Contents

1.1   *The Nature of Consensus*

This discussion might initially be described as an extension of earlier discussions within *website-2* related to *politics*, *economics*, *population*, *climate change* and *human perspective*. Further implications were then raised in another discussion entitled '*Brave New Worlds*' that made reference to Aldous Huxley's 1931 novel. This discussion also produced the diagram right to represent a framework in which to discuss the complexity of issues affecting the modern world. However, it will now be argued that this diagram can also be used to reflect the scope of the problems of trying to forge any consensus on any of the issues raised. For in a wider context, Huxley's original novel could be interpreted as either a futurist utopia or dystopian nightmare depending on your *worldview* and your position within such a society, i.e. whether you are a winner or loser in the current system. However, as indicated, it also raises the issue of whether there can be any real consensus of opinion by which society might choose a path into the future. As such, this discussion will attempt to consider the nature, and possibly limits, of any collective consensus.
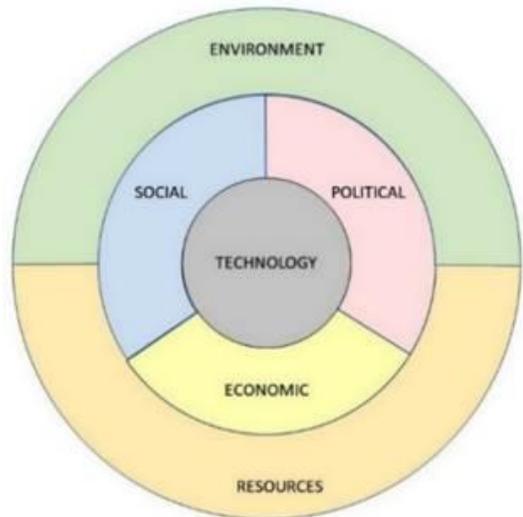
How might this issue be reviewed?

Well, as a starting point, we may need to consider the conceptual *idea* of any consensus, which then raises the issue of the *scope* of any opinion within a broad *framework* of political and economic ideologies. However, while there may be an idealised perception of consensus, which collective society might used to guide its decisions; consideration is also required of the *limitations* on any global consensus given the disparity of opinions that exists between the some 190+ national identities. Given this somewhat negative outline, we might table a question.

Will consensus shape the future?

For the purposes of this introduction, we might simply reference aspects of the previous *Brave New Worlds* discussion, which introduced a broad set of catalysts, centred on *technology*, but then constrained by *economic*, *political*, and *social* issues, as well as the *human ecosystem* as a whole. While the role of technology was limited in the past, it is clear that it may become a major catalyst of change in the future, although it is far from clear whether there is any broad consensus of the direction of developments, as expressed in the following quote:

> *Much of humanity now lives in man-made environments in which a technology-led 'evolution' is accelerating, but not necessarily being planned. For history suggests that humanity has rarely, if ever, been in complete control of its technology developments and, in many cases, did not foresee or concern itself with many of its negative consequences.*

Of course, the development of technology will require financing by both the local and global economy. How different groups in society quantify success was characterised in the following quote:

It would take the world's richest person, Carlos Slim, 220 years to spend his $80bn fortune at a rate of $1m per day. By the same token, it would take the poorest earning $1/day over 220 million years to earn the same amount.

Whether there is a justification for such disparity will not be discussed at this point, but many consider the excesses of capitalism to be a problem. However, while capitalism, like democracy, may not be perfect, it is often assumed to be better than any alternative, where its global development will help expand prosperity, although this last assumption is not necessarily guaranteed. So, even if capitalism has been shown to work for a minority, it is questionable whether it works for all, such that we might ask whether this system has ever had the consensus of a majority. However, we might use a quote by Thomas Sowell to characterise the scope of this issue, which then leads to the issue of politics.

The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it. The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics.

Again, we might start with an idealised concept of political governance '*by the people, for the people'* as oppose to the imposition of autocratic or military power, However, while we might perceive the benefits of a more democratic form of governance, history is littered with the failure of possibly well-meaning, but weak democracies. If so, we may also have to question whether the perception of a democratic consensus is flawed, especially if it only has the support of a minority of the population. For, in practice, most democratic electoral systems only offer one or two alternatives that can be subject to much influence by powerful institutions with their own agenda. Clearly, this may be a somewhat pessimistic assessment, which people like *Steve Pinker* have provided statistical evidence suggesting that the world has actually become a much better place for many, especially over the last 100 years, which might be seen in the context of political progress.

So, do we need to consider a bigger picture?

