I

Spreading suspicion

1 'Without trust we cannot stand'

Confucius told his disciple Tzu-kung that three things are needed for government: weapons, food and trust.[1] If a ruler can't hold on to all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next. Trust should be guarded to the end: without trust we cannot stand. Confucius' thought still convinces. Weapons did not help the Taliban when their foot soldiers lost trust and deserted. Food shortages need not topple governments when they and their rationing systems are trusted, as we know from the Second World War.

It isn't only rulers and governments who prize and need trust. Each of us and every profession and every

1 Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), xii, 7, p. 164.

institution needs trust. We need it because we have to be able to rely on others acting as they say that they will, and because we need others to accept that we will act as we say we will. The sociologist Niklas Luhmann was right that 'A complete absence of trust would prevent [one] even getting up in the morning.'[2]

2 The crisis of trust

We may need trust, but trusting often seems hard and risky. Every day we read of untrustworthy action by politicians and officials, by hospitals and exam boards, by companies and schools. We supposedly face a deepening crisis of trust. Every day we also read of aspirations and attempts to make business and professionals, public servants and politicians more accountable in more ways to more stakeholders. But can a revolution in accountability remedy our 'crisis of trust'?

In these five chapters I shall discuss both the

2 Niklas Luhmann, *Trust* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), p. 4.

supposed crisis and its supposed remedies. I do so as an outsider. The experts and exponents of the crisis of trust are mainly sociologists and journalists: they've tried to find out whom we do and don't trust, in particular whom we *say* we do and don't trust. They have produced lots of dispiriting evidence. Remedies are proposed on all sides: politicians and campaigning groups, academics and journalists advocate greater respect for human rights, higher standards of accountability and greater transparency. If these are remedies for our 'crisis of trust', we should surely be seeing results by now. On the contrary, the accusations mount.

I shall look at trust from a more philosophical but also (I hope) more practical standpoint: these (I believe) go together quite naturally. What does it take for us to place trust in others? What evidence do we need to place it well? Are human rights and democracy the basis for a society in which trust can be placed, or does trust need other conditions? Does the revolution in accountability support or undermine trust?

The common ground from which I begin is that we

cannot have guarantees that everybody will keep trust. Elaborate measures to ensure that people keep agreements and do not betray trust must, in the end, be backed by – trust. At some point we just have to trust. There is no *complete* answer to the old question: 'who will guard the guardians?' On the contrary, trust is needed precisely because all guarantees are incomplete. Guarantees are useless unless they lead to a trusted source, and a regress of guarantees is no better for being longer unless it ends in a trusted source. So trust cannot presuppose or require a watertight guarantee of others' performance, and cannot rationally be withheld just because we lack guarantees. Where we have guarantees or proofs, placing trust is redundant. We don't need to take it on trust that $5 \times 11 = 55$, or that we are alive, or that each of us was born of a human mother or that the sun rose this morning.

Since trust has to be placed without guarantees, it is inevitably sometimes misplaced: others let us down and we let others down. When this happens, trust and relationships based on trust are both damaged. Trust, it is constantly observed, is hard earned and easily

dissipated. It is valuable social capital and not to be squandered.

If there are no guarantees to be had, we need to place trust with care. This can be hard. The little shepherd boy who shouted 'Wolf! Wolf!' eventually lost his sheep, but not before his false alarms had deceived others time and again. Deception and betrayal often work. Traitors and terrorists, embezzlers and con artists, forgers and plagiarists, false promisers and free riders cultivate then breach others' trust. They often get away with it. Breach of trust has been around since the Garden of Eden – although it did not quite work out there. Now it is more varied and ingenious, and often successful.

Although we cannot curse those who breach trust, let alone expel them from paradise, we take elaborate steps to deter and prevent deception and fraud: we set and enforce high standards. Human rights requirements are imposed on the law, on institutions, on all of us. Contracts clarify and formalise agreements and undertakings with ever-greater precision. Professional codes define professional responsibilities with ever-greater precision.

Huge efforts also go into ensuring trustworthy performance. Auditors scrutinise accounts (but are they trustworthy?). Examiners control and mark examinees (but are they trustworthy?). The police investigate crimes (but are they trustworthy?). Increasingly sophisticated technologies are deployed to prevent and detect breaches of trust, ranging from locks and safes, passwords and identity cards, to CCTV cameras and elaborate encryption. The efforts to prevent abuse of trust are gigantic, relentless and expensive; their results are always less than perfect.

Have these countermeasures begun to restore trust, or to reduce suspicion? Sociologists and journalists report few signs. They claim that we are in the grip of a deepening crisis of public trust that is directed even at our most familiar institutions and office-holders. Mistrust, it seems, is now directed not just at those clearly in breach of law and accepted standards, not just at crooks and wide boys. Mistrust and suspicion have spread across all areas of life, and supposedly with good reason. Citizens, it is said, no longer trust governments, or politicians, or ministers, the police, or the courts, or the prison service.

Consumers, it is said, no longer trust business, and especially big business, or their products. *None of us*, it is said, trusts banks, or insurers – or pension providers. Patients, it is said, no longer trust doctors (think of Dr Shipman!), and in particular no longer trust hospitals or hospital consultants. 'Loss of trust' has become a cliché of our times.

How good is the evidence for this crisis of trust? A lot of the most systematic evidence for the UK can be found in public opinion polls and analogous academic surveys. The pollsters ask carefully controlled cross-sections of the public whether they trust certain professions or office-holders. The questions aren't easy to answer. Most of us would want to say that we trust *some* but not *other* professionals, *some* but not *other* office-holders, in *some* matters but not in *others*. I might trust a schoolteacher to teach my child arithmetic but not citizenship. I might trust my GP to diagnose and prescribe for a sore throat, but not for a heart attack. I might trust my bank with my current account, but not with my life savings. In answering the pollsters we suppress the complexity of our real judgements, smooth out distinctions we

draw between different individuals and institutions, and average our judgements about their trustworthiness in different activities.

We depend on journalists for our knowledge of the results of these polls and the levels of reported public trust. There is some irony in this, since these polls repeatedly show that no profession is less trusted in the UK than journalism. Journalists – at least newspaper journalists – are typically less trusted than politicians and ministers, much less trusted than scientists and civil servants, and dramatically less trusted than judges, or ministers of religion or doctors. Of course, the public also draws distinctions within these categories. Nurses and GPs are more trusted than hospital consultants; university scientists are more trusted than industry scientists; television news presenters are more trusted than newspaper journalists. Often newspaper reports of public opinion highlight the most dramatic statistic, typically the one that suggests the most extreme mistrust. They seldom comment on the ambiguities of the questions or the categories, or linger on cases where trust is average or high.