

Emotional confusion

by Catherine Fieschi

The left appears to be confused about the place of emotion in modern politics

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The untimely deaths of two grand figures of the British left, Mo Mowlam and Robin Cook, prompted several commentators, also of the left, to publicly lament the demise of passion and emotion in British politics. Separately, Jon Norton, Mowlam's husband, told a newspaper after her death that she had expressed reservations over Gordon Brown's capacity to lead the country because he "lacked the ability to have an emotional relationship with the people of this country." It is revealing that Mowlam should so easily embrace the idea that you need warmth and charisma to be prime minister. It also suggests confusion about the place of emotions in politics.

Left-wing politics has always approached emotions with a measure of suspicion, even fear. The politics of class allowed a commitment to solidarity but, overall, the left has placed the highest value on dispassionate debate and reason. The right, on the other hand, even the mainstream right, has always acknowledged the power of sentiment, the appeal of charisma, the draw of emotion and people's need to identify and belong.

In recent times, the left has begun to reconcile itself to the idea that emotions are intrinsic to mass democratic politics and may not always be a bad thing. But confusion and contradiction remain. On the one hand, for example, people may regret dwindling levels of passion in mainstream politics, and admire politicians who wear their heart and commitment on their sleeves, but most people on the left also recoil from the "fervour, fear and paranoia" that are sometimes described as the roots of American politics. At elections or times of emergency, it is usually the Guardian left that warns us about the manipulation of voters' emotions or fears and tries to face down populism.

But can one separate the legitimate role of emotions in politics and the populist abuse of emotions, as Mo Mowlam would presumably have tried to do? Separating "good" left-wing emotion from "bad" populist emotion feels like cheating--do we simply distinguish on the grounds of what cause the emotion is serving?

The bolder step, surely, is to tackle the disabling distinction between emotion and reason itself. Much recent research in psychology, neuroscience and philosophy exposes the duality as artificial and allows us to understand emotion as intrinsic to rational thought, and thus fundamental to political and ethical judgment.

Psychologists argue that we arrive at an emotional state only after we have weighed up--sometimes very fast--a number of ideas and thoughts. Writers such as George Marcus, who draw on brain research, go even further and argue that emotional states are what allow us to extract crucial information at lightning speed (much faster than conscious thought)--and it is this information we need to make sense of different situations. This first emotional step is the necessary condition for elaborating a strategy and then acting on it.

So what might a left-wing politics of emotions look like? The answer is that it would look like a politics that no longer distinguishes between emotions and rationality. It would accept that, far from distorting political judgement or distracting the mind, emotions are key to our ability to appraise, evaluate, judge and ultimately choose--that they make us more rational, not less.

Recognising the fundamental connection between rationality and emotion would allow our leaders to be much more open about managing emotions in the public realm. Such management could be given its rightful place as intrinsic to governing, whether in the handling of crises or in the management of our day-to-day relationships with public services.

Walt Whitman suggested the existence of a "public poetry" about emotions that could be used as the basis for the public culture of a pluralistic democracy. Such a public culture would no longer be based so much on "conspicuous compassion" but rather, on what Martha Nussbaum refers to as "appropriate compassion." Appropriate compassion is an important ingredient of good citizenship: it is neither bleeding-heart liberalism, wishy-washy emotionalism nor goody-goody wishful thinking. It is a commitment to fostering emotional political literacy among the public and politicians.

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