Clearly, much progress has been made, which should not be ignored, although the Brave New World discussion also attempted to consider some of the wider implications on various groups in terms of the *future of employment*, as characterised in the chart right. So, while not ignoring the positives as outlined by Pinker, it is possibly naïve to assume that self-interest will disappear from the world and that powerful individuals,

Life chances:	High Risk	Up-Hill Battle	Keeping Up	Out Ahead	Yours to Lose
% pop	5%	20%	50%	20%	5%
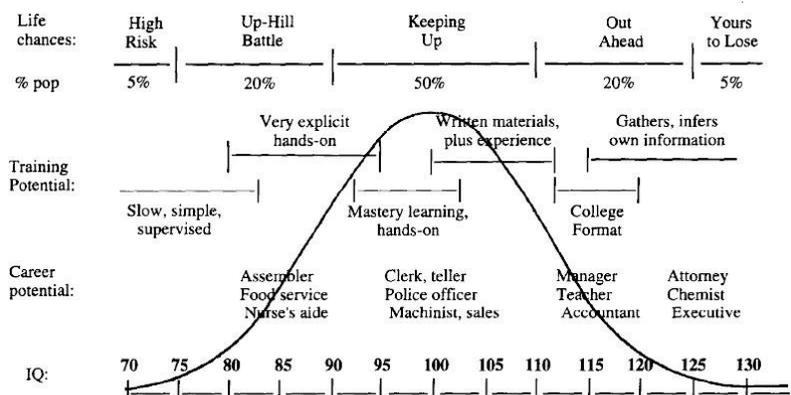
institutions and nation-states will not continue to make decisions that prioritise their own self-interests above all others without consideration of a wider consensus. So, based on this initial introduction of some of the wider issues, we now consider the basic idea of a consensus.

1.1.1 *The Idea of Consensus*

Today, there is much in modern society that is argued, and agreed, based on some perceived '*consensus of opinion'*, although we might have to considered the nature of this consensus in the context of past, present and future developments. However, let us start with a general semantic breakdown of this phrase beginning with the word '*consensus*':

> *Consensus is a noun, which is usually intended to signify some general level of agreement achieved within some group. By way of synonyms, we might cite other words like accord, unanimity, solidarity or simply like-mindedness.*

However, the scope of the group implied in the note above can encompass agreement between two individuals, small communities, nation-states or even some wider global consensus. Consensus may be sought on any number of issues, which may range from the frivolous to the profound, although we shall try to focus on the more important issues that may come to affect future developments. Consensus may also be considered in terms of its quality and quantity, where the consensus of a group of experts might be perceived to carry more '*weight of authority'* than some arbitrary and uninformed group. Given this potential scope, we might recognise that the idea of a consensus may become increasingly ambiguous as the size of the group is expanded, irrespective of whether this group is informed or uninformed, even if we assume that debate is not suppressed. The other word in the opening phrase was '*opinion*', which also needs some possible definition.

> *Opinion is also a noun that expresses a view or judgement about some issue, which is not necessarily based on fact or knowledge. Again, we might cite other synonyms, e.g. belief, judgement, viewpoint, attitude, perspective.*

It is said that western languages are often biased towards nouns, whereas other languages can be biased more towards verbs. As such, it might be argued that Western languages like to give things and concepts names, which it is assumed infers some meaning, and therefore some understanding of the thing or concept being discussed, although this latter assumption may need to be further questioned. However, if the '*consensus of opinion'* does represent some collective position, we also need to understand the history as to how this collective position or worldview was formed, i.e. its cultural context, which may have involved both education as well as indoctrination. Likewise, an apparent consensus does not necessarily have to represent a majority view as history suggests that powerful minorities have often simply imposed their worldview on a broader majority. Therefore, within this historical context, we might also consider the development of a collective cultural worldview in terms of three fundamental components, i.e. theology, philosophy and science. We might then describe the nature of any consensus within each component as follows:

- Theology represents ideas or assumptions based on belief.
- Philosophy represents ideas or assumptions based on logic.
- Science represents ideas or assumptions based on facts.

Of course, at this stage, these definitions are not intended to be taken too literally, as aspects of belief, logic and fact underpin all three components of any *worldview*, which can then be subject to much variation. Again, it might be recognised that we have introduced yet more names of concepts in the list above, which it is assumed infers some meaning, although it is recognised that there may be a considerable variation of understanding of each word. Therefore, some initial clarification is possibly required.

- **Belief:** We might simply define a belief as a position that does not necessarily have any tangible supportive evidence. However, in this context, a belief is not confined to theology as it might be seen to exist in a philosophical conjecture or scientific hypothesis.

- **Philosophy:** Is often perceived to require some form of logical reasoning, e.g. *deductive* or *inductive*, but which may not necessarily have any tangible supportive evidence. Again, we might recognise that theological beliefs may cite varying degrees of philosophical logic, while scientific hypothesis may rest primarily on mathematical deductive logic.

- **Science:** The idea of a fact is usually assumed to be supported by empirical evidence that can be cross-checked by others. However, we might separate the nature of a fact into various categories, where the degree of certainty in the verification process may be more subjective, e.g. anecdotal evidence versus empirical evidence. Of course, history tells us that scientific facts are constantly being revised and therefore may also come with no absolute certainty.

So, what might we initially conclude about all these words?

