

***BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE
POLITICIANS***

WHY VOTERS KEEP BUYING TICKETS TO THE POLITICAL
THEATRE THEY CLAIM TO DESPISE

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SUMMARY

BRITISH POLITICS HAS BECOME a long-running play in which the cast changes, but the plot rarely does. Politicians sell the comforting illusion that they can fix what is broken; voters believe the pitch, boo when the promised transformation fails to materialise, then return for the sequel, hoping the next cast will finally make the script work.

This essay argues that the blame cannot stop with vain, glib or incompetent politicians. The more uncomfortable truth is that the electorate helps sustain the show. It rewards simple stories, reassuring villains, confident promises and the fantasy that the next leader will finally possess the magic touch.

That does not mean voters are stupid, despite much of the evidence suggesting they are. Most are busy, tired, tribal, short of time and operating with limited information in a political environment designed to simplify, excite and manipulate. They use shortcuts because politics is too complicated to follow properly. They seek certainty because uncertainty is exhausting. They are drawn to stories because stories turn a tangled system of trade-offs, constraints and unintended consequences into something easier to grasp: heroes, villains, causes and cures.

The result is a democracy trapped between resentment and resignation. Voters punish one set of performers, elevate another, then rediscover the same limits, evasions and disappointments. The theatre continues because the audience still attends. But Britain's creditors may not remain so patient. That is where the next essay begins.

HOPE, POPCORN AND WESTMINSTER

In *Goodbye Trust* I explained why I had lost interest in UK politics. No – it's worse than that: I've developed a crushing boredom about the whole Westminster production. I am forced to pay eye-watering tax. My day-to-day life is still governed by their rules. Yet when friends ask what I think about XYZ politician or the fuss over ABC legislation, my eyes glaze over as if I've been lightly tranquillised.

Give me the shenanigans of American politics and I'm brimming with opinions. China's demographic time-bomb? I can bore you for hours. But the UK government's latest pledge to do something about something? Blank face. Shrug. If the words ever had substance, they will dissolve by tomorrow.

When I do pay attention, it's mainly for entertainment value. I watch politicians the way you watch a reality show you claim to despise: to enjoy the daft comments and outlandish behaviour. Somewhere along the line I swapped hope for popcorn. Whether that's age, the

pandemic, social media, or simply the cumulative effect of watching promise after promise dissolve without a trace, I'm not entirely sure.

I came to a simple conclusion: politics has become showbiz. Not just slicker than it used to be, but theatrical in the full sense – actors, scripts, props, and an audience pretending not to know how the story ends. The longest-running production is Prime Minister's Questions: a weekly half-hour comedy in which questions and answers rarely meet, and the real scoring system is indignation, voice projection, and the quality of the put-down line.

The trouble is that beneath the theatre sits a more serious problem. Politicians have far less power and influence than voters believe. Modern states are vast machines constrained by civil servants, regulators, courts and international authorities. And then there is the inconvenience of economic and political reality that keeps returning and demanding attention. Yet politicians must act as if they control everything and 'can right all the world's wrongs.' When results fail to appear, rhetoric fills the gap. The show must go on.

And here's the uncomfortable bit: we are part of it. Our democratic participation often amounts to a few minutes in a polling booth every few years – much less effort than the weekly shop – followed by surprise when the next performance looks suspiciously like the last. I joked that I would keep attending the political theatre, but only for comedies. When Labour took power, I assumed the first act would be solemn before drifting into farce. I didn't expect the comedy to start on day one.

A NEW CAST, SAME OLD COMEDY SHOW

Lord Waheed Alli (Baron Alli) got the ball rolling by treating the new administration like a particularly generous wedding guest, showering Starmer and a clutch of ministers with gifts and ensuring the government's first real storyline wasn't 'national renewal' so much as 'who got the biggest goodie bag?'

Then came Sue Gray: the woman who was supposed to know exactly how Whitehall works, where all the bodies are buried, and which levers do something. She didn't last long enough to redecorate her office. And once she'd gone, the cast list started to wobble.

Ministerial CVs, previously read aloud with the solemnity of scripture, began to unravel under media scrutiny. It turned out a few careers had been described with... let's call it enthusiasm. 'Led major national programme' translated, in some cases, as 'attended two meetings and once helped serve the coffee.'

