

In the increasingly brutal culture wars between the Left and the Right across the democratic West, both sides are flawed, proposing not just who we should vote for but how we must live. A moral philosopher calls for fresh thinking on the great questions of our time / By JAMES MUMFORD

Defeating tribalism

I'LL PUT IT bluntly. Politically, I don't like my options. Growing up in this giddy world (b.1981) I've become increasingly dissatisfied with the alternatives on offer. Because there aren't very many. Deep polarisation has delivered unacceptable options. And not just at a party-political level – the dearth of boxes on the ballot paper.

The real source of my frustration is the way every conceivable position on controversial moral issues has been bundled up into package deals that I'm supposed to choose between. This clustering of causes across the political spectrum is the legacy the boomers bequeathed to us, and it's got me all riled up. My political identification is supposed to determine every view I take on the most fundamental questions I face.

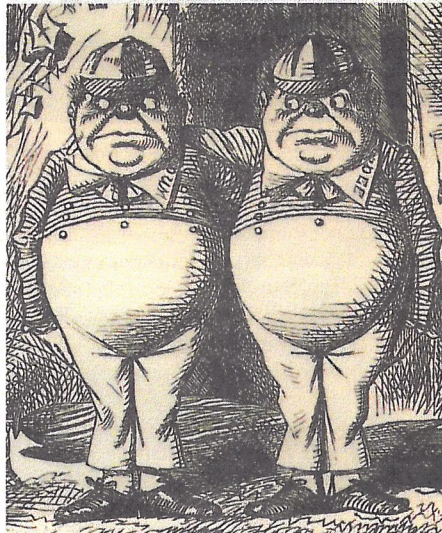
Say I'm on the Left. Because of the way positions have been packaged, the way I vote means I'm urged to press "Accept all" to the terms and conditions of the whole deal: to sign off on every part of the platform. So, I passionately opposed the invasion of Iraq and defend affirmative action to the hilt. Am I simply to inherit an affirmative view of the legalisation of drugs? Or maybe I am conservative. I worry about levels of immigration. I bemoan the rise of identity politics. Why am I then supposed to support greater sanctions on welfare for the unemployed?

It was a while before I was able to trace my dissatisfaction to its source – this packaging of positions. In 2013 I moved to the United States. I had lived in America before and had always been impressed and inspired by how sanguine were the people I met, how open. I liked their awareness of and investment in the American project itself. This time, though, the climate felt different.

I WAS OVERWHELMED by the extremity of polarisation. I was seeing for real what it looked like for people to be socially divided along political lines – the faculty ostracising the professor; churches so engulfed by their division they ignored their *raison d'être*; family members simply disliking each other; and dinner parties where there were no debates because no one from the opposite end of the political spectrum had been invited.

But what struck me was not just the partisanship, and its effects on how relationships fared and institutions functioned. It was the range of issues that had come to be enveloped by ideology. The "sites of contestation" weren't just about matters of state.

TWEEDLEDUM AND TWEEDLEDEE BY SIR JOHN TENNIEL, FROM LEWIS CARROLL'S THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS AND WHAT ALICE FOUND THERE. PA/DESIGN PICS, KEN WELSH



'A seismic change in our mode of engagement is vital – ending the vitriol and the vilification'

Thinking had become radically dichotomised about the most intimate quandaries, the most acute dilemmas, the weightiest of controversies – birth and death, growing up and getting old, race and gender, sexuality, family, our obligations to those near and far, what I do with my body and what I do with my wallet. Morality had become thoroughly politicised.

Two opposing political visions governed how to act, and how to think about how to act. Then, the more I thought about separating out into packages of so many positions on the most existential and important questions, the more I thought about the combinations. And the stranger they seemed. You pull up at the traffic lights. On your right is a car juxtaposing "Liberals Take and Spend. Conservatives Protect and Serve" with "Pro Guns. Pro God. Pro Life". On your left is a car displaying a rainbow flag alongside "Buy Fresh Buy Local", "No Nukes" and "Co-Exist". Those stances may be ideologically aligned. But do they imply each other? Why should being religious preclude buying fresh, local produce? Why should a dedication to diversity commit you to unilateral disarmament?

Last year I returned home from the States. I'll pretend it was a protest move against the political climate, rather than because I couldn't land a job and my visa was about to expire. I had mixed feelings about departing. I was having to leave a country I love so much, but I would not miss its political climate. So I disembarked, thinking I had left the culture wars

behind, only to find them staring me in the face. It turned out that while I was away from the United Kingdom there had been some kind of referendum on whether to leave the European Union, and the country, by the slimmest of margins, had voted in favour.

JUST AS IN the US, people were socially divided on political grounds. Profound disagreement about politics had morphed into hatred of people. Groups were closing ranks; families had been shaken to the core. When I got home, I found that intense polarisation was not only an American phenomenon. We may not have AR-15s on our streets. Polarisation may not correlate with political parties in such a straightforward way. But what had been both exposed and exacerbated was a brutal political antagonism.

What we also have, I realised, are package deals. Included within them might be slightly different positions. But the dynamic is the same. If you are a Remainer, you are supposed to hold a range of other views that have been bundled together, while the formation of a Brexiteer identity has served to weld together a number of distinctly conservative positions. Here, too, Right and Left are ideologies proposing ideas not just on policy but on identity, not just who we vote for but how we live.