In the discussion to follow, it will be argued that the very idea of consensus may be problematic for a variety of reasons, which the previous introduction has only alluded. For the scope of any consensus is often based on limited information compounded by different cultural and social norms, where consensus has often been '*engineered*' by a powerful minority to support their own worldview, or possibly more simply their own self-interests, such that any alternative perspective is supressed. While this may appear to be a negative summation, there are numerous historical examples of this type of engineering of a consensus in order to maintain either religious or political power. It is therefore possibly naïve to assume that such problems are not manifest in present-day society. However, the danger of '*engineering a consensus*' might be expressed in much more blunt language, i.e. the majority are fooled by ignorance or an inability to understand the issues at hand, such that their opinion can be manipulated, even if sought. We might attempt to described the first part of this problem in the words of William Clifford, written in 1877.

> *"The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them, for then it must sink back into savagery. It may matter little to me, in my cloud-castle of sweet illusions and darling lies; but it matters much to Man that I have made my neighbours ready to deceive. The credulous man is father to the liar and the cheat."*

While Clifford's choice of words may appear overly dramatic in the modern context, the '*danger to society*' may still be real enough, if future developments are predicated on an ill-formed or easily deceived '*consensus of*

opinion'. Today, we might recognise the issue of *'fake news'*, which may be engineered based on a new generation of AI manipulation and then widely distributed via the Internet. Of course, the real danger of any consensus may be based on the presumption of certainty that often accompanies any wide-spread acceptance, especially if primarily based on ill-informed opinion. Again, history tells us that previous generations have often been certain of specific beliefs, such that their apparent consensus would not tolerate debate, even though many of the beliefs were subsequently proved wrong. In this respect, we might summarise the limitations of certainty in the words of Voltaire (1694-1778):

<p style="text-align:center;color:red;">*Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.*</p>

However, there is possibly another more serious problem surrounding the idea of any perceived consensus, which might be characterised in the form of the next question.

Is the idea of any large-scale consensus simply an illusion?

It is recognised that many will reject this initial inference as being far too negative, although it may be conceded that the real nature of any consensus might lie in a compromise. However, while some powerful group may compromise on some issues in order to reach any agreement, it is often with the condition that their primary objectives are not put at risk. If we are to pursue this possibly contentious argument, we need to better define the nature of a '*primary objective'*, which may initially be considered in terms of simple self-interest, but then expanded to include the wider goals of some political or economic ideology. If so, we need to consider the real *scope* of consensus and the *framework* within which it is assumed to have been established.

1.1.2   *The Scope of Consensus*

An apparent consensus may often be traced back to a history that helped shaped a given society. We might then better understand the nature of this society in terms of its present-day cultural and national identity, which may seek to both educate and indoctrinate its population to accept a given collective worldview. While this collective worldview may not be universally accepted, the scope for debate and dissent within the confines of a given society can be limited by either social peer pressure or by more extreme political oversight.

> *Note: The idea that any of us exist outside any form of social peer pressure can usually be quickly dismissed, if we simply compare the similarities with our immediate neighbours against others in geographically dispersed cultures. Therefore, with possibly only few exceptions, most of us are basically a conformant product of time and place.*

Of course, most of us still like to think that we are personally one of the few exceptions, who have come to shape their own worldview without undue bias towards the social norms that have surrounded us since birth. However, within a framework of diversity founded on different cultural, religious and political worldviews, we might accept that there are some practical limits on the scope of any consensus, when extrapolated to a global level, but which can still exist within an expanding multi-cultural national identity.

> *Note: Throughout the 20th century, the idea of globalism was expanded in terms of economic trade, such that some believed that it could naturally be extended to people. In this context, the identity of a person, which was once defined in terms of family and local community, then expanded into a national identity, would simply continue to evolve into a global multi-cultural identity of universal tolerance.*

Unfortunately, while this is a laudable goal, human evolution in conjunction with the complexity of cultural and religious traditions, which often underpins social order, may require more time to adapt than was initially assumed. Of course, this does not mean that some will not attempt to engineer a consensus that allows them to pursue a more globalist ideology. However, it is far from clear whether there is a consensus for this idea, as many have become increasingly critical of globalism and the challenge to their national and cultural identity, especially if it only benefits some perceived economic elite. In the words of Marine Le Pen.

> *"Countries are no longer nations but markets. Borders are erased. Everyone can come to our country, and this has cut our salaries and our social protections. This dilutes our cultural identity.*

Today, we might recognise the degree of polarisation that has developed between the idea of globalism and nationalism, where certainty of the benefits accrued by either, in isolation, is often assumed. Again, it might be argued that developments have not necessarily proceeded based on any overarching consensus, but rather on the basis that one side has simply been in a position to impose its worldview. As the idea of globalism appears to be a key issue in the modern world, it is possibly worthy of some further introduction, which we might also consider in

terms of the '*winners and losers'* in this process. However, we will first attempt to define the scope of developments in terms of an expansion of the global economy, which has required increased interaction between people, governments and private organizations around the world. This development has also led to cultural exchanges and developments and a much wider movement of people between nation-states with different cultural and religious traditions. Initially, such trends were equated with progress, at least in terms of economic growth, such that it might have been assumed that globalism must be beneficial to all, at least, by those who gained from this form of progress. This said, we might table a question for further consideration as we proceed to outline the issues.