After that, the government reached for the big, grown-up 'we're in charge now' moment: the budget. Unfortunately, it landed like a damp firework: loud, smoky, and mostly remembered for the smell. And then the resignations began, as they always do, with howls of 'not wanting to be the story' and other gibberish to detract from their wrongdoings.

Eighteen months in, the 'grown-ups are back' slogan became the political joke of the year. Since the 2024 election, ministers had been resigning with weary regularity. Some walked on principle; others to avoid being a 'distraction'. The Cabinet started to resemble an airport departure: last calls, teary goodbyes, someone forgetting their luggage.

Then the theatre critics got their hit: leaked files, whispered scandals, and decisions that became the story that ate the government. The Westminster media machine went into overdrive, asking the usual question: how long has he got, and who gets the next starring role?

BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE POLITICIANS

The only reliable constant is that Labour's numbers kept sliding, and every 'firm decision' ripened, bruised, and was quietly swapped out the moment the markets – or the backbenches – cleared their throats.

There's been more farce in the supporting cast: attempts to delay local elections followed by rapid U-turns after legal advice, leaving councils scrambling, printers overheating, and everyone delivering heartfelt speeches about democracy while quietly calculating the bill.

And then there's the sort of press-freedom-and-ethics row that makes everyone feel grubby: allegations, investigations, and another minister edging toward the exit with a cardboard box.

Even Whitehall joined the performance. Senior appointments arrived with fanfare and almost immediately acquired backstories that sounded like rejected television scripts. Reports of missing documents and institutional manoeuvring emerged within days. The wisdom of these decisions was then questioned in exactly the way you'd expect: loudly, anonymously, and with a tone of theatrical concern.

Trump treats him as a useless idiot for borrowing the lines from *Love Actually* and getting them wrong. Even the Epstein saga engulfs the Labour government as it attempts and fails to distance itself from the appointment of the Prince of Darkness (Peter Mandelson), before shamelessly blaming a hapless civil servant for his appointment. The stench of decay pervades Starmer's government.

As I write, my news feed keeps announcing some new turn in the political turmoil, as Keir Starmer's fate is debated for the zillionth time. Who will replace him, and when? Will they take the UK back into the EU? Will they "turn back Thatcherism"? Will they make the sun shine every day? *That last promise was mine.* UK Ltd is going to spend the next couple of months in stasis while a motley group of wannabe prime ministers pitch themselves to their supporters, to Labour MPs, and maybe, eventually, to the poor saps otherwise known as the electorate.

As Labour convulses into warring factions, we get to meet the new stars of the post-disappointment era.

On the right: Nigel Farage, still doing what Farage does best – performing. In *Goodbye Trust* I wrote about the stage props: the pint of beer, the simple symbols, the ability to make the unbelievable believable. Reform has become a bolt hole for disgruntled Tories who think defecting is their best chance of resurrecting their careers.

On the left: Zack Polanski, a former actor and media-friendly communicator who won the Green Party leadership in a landslide with a vision framed as 'eco-populism'. Full of slogans – 'make the rich pay', 'legalise drugs', 'make the world more equal' – his soundbites appeal neatly to the young with their nanosecond attention spans and rapidly depreciating credentials.

The left and the right have skipped the phase of being serious politicians and gone straight to performance roles. Who cares what their policies are? A ragbag of platitudes that dissolve on contact with analysis.

And this is where the showbiz thesis meets the essay's central theme.

We have a disappointed electorate, sick of broken services and broken promises, watching yet another serious government wobble through scandal and resignations. Alongside it, we have alternatives led by figures who are, by design, performers. They are not selling a

detailed instruction manual for running the state; they are selling a story in which the villains are obvious, the solutions are simple, and the hero is waiting in the wings. They assume their supporters are economically illiterate and are rarely disappointed.

Which raises the uncomfortable question. If the electorate keeps making the same mistake – keeps electing people who invariably disappoint – should we blame the politicians... or the voters' willingness to believe the fairytale that next time it'll all be different?

THE FAIRYTALE WE KEEP BUYING

If politics is showbiz, the awkward truth isn't that politicians perform. It's that we keep buying tickets. We complain about the theatre, then reward whoever delivers the best show: the funniest story, the sharpest villain, the most confident promise.

So the problem isn't only that politicians oversell. It's that the electorate wants to be sold to and repeatedly accepts being disappointed.

