sealed the independence of Ireland. That was the single most significant result of the 2015 general election. Many everyday people entered Parliament, including a university student.

I felt hopeful when I had a meeting with people in London very unlike me and we found common ground. That hopefulness turned out to be justified; we continued to work together for the best part of a year despite our political differences, our very different beliefs and backgrounds.

I felt hopeful when I read this: "Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price, forgoing a firm commitment to reviewing and reforming the entire system, only reaffirms the absolute power of a financial system, a power which has no future and will only give

rise to new crises after a slow, costly and only apparent recovery.” It is from the Pope’s June 2015 encyclical.

I felt hopeful when I watched a colleague be kind to a student who was difficult to deal with, when they need not have been. I know how much it meant to the student. On many issues that colleague and I do not agree, but watching someone be kind always makes me hopeful, especially when I had not expected it.

I felt hopeful when in the immediate aftermath of the body of that little boy, Alan Kurdi, washing up on a beach in Turkey, the British press did not report the latest immigration data, released by the Office for National Statistics just a day or so later, with their usual bile.

I felt hopeful when I received a letter, unsigned, from someone who liked something I had written and who just wanted to let me know that they liked it, but didn’t think I needed to know who they were.

I felt hopeful that a [man who really did not want to stand for office](#) could be persuaded to do so, and then become leader of Her Majesty’s Official Opposition by a huge majority of votes because he and those around him were

offering something new. And I felt hopeful when his party polled so well in the Oldham by-election in December 2015, increasing its vote share by 7 per cent.

I felt hopeful when students in my university began protesting about a statue of Cecil Rhodes being left on display overlooking the high street of the city – and when they began to talk about just some of what he had done and inched open the lid of the Pandora's box that patronage, privilege and philanthropy try to keep so firmly shut.

I felt hopeful when Hillary Clinton began to adopt the language of Bernie Sanders in the US primaries in March 2016. She may have done this for cynical reasons, but the fact that she had to do it because it was what the electors wanted to hear should give us cause for hope.

I felt hopeful when I went to London for the first time in years and didn't pay for a packet of cigarettes as soon as I got off the bus, because a friend had made me promise to try not to, and to kick my habit of always having a smoke in the Big Smoke.

And I felt hopeful when the seeds I had planted in the garden shed germinated and first poked up through the soil this week. Even though I knew that is what almost always happens when you plant a seed.

I am often *not* very hopeful – although you didn't ask me about that. But often I am *very* hopeful. (Some of us have more mood swings than others.) And on the ups we can do a lot. We just have to get through the downs to the next up!

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Interview with: Karen Shook

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