Was a consensus ever sought for globalisation?

While there were undoubted benefits to globalisation, it is clear that not everybody perceived themselves to be a winner within this expanding process. As a consequence, an increasing number have criticised globalisation on the grounds that the benefits are not universal and has led to problems associated with unemployment, inequality and conflicts associated with cultural differences, when linked to mass migration. If we accept the reality of these different perspectives, we need to consider the pros and cons of globalisation, not just in terms of economics, but also in terms of its impact on cultural identity and national sovereignty, especially when it comes to the democratic representation of '*the people by the people'.*

- **Economic Globalisation**
  Without necessarily highlighting all the issues, we might characterise the positives associated with this form of globalisation in terms of the potential for reduced costs and better choice of products and services, if optimised supply chains can be achieved via increased competition. Likewise, globalisation can offer up greater opportunity for growth to both producers and retailers of goods and service, if they can diversify into new markets. Of course, we might recognise that not all nation states, companies or people can compete effectively in this expanding global market, such that many local economies and communities have suffered negatively as a consequence.

- **Cultural Globalization**
  Today, the idea of a cultural identity invariably sits within a national identity, where both are a product of history, language and customs established over many generations. However, many now feel that their cultural or national identity is being threatened by mass migration, which provides too little time for the diverse nature of the people involved to adapt to change. Of course, the positive side of this form of globalisation may be defined in terms of the access to new cultural products in the arts, entertainment and even education. Likewise, it might be assumed that people may become more tolerant of differences, which may then reduce the probability of conflicts between nation states. However, others perceive danger to their cultural traditions, not only due to mass migration, but in terms of the impact of consumerism on their society and the fragmentation into factions with very different values and self-interest.

- **Political Globalization**
  Today, many see the growth of new institutions with global reach, which then attempts to influence the democratic process within what many assume to be an independent sovereign nation. Again, on the positive side, many of these international institutions can provide both aid and financial support to a nation state,

which may also help to mitigate or prevent local conflicts from escalating into full-scale wars. Likewise, a global perspective of a wider political system may provide better solutions for global problems, which may also provide hope when people are subject to oppressive national governance. However, on the negative side, many believe that these global institutions operate outside of the consideration of the local democratic opinion, such that the consensus of the people is simply ignored in pursuit of a global ideology.

So, based on what is recognised as a simplistic summary, we might return to the question as to whether a consensus was ever sought for globalisation? In truth, history suggests that the development of supranational institutions, such as the European Union, has not always proceeded on the basis of a broad consensus within the boundary of each nation state, but rather on the ideology held true by a small minority, who are often the most obvious beneficiaries of change.

What else might need to be taken into consideration at this point?

In an ideal world, we might assume that consensus should be reach through open and honest debate of the issues. However, again, history might suggest that this is a very naïve assumption, which rarely happens when powerful self-interests are at stake. Similar in scope to fake news, we might need to consider the issue of withheld information, half-truths and peer pressure as possible mechanisms by which some may seek to create an apparent consensus in favour of their proposal. However, rather than considering all potential mechanisms, we might attempt to characterise the scope of such issues in terms of '*political correctness'*, although this term possibly requires some initial clarification.

> *Note: At a basic level, political correctness might simply be described as a concept that seeks to give the least amount of offense to any group within society on issues such as race, gender, culture or sexual orientation. However, the concept often runs into problems, when it seeks to build a consensus of opinion that suppresses discussion of legitimate issues of concerns on the grounds that somebody, somewhere might take offense. In this context, political correctness can be seen as a challenge to the* freedom of speech.

Historically, the idea of political correctness can be traced back to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which required an adherence to the policies and principles of Marxist communism. At this point, we need to recognise that some nation states prioritise political stability over individual freedom, which is an idea more associated with western democracies, where the freedom of speech is usually provided some legal protection. However, from a historical perspective, nation-states like Russia and China, which have preferred centralised governance, freedom of speech is said to be a privilege not a right, but which can then simply be denied to its opponents.

> *Note: In a religious context, blasphemy can be interpreted as almost any impious utterance or action concerning God or one of his assumed prophets. Therefore, on this basis, almost any comment might be defined as an insult and used to restrict the freedom of speech of others.*

Today, in many modern democracies, the idea of political correctness has been used to restrict the spread of hate-speech, which in principle might be supported by a broad consensus. In this context, most might agree that the freedom of speech has to be subject to some restrictions, such that it is not used in a derogatory or abusive manner. This said, there has been a considerable expansion of the original idea of political correctness to include

the concept of '*safe-places'* and '*no-platforms'* in both public debate and many educational institutions. Of course, the problem with such ideas is not in the general definition, as it might relate to hate-speech, but the subjective scope of what constitutes '*unacceptable'* or *'offensive'* speech. Clearly, some political systems may define unacceptable speech as anything which challenges its authority, while a religious ideology might define another class of offensive speech. However, whether by accident of design, the net effect is to suppress the freedom of speech of others, even when this speech only makes truthful statements. Therefore, returning to the issue of safe-spaces and no-platforms within a democratic society, there is a growing concern that such ideas might also be used to bias a consensus towards a given ideology, such that legitimate debate can be suppressed.