In *Goodbye Trust*, I described our reluctance to abandon this fairytale: the belief that somewhere there must be competent politicians who will take care of us. When each lot disappoints, we convince ourselves the next bunch might be better. That isn't one election. It's the habit that keeps the whole industry alive.

The competence myth

Every fairytale needs magic. Ours is the magic of anointment.

We take ordinary people – often very ordinary people – and elevate them with our vote. Then we pretend the elevation changes what they are. The Member of Parliament and Minister titles become a magic spell. Their appointment to office becomes proof of expertise.

This is why we can watch someone walk into a department they've never run, speak in a confident tone within days, and treat that confidence as competence. It's why we hear 'I will fix it' about problems that are obviously tangled in law, markets, institutions and time and experience it as comforting balm rather than a ridiculous promise.

The anointment myth does two jobs at once. It flatters the politician ('you are exceptional') and soothes the voter ('someone is in control'). It avoids the more uncomfortable truth: most leaders are as limited as we are, in many cases far more limited, and their jobs are probably impossible.

Why the fairytale is useful

The fairytale persists because it turns anxiety into hope.

Most people can live with disappointment; helplessness is harder. The story 'this time we'll get someone competent' takes the hum of dread – rising prices, failing services, unstable jobs, wars, technological upheaval – and turns it into something you can hold. The ballot becomes a ritual of relief: a small, periodic moment where fear is converted into agency.

It turns complexity into casting. Real politics is trade-offs, delays, unintended consequences and constraints. That is cognitively exhausting. The fairytale reduces the mess to a decision our brain can handle: pick the hero.

BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE POLITICIANS

And it turns the voter into a consumer. If politics is a market, you don't need to understand why Brand X failed; you simply switch to Brand Y. That posture has a huge psychological advantage: it keeps you innocent. As a consumer, you experience disappointment. Your only responsibility is to choose again.

How the fairytale is packaged

Election night is the product launch. Studio lights, slick graphics, pundits in launch mode. The numbers drop; the room reacts as if a new iPhone has been unveiled. At party HQ, celebrations turn raucous – cheers, hugs, confetti everywhere. At the losing HQ, people drift away quickly, the room thinning by the minute, plates of cold chicken and limp prawns to be abandoned to their fate.

Manifestos are trailers. Two minutes of promises, a combination of 'bold' and 'world-leading' headlines, villains clearly identified and labelled, happy endings where everybody is a winner, described and presented with beaming multi-ethnic montages. Implementation and trade-offs sit in the small print like legal disclaimers.

The victory speech is a redemption arc. The country is 'broken'; tomorrow starts the rebuild. There's always humility, always 'hard work', always 'service'. We applaud the first line as if it were already proof.

Taken together, these rituals do something clever: they give us a fresh start without requiring us to learn anything. Every few years we get to pretend the last season doesn't count. The franchise is rebooted; the cast is swapped; the plot is reset.

Collusion

This is where the blame gets uncomfortable.

Politicians overpromise because it works. We reward certainty and punish honesty. Anyone who talks about constraints, delays or uncertainty is branded weak. Anyone who offers a clean narrative and a simple fix gets attention, belief and votes.

Then reality refuses to follow the script, and we call it betrayal.

So, who is the fool in this story? Politicians keep using the same script because we, the audience, keep buying it.

IS THE ELECTORATE STUPID, BUSY, OR JUST HUMAN?

After every election, a familiar frustration bubbles up: the electorate must be stupid. It's rarely said with malice. More often it's exhaustion with people looking at the result and wondering how this keeps happening.

It's a tempting diagnosis because it's tidy. One word. One culprit. No further questions.

But 'stupid' is usually a shorthand for something messier: limited time, imperfect information, tribal loyalty, fear of change, distrust of everyone on offer, and the awkward fact that most elections are choices between options you didn't want.

So yes: ask the question. Just don't turn it into an insult. An insult lets the political parties, the media ecosystem and the incentives of the system off the hook and it lets the rest of us pretend we're not in the same boat.

Too little time: politics as background noise

The simplest answer is the least flattering to political obsessives: most people have more important things to do and find the day-to-day shenanigans of political discourse monumentally boring.

Politics competes with balancing finances, childcare, deadlines, bad knees, the WhatsApp group that won't shut up, and the low-grade anxiety of modern life. It's not that citizens don't care. It's that caring doesn't create time.

So, people do what busy humans always do: they triage. Politics becomes background noise only noticed when it gets loud, ignored when it's humming.