In *Vexed* I attempt to wrest myself free of these package deals. I want to affirm certain fundamental principles on the Left and then question why those principles are expressed in some positions and ignored in others. And vice versa: I want to ask why the most compelling conservative principles are not expressed across the board. The aim, I should say, is not to point out inconsistency for its own sake – consistent worldviews can be wicked! My aim in ensuring I haven't subscribed to a package deal is motivated by the assumption that a view can't be right simply because it has been tacked on to another one for contingent historical reasons.

POLITICAL TRIBES – whether the traditional European Left, Anglo-American liberals, libertarians or social conservatives – can't be reduced to social identities. For this reason: *they harbour visions of the good*. That is, at their best, they traffic in ideas about the welfare of the *whole*. The values wrapped up inside the package deals have universal purchase. Those principles are about what it means to thrive as a human being and thus what it is for everyone to flourish.

The vision of liberals isn't just for a world that is better for liberals. The conservative vision isn't just for a world that is better for conservatives. It may be that those principles are mistaken – identifying those principles is what my book is about. It may be that those principles are not good. But the culture wars are more than tribal blood feuds in which the promotion of an agenda is merely the pursuit of interests. The culture wars are bitter disputes about what is true about the world.

Given the character of public debate, it is little wonder that recent books bemoaning political tribalism conclude with calls for conciliation. “We need to find a way to talk to each other if we are to have any chance of bridging divides,” writes Amy Chua in *Political Tribes*. “We need to allow ourselves to see our tribal adversaries as fellows ... engaged in a common enterprise.” According to this view – and this is the critical thing – the condition for the possibility of living together peaceably is for political factions, when it comes to their deepest principles, agreeing to disagree. Our hope lies in leaving well alone those values about which we are so conflicted.

Which seems to me the one thing we can't do. A seismic change in our mode of engagement is indeed vital – ending the vitriol and the vilification. But it can only be a necessary and not a sufficient achievement. It will not be enough. Why? Because the abolitionists did not agree to disagree. The civil rights movement did not settle for living with their differences – that would have meant capitulation, giving up on the dream of transformation. It would have entailed abandoning the aim of integration.

SIMILARLY, IN OUR moment, agreeing to disagree is the quietist option that rests content to leave things as they are. Defending our convictions in the public square – though in so different a way, rooted in the recognition of the inextinguishable humanity of one's adversary – is what it means to be committed to the good.

The defeat of tribalism hinges on our willingness to question package deals. Defying that inheritance, refusing to have the parameters of our thinking, the range of options open to us, circumscribed by ideology may itself help us to move closer towards a profoundly different political environment.

I try to break with package-deal thinking by affirming principles from across the political spectrum – some from the Left, some from the Right. Thinking afresh about the great questions of our time – assisted dying; what we should do about in-work poverty; how we are to evaluate our sexual culture; the question of gun violence; whether we pursue proposals to enhance ourselves; how we confront the collateral consequences of crime – is long overdue, and it is only by escaping package deals and seeking recourse to first principles that we can do it.

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In the silence of our own desert we will find the inner strength to meet the challenges of being a disciple of Jesus today, writes **Laurentia Johns OSB**

ONE SATURDAY morning some years ago, a young woman appeared at our retreat house asking where she could find quiet. This took me aback: the whole place was silent. I showed her the oratory, the walled garden, the library. Our pilgrim, looking edgy, evidently did not want to talk.

Whenever I looked out of the window, I saw the slight figure sitting motionless on a bench in the abbey grounds. She had no book, no phone. At the end of the day she thanked me profoundly for “everything”, declared the place a haven, and departed seeming far more at peace than when she arrived. As far as I recall, she did not attend the monastic services, but she certainly knew how to be still.

“All the misery of mankind,” wrote Pascal, “comes from not knowing how to sit still in a room.” (*Pensées*, 139)

To prepare himself to confront the miseries of the world, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert. Now he draws us after him into the desert of Lent. On this Sunday, when candidates for Baptism are presented in our churches, the Gospel of Jesus' desert experience is given as a pattern for the whole Christian journey, where the struggle against the forces of darkness is integral.

The Spirit summons us, catechumens, young Christians and veterans, to carve out some moments of silence and solitude each day in the coming weeks. This is not easy in our busy lives, but it is vital if we are to find the inner strength to meet the challenges of being a disciple of Jesus today.

In our own desert place, which we can sometimes enter by something as simple as switching off our phone for 15 minutes, we may begin to discern the

contours of our inner landscape. After the initial relief of being away from the relentless noise and pressure, we may begin to be aware of features that disturb us: mountains of pride, ravines of resentment. But if we stay put, if we are able to resist the urge to “get me out of here”, we may begin to detect a deeper reality: an awareness, deep within, of a merciful, mysterious presence.

“The fruit of silence is prayer,” St Teresa of Calcutta said. God's Spirit attests to our spirit that we are – contrary to all the undermining attempts of the Adversary – “children of God” (cf. Romans 8:16). And in this merciful presence we begin to see more clearly our temptations, our liabilities and shortcomings as well as our blessings and gifts.

At other times, solitude and silence can be thrust upon us through circumstances we have not chosen. Freedom will come in praying for the grace of acceptance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, in what would be his final Christmas letter to his family: “Our homes will be very quiet at this time. But I have often found that the quieter my surroundings, the more vividly I sense my connection with you all. It is as though in solitude the soul develops senses which we hardly know in everyday life.”

So as well as a greater awareness of the presence of God, the fruit of solitude can also be solidarity with our friends and family. How will you enter the desert this Lent?

Laurentia Johns is a Benedictine nun of Stanbrook Abbey. She is the author of *The Way of Benedict: Eight Blessings for Lent* (SPCK, £9.99; Tablet price, £9).