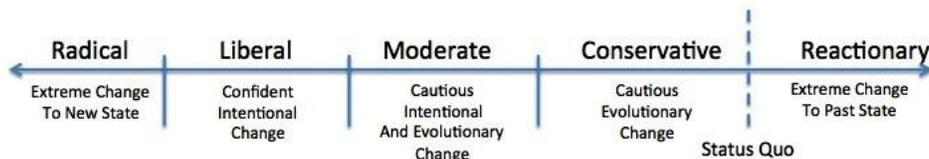*So, how might we therefore characterise the scope of any consensus?*

In the scope of a myriad of different and conflicting ideologies encompassing economic, political and religious worldviews, we might realise that the formation of any sort of consensus has not necessarily been for the benefit of the majority, but invariably for some powerful minority. Equally, this consensus may have been subject to considerable manipulation based on false or suppressed information. Finally, even if these problems are ignored, many political systems, even those broadly assumed to be democratic, may essentially ignore the wider concerns of a majority because its political representatives believe they know best. As such, we possibly need to consider the political and economic framework in which consensus is assumed to operate.

1.1.3 *The Framework of Consensus*

For the purposes of this discussion, the goal is to reduce the actual complexity of a myriad of political and economic ideologies to a minimum. As such, the descriptions should only be seen as a broad generalisation of the concepts and issues, which may influence any perception of consensus. First, it is assumed that there is a definable different between an ideology and a philosophy in that an ideology seeks to change the world, while a philosophy may only seek to understand it. However, it possibly needs to be highlighted that different groups of people can have very different attitudes to change, which we might characterise, not necessarily explain, in terms of the following diagram.

← Radical	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Reactionary →
Extreme Change To New State	Confident Intentional Change	Cautious Intentional And Evolutionary Change	Cautious Evolutionary Change	Extreme Change To Past State

Status Quo

If this characterisation has any validity, we might recognise that people in these different groups may develop a different worldview, which might then be associated with ideologies that have a different perspective on the scope of change. While there are many types of ideologies, we shall first simplify the scope of this discussion by defining only three basic groups of ideologies, i.e. religious, political and economic, but then ignoring the myriad of ideologies associated with religion, which has previously been discussed under the heading *Human Perspective*. As such, we shall only focus on the scope of political and economic ideologies, which are often entwined, because certain political ideologies are invariably drawn toward certain types of economic ideologies. As such, we might reduce the sum total of complexity to a much-simplified subset, but which still help characterise the problem of achieving consensus, even if debate is both informed and rational.
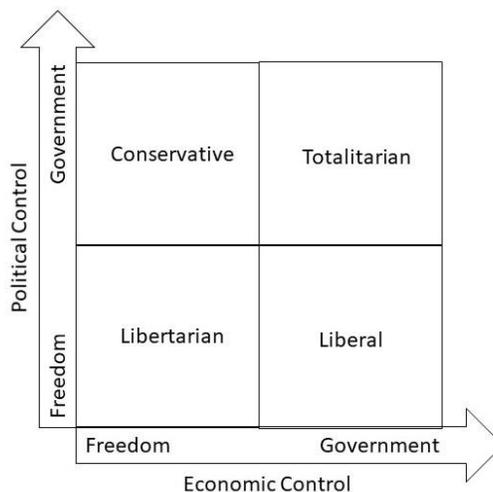
In the diagram above, we might describe each of the four boxes as being generally representative of a type of ideology, held by an individual or group, which in a modern context seeks to control the political and economic systems of a nation-state. The scope of this control is then shown to range between complete individual freedom through to complete government control. So, while the goal of this discussion is trying to reduce the actual complexity of a multitude of competing variations within the ideological spectrum, we still need to clarify the

terminology introduced. For, as per most discussions, terminology can be introduced as a form of shorthand, where a word or phrase is intended to infer meaning of some idea or concept, but where interpretation can be somewhat subjective. However, while the following definitions are only an attempt to mitigate misunderstanding, a degree of ambiguity may always persist when interpretation is subject to the confirmation bias of both the writer and reader.

- **Libertarian**

  As shown bottom left, a libertarian prioritises individual liberty. As such, a libertarian will argue that liberty must be maintained in any change and, as a consequence, political and economic control by government should be minimised. However, there can still be much variance of opinion within this consensus, such that some libertarians will accept some government regulation in order to curb the excesses of self-interest of some individuals, if detrimental to the freedom within a society as a whole. However, there may be no obvious consensus on this governance along the left-right spectrum of political opinion.