Too easily pleased: the sugar rush of certainty

Time pressure doesn't just reduce how much information people consume. It changes what they can tolerate.

Complexity is exhausting. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. 'It depends' is intellectually honest but psychologically useless when you're already stretched. Under those conditions, clarity feels like competence.

This is why voters are drawn to simple, crisp promises. Not because they are stupid, but because certainty is comforting and easy to understand.

Too little seriousness: token democracy

We like to say we live in a democracy, but most of us practise something closer to token democracy. We vote occasionally, then outsource the hard work of governing to people we don't know, in systems we don't understand. When things go wrong, we complain, often loudly, rarely constructively.

In most areas of life, good outcomes require sustained involvement. In politics, we disengage for years at a time and then act surprised when the machine fails.

Cognitive shortcuts

Even when people do pay attention, they lack the time or tools to evaluate competence properly. So they look for patterns that are invariably wrong. Fluency becomes knowledge. Confidence becomes correctness. Familiarity becomes trust. Charisma becomes competence.

In a system where real outcomes are slow and complex, we cling to these mental shortcuts.

FACT FREE UNDERSTANDING

There is another uncomfortable layer beneath all this. Voters are not only short of time and dependent on shortcuts. They are often missing some of the basic facts needed to judge the performance of the country they are being asked to govern, however indirectly, through the ballot box.

BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE POLITICIANS

An April 2026 report by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) and Freshwater Strategy contains some interesting observations. The British public has a poor factual map of the economy it is so angry about. People know something is wrong. They feel it in prices, wages, rents, services and the general sourness of national life. But many do not know, with any precision, what has gone wrong, how Britain compares with other countries, or what economic growth means.

The report found that 65% of voters rated the UK economy as poor, while 46% believed it was contracting. So this is not a complacent public. The electorate can sense decline. But when asked about Britain's relative position, voters badly overestimated the country's standing. They tended to think the average person in Britain was as rich as, or richer than, people in countries such as the United States, Switzerland, Singapore, Germany and Australia. In reality, Britain sits well behind those countries on GDP per head. The report's most brutal comparison was with America: respondents, on average, placed the UK ahead of most US states. The fact is, the UK ranks below every single US state.

That is not a small factual error. It is a whole mistaken picture of national performance. If voters think Britain is still near the top of the rich-world league, then political argument takes place inside a fantasy. Decline becomes harder to explain. Trade-offs feel less necessary. Hard choices sound like ideological cruelty rather than the consequence of long economic under-performance.

The misunderstanding runs deeper than international comparison. The same report found that many voters struggle to explain what GDP growth means. Asked what "GDP growth" meant, most people struggled to explain it. In focus groups, people associated growing the economy with more tax, more inflation, more money flowing around, or more government spending, rather than the less glamorous machinery of productivity, investment, competition, business formation and output per worker. This matters because a voter who cannot distinguish growth from government activity is easily sold the idea that any energetic-looking state intervention is an economic strategy.

There is a similar confusion about business. The public likes small businesses and entrepreneurs but often views larger companies as exploitative. The report found that voters significantly overestimate profit margins across the economy, especially in sectors such as utilities, energy and groceries. That misconception has political consequences. If people imagine that firms are sitting on vast excess profits, then the argument for lower taxes, cheaper energy, lighter regulation or better investment conditions sounds like special pleading for the already rich. The link between business investment, productivity, wages and living standards disappears from view.

The most revealing finding is the contradiction at the heart of public opinion. Voters strongly support growth. They also support lower energy costs, lower taxes and less red tape as ways to encourage it. Yet they also favour many state-led answers: more public investment, redistribution and government direction. They distrust politicians and blame government failure, but still instinctively look to the state to fix the economy. The report calls this a 'kitchen sink' attitude. That phrase is exactly right. It is not a coherent economic worldview. It is frustration throwing everything at the wall and hoping something works.

This does not mean the electorate is stupid. It means something more difficult for democracy. The public can be emotionally right and analytically wrong at the same time. It can feel

stagnation before it understands stagnation. It can know that the country is not working while misreading why it is not working. It can demand growth while resisting the conditions that might produce it. It can blame politicians for failure while rewarding the political language that makes failure more likely.

