[Politics by Numbers](#)
by Simon Belt

Because of their potentially volatile and confrontational character, many pubs, clubs and family do's used to have a rule of thumb to *never to talk about Politics, Religion or Football*. Of course everyone did talk about them because they were the more interesting subjects, and they represented something meaningful if things were becoming pedestrian conversationally. These subjects can more often than not be the safe options these days. So what's happened to gut these topics of their power to excite the emotions?

Being a Leeds United fan used to guarantee digust or at least respect from other football fans, but given that football has been been invited into the parlour from the backstreets these days, it's not the game it used to be. Religion is also not a cause for consternation, and if anything it's more often than not a belief likely to solicit sympathy if not bewilderment from a largely secular and disbeliving society. Politics is most definitely not what it used to be, with the '*you can't say that*' sentiment tending to come from the traditionally liberal rather than conservative groupings. So what's led to the narrowing of differences and reversal of traditional approaches in politics?

The Brexit vote is a good way to illuminate the way that principles seem to be less important as immediate and personal machinations. The referendum on whether the UK should leave the political institutions of the EU came about in the first instance through a growing tide of hostility to the distancing of politics from the electorate, and imposition of formally liberal policies on society. A series of policy inpositions from the smoking ban to gay marriages, that were not part of flagship manifesto commitments were discussed by a political elite at a distance from the populace who found themselves being the instrument of these changes. David Cameron and a new layer of Conservatives were at the forefront of bringing forward these changes, partly to redefine the Tories from the tag of nasty party to being metroplitan and forward thinking, free from the constraints of tradition.

Going over the heads of voters to decide policy that may or may not be popular will eventually fuel a resentment that comes back and bites you in the bum. As all the mainstream political parties were playing the game of doing things *to* the electorate rather than *for* them, the electorate were always likely to find an outlet to try and put themselves back in the game. Step forward UKIP who weren't part of the Westminster and Brussels love-in, in fact UKIP's single minded pitch to the electorate was to oppose the alienating process of politics behind the closed EU doors. Polling significant support, it posed an existential threat to Cameron's re-election chances, so he conceded the referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU. It's worth noting that involving the electorate in such an important decision was opposed by the traditional liberal parties of Labour and the Liberals. And so the electorate, with the Brexit vote, are now back in the game.

All familiar territory, but what is stark about politics today is the almost universal lack of principles. Elections are very interesting, and the referendum on whether the UK should be maintain membership of the EU really does bring home a lot of important trends in ***politics by numbers***
rather than principles. Once Cameron made the manifesto pledge to hold a referendum, the

re-election of the Conservatives was a very likely outcome, and because both Labour and Liberal parties didn't want to allow the electorate the franchise on such an imporatnt issue, when the Tories were re-elected to offer the referendum they found themselves between a rock and a hard place. And how they've wriggled since.

Not wanting to appear completely out of kilter with the electorate, and unable to muster any conviction that they rather than the electorate should make the decision on the UK's membership of the EU, MPs voted 6 to 1 to have the referendum. At no stage in the saga of getting to vote on our membership of the EU was there anything like a principled stance, except for a few MPs who stand head and shoulders about the rest - and on the UK not being in the EU, UKIP. What a sad state of affairs when politics today is all about a numbers game of trying to protect individual careers rather than campaign around a principle - and one that allows the likes of UKIP to look credible when alongside the rest.

What has been really galling is the way in which the decision made by the electorate to leave the EU has been picked apart, initially by alleging that the electorate just weren't up to the task because they believed the wrong facts, weren't capable of understanding facts because they were too emotional - and when these didn't carry any sway, that the electorate could be sliced and diced to deliver the facts more suited to career politicians looking out for themselves! The retrospective demand for Parliament to decide on leaving the EU (triggering Article 50), presented as a matter of democracy by the Remain camp (who'd showed little regard for Parliament's diminishing role beforehand), was galling, but the most ridiculous part was the way many Remain MPs used the numbers of votes on a constituency by constituency basis to justify voting against the triggering of Article 50.

There is a serious problem in politics today with all this talk of fake news, post truth, 'my constituents' etc, whereby conviction and campaigning around principles is seen as the action of bigots and not as refined or flexible as the politics of the moment. Identity and partial

marshalling of facts that can be verified in isolation and of context spur on regional or nationalist campaigns like in Scotland with the SNP or Northern Ireland with Sinn Fein. The denigration of religion, so apparent in Cameron's campaign to open up marriage to include same sex couples, is not the actions of an enlightened liberal, or our educated betters, but part of a wider denigration of principle. We need to regain the languague and conviction of principle, by working through a coherent set of values to organise society by, and argue for those publicly to win over support for them. This won't be done by slicing the electorate into a number set that justifies a career choice of particular politicians at any given moment, figuratively or literally.