- **Totalitarian**

  The scope of totalitarianism, top right, is an extreme form of authority, which in the current context will be associated with the collective state, i.e. government, rather than an individual. However, while totalitarianism might be seen as a political ideology that prohibits opposition, in almost any form, it also tends to want to restrict the liberty of the individual and control the economic system of wealth distribution. However, if we were to characterise the nature of totalitarian governance, e.g. communism through to fascism, it may also be positioned anywhere on the left-right spectrum of political opinion.

- **Liberal**

  While we might describe liberalism as an ideology that also supports personal liberty, it often requires government control to ensure individual rights, i.e. civil and human. As such, liberals will argue for democracy, secularism, gender equality, racial equality, internationalism, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion, but then require government regulation to prevent the excesses of capitalism. While this discussion is attempting to minimise the scope of terminology, some may perceive a similarity in the ideology, as described, between liberalism and socialism. While possibly too simplistic, it might be argued that the primary difference between these ideologies is essentially in their attitude to change, which in the case of socialism is much more under the control of central government. In this context, we might simply position socialism between liberalism and communism on the political spectrum.

- **Conservative**

  In terms of the previous diagrams, conservative might be described as being more cautious about change than liberals and want the control of change to be reflected in the political governance. However, conservatives believe in personal responsibility and limited governance of a free market economy, which parallels some of the traits of libertarianism, although the latter are more likely to reject almost any political governance. While many identify conservatism on the right of the political spectrum, it is possibly better described as a political attitude, rather than an ideology, especially given its general objection to radical change. In this context, the central principles of conservatism might be described in terms of traditional values, the need for authority, inclusive of a respect for property and support for institutions that have stood the test of time.

As already admitted, the scope of these definitions is extremely simplistic, where in reality the neat distinction between the four boxes in the previous diagram can blur into an almost continuous spectrum of political and economic ideological differences. As such, the framework is really only intended to highlight the problem of establishing any wide consensus, when people have so many different opinions, which is possibly why people are given so little choice when it comes to political governance or the regulation of the economy.

What other factors might be considered in this framework?

Well, the issue of globalism and nationalism has already been outlined as an issue that can also divide opinion. However, while globalism might be associated with a range of political and economic ideologies, it is possible that nationalism is better described more as a social movement. Historically, we might recognise that institutions with political and economic influence might generally favoured the globalist agenda, if it is perceived to forward their self-interests.

> *Note: Many who favour globalism are naturally a beneficiary of this perceived progress, freed from their cultural past to pursue their own self-interests in terms of financial renumeration and opportunity. However, it has to be recognised that many do not perceive such benefits and are often left to cope with the negative aspects of mass migration compounded by imposed austerity measures that still persist as a result of earlier economic mismanagement.*

In contrast to the influence of global institutions. nationalism is often constrained to be a social movement localised within a specific geography, which reflects a given cultural and national identity, such that its influence may be limited in scope. In this respect, many social movements do not hold much political or economic influence beyond the power of mass protest.

> *Note: If this general assessment is not too biased, then it might also be suggested that the supporters of globalism might be in a better position to leverage its power to influence opinion in order to forge a perceive consensus that appears to support its interests.*

Of course, we might question the perspective expressed in the note above, if the majority within any population are not the beneficiary of globalism. However, this issue returns us to the nature of any consensus and whether a majority opinion is ever really sought within any political system, irrespective of whether it is democratic or authoritarian in scope. As such, we possibly need to consider the practical *limits of any consensus*.

1.1.4   *The Limits of Consensus*

In the previous discussions some attempt has been made to generalise the idea and scope of any consensus, which might be sought within some form of political and economic framework. While these discussions were not intended to be either authoritative or exhaustive, they were hopefully enough to highlight some of the issues and assumptions that would influence the development of opinions, while not necessarily representing a majority consensus.
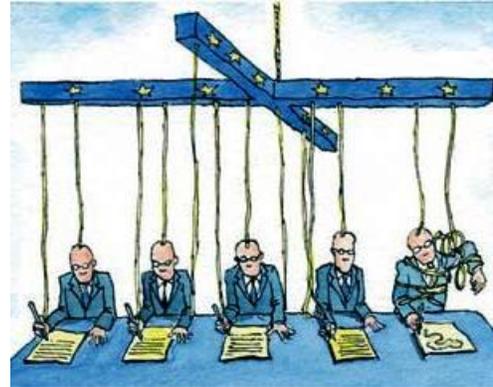
So, what limits the possibility of some majority consensus?