That is where the fairytale becomes so resilient. A voter who does not know how far Britain has fallen, does not understand the mechanisms of growth, overestimates corporate profits and distrusts almost every institution is not well placed to evaluate a serious programme of national repair. Under those conditions, performance has an obvious advantage over explanation. The politician who says, 'they have stolen your future and I will give it back' will usually beat the politician who says 'your living standards depend on productivity growth, capital deepening, planning reform, energy costs, labour-market incentives and institutional competence'.

The first version is a story. The second is probably nearer the truth. Democracy has always preferred stories.

Tribal comfort

For many people, voting isn't primarily about solving problems. It's about expressing identity, standing alongside your own side, sticking two fingers up to those you are against, and rarely about what will work.

Tribal voting reduces uncertainty, providing the comfort of belonging with like-minded people who are equally unable to distinguish up from down. It gives you a ready-made explanation for why things are broken and who broke them. Once politics becomes identity, disagreement becomes threat. Changing your mind feels like betrayal.

That isn't stupidity, it's being a messy, fallible human.

So... stupid, busy, or human?

If you want a neat answer: the electorate is not stupid in the way the insult implies. It is busy, it is cognitively limited (yes, I am being kind with my words), it is emotionally motivated, and it is tribal, which is to say it is human.

Because a democracy built on an exhausted, distracted, identity-driven electorate will reliably produce exhausted, distracted, identity-driven politics. Do citizens deserve contempt? No, they don't; they are just part of the huge delusion. Just as MPs are anointed, so are voters, for those few seconds that they make their cross on the voting paper, with insights and intelligence few possess.

I WASN'T THE FIRST PERSON TO ASK THIS

When I first started thinking 'perhaps the electorate is part of the problem', I assumed I'd invented a uniquely dreadful thought. It felt impolite. Anti-democratic. The sort of thing you mutter and then immediately check whether anyone heard you.

It turns out this dreadful thought has a long pedigree.

There is, in effect, a slightly awkward support group stretching back a couple of thousand

BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE POLITICIANS

years, populated by people who have looked at democracy and quietly wondered whether crowds are always the best decision-makers.

The Greeks, who invented democracy, almost immediately became suspicious of it. Plato watched Athens vote itself into trouble and concluded that letting the masses rule was like letting passengers vote on how to steer a ship. The problem wasn't that people were malicious; it was that they were 'impressionable'. A good speech could outweigh a good argument. The demagogue was always waiting in the wings.

Aristotle was more sympathetic but still cautious. He thought democracy could decay into mob rule if it lost its respect for law and balance. Stability required restraint; crowds, by definition, are not known for restraint.

By the time we reach Rome, the tone becomes more cynical. Juvenal's phrase 'bread and circuses' captured the idea that a population could be pacified with entertainment and basic provisions. The crowd does not necessarily demand good governance; it demands distraction.

Fast forward to the Enlightenment and the tone softens but the concern remains. Madison worried about factions – groups driven by passion rather than reason. Tocqueville admired democracy but feared the 'tyranny of the majority' – the way opinion could flatten nuance and pressure people into conformity.

Then comes the modern period, where the problem becomes more psychological than structural.

Walter Lippmann argued that citizens do not experience the world directly; they respond to simplified 'pictures in their heads'. Public opinion, in this sense, is shaped less by facts than by narratives.

Joseph Schumpeter went further, stripping democracy of its romantic gloss. In his view, democracy is not rule by the people but competition between elites for votes. Citizens do not govern; they choose who will govern. Their role is intermittent, limited, and largely passive.

Modern political science adds a further twist: rational ignorance. The cost of becoming fully informed is high, and the impact of one vote is negligible. So most voters rationally choose not to invest heavily in understanding the detail.

Another line of thinking suggests that voting is not primarily instrumental (choosing the best outcome) but expressive (signalling identity). The ballot becomes a badge. You vote to say who you are, not to optimise policy.

Then television arrives and changes the tone again. Neil Postman's argument that we are 'amusing ourselves to death' applies as much to politics as to entertainment. Complex argument struggles in a medium designed for brevity, emotion and visual impact. The telegenic candidate gains an advantage over the competent administrator.

And then, finally, the digital age industrialises the whole process. Social media does not invent performative politics; it amplifies it. Algorithms reward outrage, speed, clarity and emotional charge. Nuance sinks. Hesitation disappears. Confidence succeeds.

When you put all this together, the conclusion is not that democracy is broken; it is that it has always contained a tension between wisdom and will, between performance and prudence, between what feels good to vote for and what works slowly in practice.

