

CEPaLS 17: While I was watching Master Chef

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This text was originally posted on my Tumblr blog on 29th April 2017. The blog is now deleted, and so I am presenting it as a CEPaLS paper.

While I was watching Master Chef last evening I realized I have some views about this programme and that got me thinking about the current General Election campaign.

I have been watching Master Chef since it began in 1990, and I like it very much. It exemplifies expertise. I can recognize people who know, like and do really interesting things with food in ways that are inspiring. This is evident from the presenters, the guest chefs, and the staff in the professional kitchens. But importantly it demonstrates the importance of good teaching. A lot of the professional chefs in the studio, at the lunch table and in the kitchen are really good teachers. I also like to see the contestants learning, grasping new skills, taking risks with their ideas - even when sometimes they don't quite get a dish correct.

There are things I want to raise some questions about. Why does some of the meat that is praised as well cooked actually look like it is an electric shock away from walking off the plate? Why are there no vegan cooks on the show? Why is there no requirement to make gluten free food? And why does the way the food is responded to sometimes look more like a test of class dispositions? Why is 'restaurant standard' based on a particular 'type' of restaurant?

These are all matters that I have a reflexive view about even though I have never tasted the food! But what I did do is to bring my knowledge and experience to this programme when it first started, and I have continued to learn over nearly thirty years. My judgement about Master Chef has been subjected to review and development over time, and when this series ends I will be looking forward to learning afresh in 2018.

Are these views opinions?

Is it ok to have an opinion about Master Chef?

To have an opinion is to exercise judgement based on beliefs rather than evidence.

I ask this because in my everyday life I have experienced views about matters where in raising a range of alternative standpoints with facts and knowledge, the reply has been: I have a right to have an opinion. This happened once in the EU referendum campaign where in providing a range of different views and evidence the person told me: I have a right to an opinion. The second one was where someone in the US told me that they would flick the switch to execute a child murderer, and when I provided different ideas and evidence, then again I was told: I have a right to an opinion.

I agreed with the two people that they have a right to an opinion but not about the vote in the referendum or over the life and death of those found guilty of murder. But I also said that there are some issues that are too important to have an opinion about. The EU referendum and issues of legal punishment are examples of how we as citizens need to exercise judgement rather than have an opinion.

What particularly troubled me about 'I have a right to an opinion' is that it was used to pull the shutter down on any further discussion. It was used to defend a position, and to deny exchanges of views, and challenges to thinking. Both people were not prepared to learn from the relational encounter, and both people were not prepared to engage with a fellow citizen who was in effect seeking to teach them something new. Having a right to an opinion was all that seemed to matter, where there was no duty to test that opinion with new information and

ideas. Silencing is deeply worrying.

So in the coming UK general election we should make our minds up based on something more than an opinion, and when we hear another viewpoint we should not set out to silence based on a 'right' not to think. A danger is that we could confuse watching the party leaders in a TV debate with watching TV in a general sense. If you learn that being in the world is about having an opinion in the every-dayness of TV watching, and that political opinion is essentially the same, then the important issues of the day will not be tested.

But at the same time we should be respectful of those who enter and compete on TV programmes such as Master Chef as they also deserve something more than opinion. I have learned to learn about food from watching Master Chef, and importantly I think my critical skills about the technology of food production along with issues of social justice have also developed. These are transferable skills into wider issues within civil society and so watching Master Chef could be a helpful teachable moment for how we think about issues, ideas and who we are as a nation. At the same time by thinking politically outside of TV viewing I have also been able to watch Master Chef in new and interesting ways, and it has enriched how I think about the vitality of civil society.

What I am getting at here is the need for thoughtful voting.

Readers of my blog will know that I am concerned about the policy to expand grammar schools in England. The current Conservative policy is not based on evidence but on private opinions. Today I read an article that Headteachers are opposing the planned investment in grammar schools because there is no evidence to support such large-scale investment of public money. See the following:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-39735255>

So while I was watching Master Chef last night the first full week of the general election was coming to an end, where there is an educational imperative for all: our schools are being taken away from us. This is not an opinion but is based on research. So if what I have communicated in my blogs about this policy is challenging then please ask questions, seek understanding, and provide those who are campaigning for the comprehensive school with other evidence and ideas.

I do not have a right to an opinion about grammar schools, but I have a duty to exercise thoughtful voting about the education policies laid out in the party manifestos.

If you wish to reference this paper:

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