In terms of an initial response to this question, we might recognise that in many situations the idea of consensus actually becomes a compromise, often weighted in favour of the most powerful group. However, before pursuing this suggestion, we might first return to how individuals come to have a different perspective of the world, where it has been suggested that most individuals are born into a collective worldview, such that they invariably identify themselves in terms of cultural norms that surround them. While this process might be described in terms of a formative education, it may also reflect a form of indoctrination, which can be further compounded by the system of political governance, if it suppresses any wider perspective of the whole. Of course, anybody educated, or indoctrinated, into a different system might immediately perceive a problem in another worldview, while often rejecting the limitation of their own worldview. In this context, we might also see the limitations of any consensus, either at the level of an individual or nation state, when it comes to defining a globalised worldview.

> *Note: The discussion entitled* Information Control *highlighted a further danger, if future technology should develop the means to monitor and enforce the conformance of a population to accept the dictates of an authoritative government. See George Orwell's* 1984 novel *as one potential consequence of this idea.*

Of course, under the circumstances suggested in the note above, the idea of a consensus would cease to be an issue, as consensus would simply become an illusion. However, practical limits may also be placed on the scope of any consensus, even within fundamentally democratic systems, if the opinion of certain sections of society can either be ignored or have inadequate representation. In part, this issue was first discussed in terms of the political and economic framework in which we might initially assume seeks to develop a consensus through open debate. However, democratic systems also attempt to manipulate the illusion of a consensus, possibly by the design of its voting system and the use of what might be described as '*scare-tactics*'. By this means, many individuals can be '*persuaded*' of the dire and adverse consequences of not supporting a specific position, which allows the self-interest or ideology of a smaller minority to be pursued. We might attempt to highlight some of these issues in terms of the UK political system and the 2016 referendum decision to leave the European Union (EU).

> *Note: It might also be useful to highlight that the UK parliamentary system is one of the oldest continuous representative assemblies in the world. However, any examination of its near 1000-year history suggests that the development of this system essentially never required the consensus of a majority, such that we might question its credentials as a democracy.*

While we will not even attempt to cite all the potential problems with the UK parliamentary system in terms of it being a consensus democracy, we might consider its present-day '*first pass the post*' voting system, which elected a conservative government in 2015, prior to the 2016 referendum, even though they only received 37.8% of the votes casted, which reduced to 24.5% of the total population legible to vote.
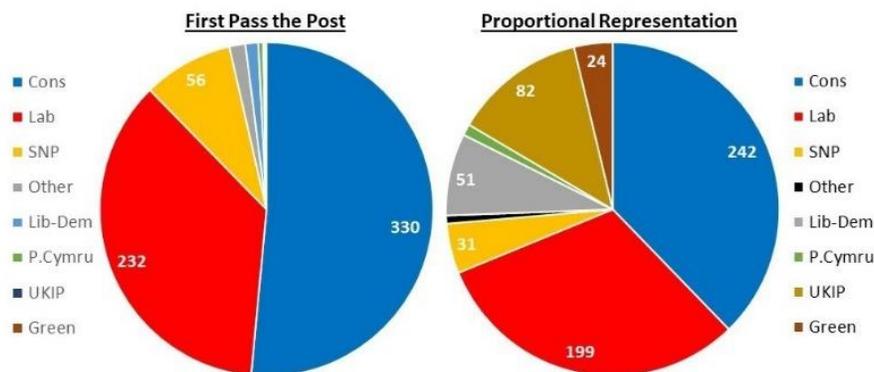
Clearly, the idea of some consensus majority of the UK voting public supporting the political goals of a conservative government might be questioned, if potentially 75% did not directly give their support. Of course, if 33% did not bother to vote, then it might be assumed that this group did not belong to any consensus, i.e. they were simply indifferent to the outcome. However, this assumption might be too simplistic, if many people did not vote because they believed that their vote would not change the outcome.

> *Note: Of the 650 parliamentary seats up for election in 2015, it is estimated that there were possibly less than 100 marginal seats, which would decide the result. If so, 85% of the seats up for re-election might have been class as safe seats, many voters opposed to the incumbent candidate might assume that they were probably wasting their time in participating.*

Of course, many will argue that the '*first pass the post*' system produces more stable government in that it has a better chance of securing a working majority to pursue it published manifesto. However, analysis of the voting statistics suggests the government only represented a consensus of 25% of the voting population.

But what about the proportional representation (PR) vote as in the EU referendum?

In 2016, the UK referendum PR vote was based on a 72% turnout and resulted in a 52% to 48% majority in favour of leaving the EU. While this majority was based on the total UK wide population, 28% did not bother to vote, even though the PR process suggested that all votes would count. However, this nationwide process did not account for regional differences, where there was a majority to remain within the EU.

So, can even a PR vote represent a consensus?