The suspicion that the electorate might be part of the problem is not a modern heresy. It is a recurring observation.

RESENTFUL, RESIGNED, OR BOTH?

Across Western democracies voters are quicker to punish incumbents, less loyal to parties and more willing to flirt with movements that define themselves against the whole political class. On one reading, this looks healthy: a public withdrawing consent from parties that have long ceased to deserve it. On another, it looks more troubling. Protest is not the same thing as direction. A voter can be entirely certain that the present arrangement has failed and still have no settled idea of what ought to replace it. Anger has energy, but energy is not a plan.

At the same time, the deeper mood does not feel especially hopeful. Trust in politicians, parties and institutions has been ebbing for so long that 'they're all the same' now passes for common sense rather than cynicism. People still react strongly to scandals and failures, but the reaction often has the character of an outburst rather than a commitment to change. Politics arrives in bursts: a spike of outrage, a few days of certainty, then a return to indifference or fatigue. Social media intensifies the impression of constant engagement, though much of what it produces is not participation but bursts of digital agitation.

Governments inherit mandates that are ill-defined at the start and brittle soon after, while oppositions learn that they can harvest discontent without clarifying very much at all. Politicians are not rewarded for becoming more honest; excelling at the theatrics garners much more applause. If the electorate is impatient, suspicious and only intermittently attentive, then the rational response of politicians is to communicate in larger gestures and sharper emotional contrasts. A public that no longer believes very much can still be made to keep attending. The performers hear the boos, certainly, but they also see the receipts. The audience keeps buying tickets.

HOW SILLY CAN IT GET?

The likely danger is not some melodramatic collapse into obvious tyranny. Democratic decline in advanced states is less dramatic than that. It looks more like a gradual surrender to entertainment logic, a political culture learning from the media environment that surrounds it. If seriousness does not hold attention, seriousness is downgraded. If spectacle works more than competence, spectacle is what parties, pundits and governments will learn to produce.

In that world, the basic unit of politics is no longer a policy but a clip. The question is not first 'will this work?' but 'will this land?' Can it be turned into a line, an image, a confrontation, a moment of instant legibility? Can it survive the journey from briefing paper to headline to social media extract without losing its emotional charge? Real governing, unfortunately, is not built for that sort of translation. The hardest decisions are technical, delayed, compromised and ugly in presentation. They ask the public to accept uncertainty, waiting and partial success. Entertainment logic asks for the opposite. It wants instant effect, visible conflict and endings that can be brokered in advance.

Once that logic takes hold, outrage stops being a malfunction and becomes the main fuel. Every problem must arrive as a crisis because that commands attention. Every opponent must become a villain because the choices are simplified. Every announcement must be sold as decisive because ambiguity loses attention and votes. Under such conditions, solutions are

BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE POLITICIANS

oddly inconvenient. A problem that is genuinely resolved disappears from the story. A problem that can be repeatedly dramatised remains politically useful.

This helps explain the surreal quality of so much modern public life. Major infrastructure projects are announced, reviewed, delayed, redesigned, revived and abandoned with the rhythm of a long-running DC franchise. The bridge, the runway, the railway, the hospital programme, the housing target: each becomes less a practical question than a recurring plot device. Years are spent producing atmospherics around delivery while delivery itself recedes. Farce deepens, not because government stops mattering, but because the symbolic layer of politics becomes increasingly detached from the administrative one. The state still taxes, regulates, prosecutes and spends. Its political class simply speaks about those powers in a language better suited to publicity than reality.

None of this means politicians cease making serious decisions. Budgets still hurt, borders still remain open, hospitals still malfunction and wars still impose pain. The point is subtler, and perhaps worse. Seriousness is not abolished, only displaced. Decisions are made inside systems too complicated for public performance, while the visible surface becomes louder and more manipulative. Citizens are left with the spectacle and asked to mistake it for control.

WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE ELECTORATE?

It is tempting to end here by declaring the electorate the problem, end of story. The appeal of that move is obvious. It is neat, bracing and apparently unsentimental. Yet it risks becoming another fairytale, this time for people who pride themselves on not believing fairytales. The electorate is not a cartoon of stupidity. Most voters are navigating lives in which politics competes with work, money, children, illness, fatigue and the ordinary administrative burden of staying afloat. They operate with limited time, partial information and very little direct influence. Under these conditions, they do what human beings always do in complex environments: they simplify, they rely on cues, they follow trusted identities and they choose narratives that make reality easier to grasp.

