

WORKSHOP REVIEW

The 2015 election so far: therapy, thinking and the political process, *Self & Society* workshop event led by Professor Andrew Samuels, London, 17 April 2015

Reviewed by Rachel Tribe

I happened upon the ‘Self and Society Event Series’ very recently, after a move to London enthused me with the feeling that, finally, the world was my oyster. As soon as I could, I started the serious business of discovering. I was led to ‘meetup’, an online social networking site that connects people to offline meet ups. Of the vast number of opportunities I browsed, ‘Self and Society Event Series, humanistic psych-workshops’ caught my eye. I couldn’t have imagined a better combination of concepts, so a few clicks later I had signed up to all six events. This April I attended my second event and the third in the series, entitled ‘Andrew Samuels brings us: therapy, thinking and the political process’.

The evening was introduced by Richard House, who gave a very warm welcome to Andrew Samuels. Andrew is a professor, psychotherapist, author, campaigner and political consultant. He won the election for chair of the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) in 2009, and has been involved in US President Barack Obama’s electoral campaigns, thus being very well placed to comment on the subject of political elections. His aim, as stated in the event description, was to create a space for ‘psychological reflection on the election campaign’, which in my view he did with great success.

The workshop began with Andrew outlining the etymology of the words ‘elect’ and ‘candidate’. ‘Elect’, unsurprisingly, means ‘to pick out’ or ‘to pluck out’. Interestingly, ‘candidate’ is from ‘candidus’, meaning glittering and white, a reference to Roman candidates who wore white togas.

We then had a general discussion of our thoughts about the 2015 election. It became clear that many attendees felt very strongly about the current state of politics in Britain. The topics mentioned were varied, including immigration, the Scottish referendum and Us (the people) versus Them (the politicians). I quickly felt reassured by the knowledge that I wasn’t alone in feeling hopeless in the face of the political theatre and phoney rhetoric that the 2015 election campaign magnified. Andrew, who reminded us that elitism on any side is unhelpful, managed the frustration in the room very well.

The workshop’s main event involved the participants delving into what the upcoming election meant to us. Andrew asked attendees to share recollections of their earliest memories of an election. At first I felt we were cornered into making an association between our early experiences and our current political opinions and was

dubious. However, I was surprised to hear many people, including myself, making undiscovered connections. These personal reflections were useful to the group, who were invited by Andrew to probe further.

I certainly saw the epistemology of my political opinions in a new light. I struggled to bring a memory of an election to the fore before the age of 18, as did a few others. I settled on what seemed like a fragmented but powerful memory from my early teenage years, of my father discussing why he never voted. While in the car he turned his head towards me and announced, 'They're all on the take'. I remember feeling furious at my father's lack of optimism and apparent apathy. At that time I had an unshakable belief that the political system's sole purpose was to benefit the people. Over a decade later, my optimism has not subsided, but my confidence in our democracy, capitalist economy and politicians has waned. That evening I realized how my attitudes have come full circle: I now begrudgingly concede that my father's pessimism towards elections was well founded. Whether this knowledge will be of any use to me remains to be seen.

Andrew drew the evening to a close with a body-sculpt. This took us out of our seats and comfort zones to create a position with our bodies, moving or static, which reflected how we felt about the upcoming election. Next, Andrew instructed us to add a sound to the sculpture, again choosing one which reflected our feelings about the election. While in our sculptures, we were also required to observe what everyone else was up to. This wasn't easy, but as Andrew pointed out, this is what is required of everyone in society. Attendees described the result as hellish. Through gaps in my hands which were cupped over my face, I saw a mass of individuals, disconnected, distressed, contorted. I heard a cacophony of strangely harmonious noises, desperate and aggravated. The energy it created was quite frightening.

The workshop left me feeling no closer to my goal of making a positive impact in politics – we didn't devise concrete plans about how to make the system transparent or fair, but I now realize that this wasn't the point. Instead, I paused, and I was able to reflect on and share my personal motivations. This is hugely important, as it is the very thing I want to see in the political system. To quote the oft-used phrase from Ghandi, 'Be the change you want to see in the world' – and this workshop was a good start. I came away comforted by the universality I had experienced and, since then, whether coincidentally or not, I have taken a more active role in campaigning.

In my professional career I have witnessed the astonishing human capacity to recover and to change, and I believe that as a society we can, too. Andrew Samuels created a space where sharing these sorts of beliefs felt safe in a way I've not experienced before, and I am very grateful for that. The experience definitely bolstered my resolve to continue to promote justice, compassion and a healthy planet.

Plus, the snacks were scrumptious and sure to keep hungry students like me happy!

Notes on contributor

Rachel Tribe is from Ipswich, Suffolk, and graduated from the University of Surrey with a psychology degree in 2012. She is currently studying at King's College London on the Mental Health Studies M.Sc. Rachel works as an Honorary Assistant Psychologist for Guys and St Thomas in the Haematology Department, and also for Brent Mind, co-ordinating the workshop Kidstime. She enjoys any sort of yoga, and tending to her tomato plants.

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