In many respects, it might be argued that politics, even when assumed to be democratic, does not actually create a consensus or even proceed on the basis of a majority opinion of the population. However, while the UK '*first pass the post*' electoral systems might be questioned, it is unclear that PR referendum really help create a consensus. Of

course, in the case of the post Brexit referendum, it appears that various political parties only highlighted the apparent inability for compromise, let alone consensus.
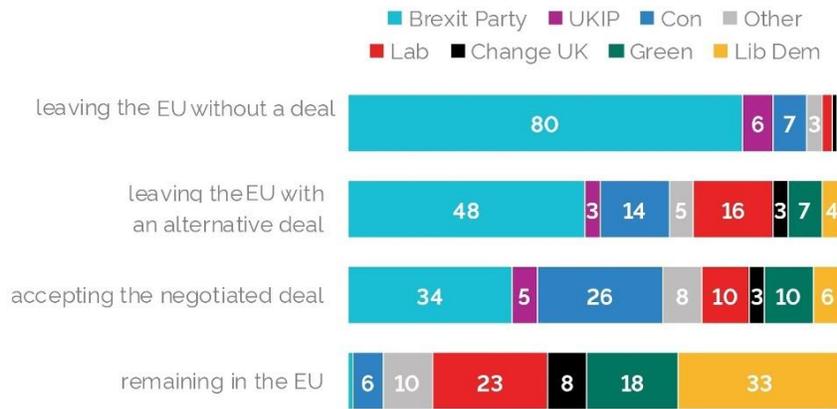
This somewhat selective example suggests that there are indeed limits to consensus, and compromise for that matter, in the domain of politics. However, it is clear that the limits of consensus are rooted in the opinions of individuals for all manner of reasons explained in terms of their worldview, which may be weighted by religious, philosophical of scientific assumptions. However, the alignment of opinion suggested in the chart above suggest some form of consensus, albeit limited in scope within any population, i.e. national or global.

What might this tell us about the nature, scope and limits of consensus?

From a historical perspective, small communities often shared a consensus worldview, although possibly limited in sophistication and scope. Over time, these smaller unified communities were invariably subsumed into more powerful groups, e.g. nation states, which on the plus side were possibly better able to satisfy the physiological, safety and social needs of its individuals. However, further reflection suggests that the benefits derived by larger social hierarchies are not necessarily equitable, and the needs of some individuals are better represented than others. Today, we might assume ourselves to have a more sophisticated worldview, although it would possibly be naïve to assume that a collective society is not still subject to the inference of a survival of the fittest. Of course, the definition of what constitutes the '*fittest*' might now be revised to the 'powerful' within the collective structures of that society. Pursuing this line of thought, as the sophistication of society in the form of a nation state increased, political and economic power transcended the individual by taking on the persona of an institution.

How do institutions influence the collective worldview?

An institution can be described as being similar in scope to a society, i.e. it is a group of individuals united by a common aim, i.e. they have a consensus of opinion. So, while consensus within a wider society might be problematic unless enforced by authoritative governance, the membership of an institution, be it political or economic in scope, might simply be predicated on sharing a common ideology or goal. In the wider context of a growing multicultural society, we might recognise that the population comes to represent an ever-broader spectrum of beliefs. Again, one-way of avoiding the dilution of a common cultural or ideological identity is by means of an institution, where the acceptance of its worldview is a requirement of membership.

Note: From a historical perspective, we might cite the institutions of a monarchy or the church as examples of powerful institutions with a common worldview, which possibly demand allegiance to an existing class structure or of a specific religious belief. Of course, in these cases, it might be recognised that these institutions not only attempted to influence the perception of a collective worldview, they actively sought to impose this worldview on the majority.

In this sense, it is probable that most worldviews are not based on any notion of it representing an overwhelming consensus, but rather that it is simply the preference of a powerful minority. Equally, we might recognise that as we expand the scope of issues seeking a consensus of opinion in the modern world, the likelihood for consensus between all the various religious, political and economic ideologies compounded by cultural and national self-interest probably falls exponentially. In this respect, it is assumed that the institutions, both national and global, which have the most power and influence will continue to dominate. If this is the case, the '*brave new worlds'* of the future will continue be defined by a new generation of '*winners and losers'* where the real nature of consensus will remain an illusion, which only serves the purpose of a small minority in any population.

Note: While much of this discussion surrounding the issue of consensus has been framed in terms of political and economic ideologies and disparate worldviews based on theology, philosophy and science, it was actually written in response to concerns about the climate change debate*. In the context of this debate, it is often stated that there is a 97% consensus of scientific papers that support the idea that climate change is being caused by human CO2 emissions, where this certainty dictates that debate is now over. As the link above points to the start of the Mysearch review of this issue, it details will not be repeated, other than say that conclusions often expressed in terms of a 97% consensus may be misleading at best, possibly to the point that the claim is a total misrepresentation of the complexity of issues. As such, the idea of any consensus in this field of science may be as much of an illusion as in the area of politics, economics or even religion. The recent appeal by 15-year old Greta Thunberg in her 2018 speech at the UN on Climate Change possibly highlights another concern in which one side of this debate is attempting to create a consensus on the basis of subjective opinion rather than an examination of the scientific details. While this young girl is entitled to express her opinion, there is concern that she possibly has a very limited perspective of the wider scientific issues and is simply being used to appeal to a younger generation, who may in-turn be susceptible to such an emotive appeal without necessarily having had time, or possibly the inclination, to examine all the facts.*