What has changed is less human nature than the environment in which human nature now operates. Information comes faster, in smaller units and under greater emotional pressure. Attention is competed for minute by minute. Performance is highly visible, competence often opaque. The politician who speaks with clean certainty is easier to process than the one who speaks truthfully about constraints. The story that divides the world into heroes and saboteurs is easier to carry than the one that admits trade-offs, delay and disappointment. In such a climate, the electorate is not irrational to respond to atmosphere, identity and tone. It is responding to the conditions in which judgment now has to occur.

Still, that is not the same thing as innocence. Democratic systems are shaped not only by formal institutions but by the tastes, tolerances and habits of the people moving through them. Politicians adapt to incentives. So do broadcasters, activists and party machines. If a public rewards overstatement, overstatement will multiply. If it punishes hesitation more severely than deception, deception will become the safer bet. No conspiracy is required, feedback is fast and decisive. The electorate is not the sole cause of political degradation, but it is one of the forces that makes that degradation rational.

There is a further discomfort. Even if voters suddenly demanded honesty, realism and administrative competence, it is far from obvious that the system could consistently provide them. Modern states are immense, entangled arrangements subject to law, markets, bureaucracy, global events and plain institutional inertia. The distance between promise and outcome is often structural rather than moral. A politician can mislead, certainly, but he can also fail while trying. We keep wanting leaders who can master complexity on our behalf, when the truer picture is that complexity masters almost everyone.

That is why blaming politicians alone is too flattering to the rest of us. It allows the electorate to imagine that it stands outside the culture it is criticising, as though manipulative politics were something imposed on an innocent public from above. It is not. Politicians exploit appetites that already exist: the appetite for reassurance, for moral simplification, for the pleasant fiction that somebody else can take charge of the mess and make it legible. They perform because performance works. They overpromise because realism rarely wins applause. They offer heroes and villains because electorates, like audiences everywhere, prefer plots to processes.

To blame the electorate is not to despise it. Contempt is useless here. It explains nothing and excuses too much. Not every illusion is forced on us. Some are embraced because they make disappointment easier to survive. We say we want honesty, then recoil from honest descriptions of limits. We say we want grown-ups, then reward performers who make constraint sound optional. We denounce political theatre after each production, then return for the next opening night convinced that this time the cast may redeem the script.

If anything is likely to change, it will not begin with better slogans, or even better politicians. It would begin with a less flattering public appetite: more tolerance for boredom, more patience with trade-offs, more suspicion of anyone who sounds too sure and less desire to be soothed by the old fairytale of competence. That is a demanding standard because it asks the electorate to give up pleasures that democratic culture now supplies in abundance. Outrage and certainty are pleasurable as is the fantasy of a decisive leader who can cut through the mess. Serious politics, by contrast, is often drab, partial and slow, offering few emotional rewards and a heap of frustration.

Which is why I do not expect the show to close. The cast will change. The branding will change. New insurgents will present themselves as enemies of the stage while mastering its techniques almost immediately. Voters will punish one set of performers and elevate another. Commentators will describe this as renewal. Then the same old collision will return: extravagant promise meeting stubborn reality, followed by disillusion, accusation and the search for fresh faces. We will call it betrayal, when it's boring old repetition.

So yes, blame the politicians where blame is due. Many are vain, glib, cowardly and absurd. But do not stop there. The more uncomfortable truth is that our politics looks this way because it fits the electorate that sustains it: distracted, anxious, intermittently furious, hungry for reassurance and longing for a captivating performance. Until that changes, the theatre will continue. We will keep mistaking the next production for an escape from the last one. And despite the boos, the box office will remain open.

But not forever. The show continues because, for now, the people who finance it allow the lights to stay on. Britain can keep staging the farce only while its lenders are willing to buy the tickets, extend the credit and pretend the building is still sound.

BLAME THE ELECTORATE, NOT THE POLITICIANS

Their patience is not infinite. At some point, the backers will stop applauding, close the box office and decide the whole production needs to be moved to cheaper premises. That is the subject of the next essay, *Five Days*: what happens when the audience is still arguing about the performance, but the creditors finally stop watching, stand up, and decide the farce has become too expensive to keep funding.