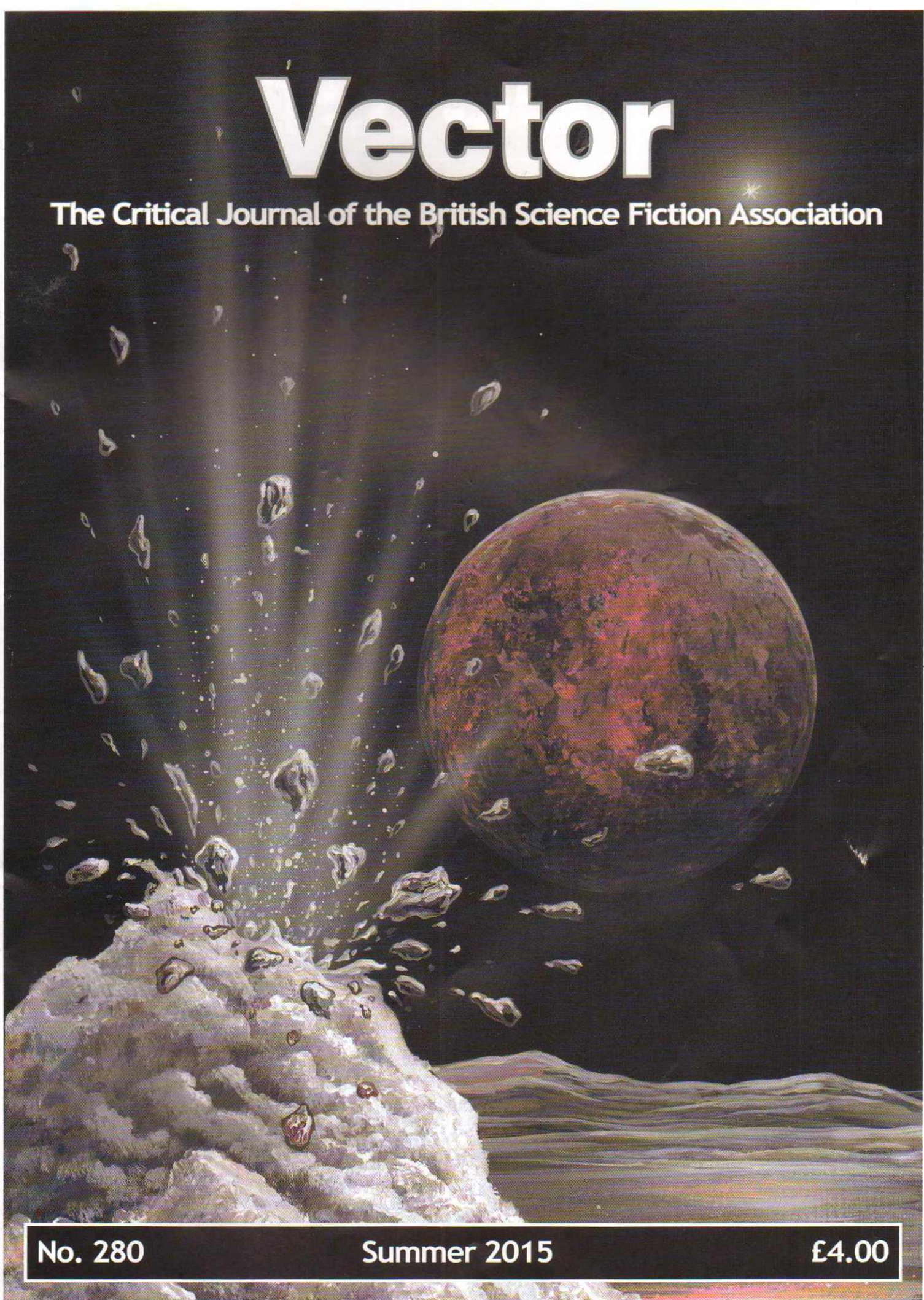


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Vote Janeway in 2015!

Can modern politics learn from future lessons?

by John Allen

*'So who are you going to vote for this year?'
'I'm not voting for anyone because nothing
ever changes.'*

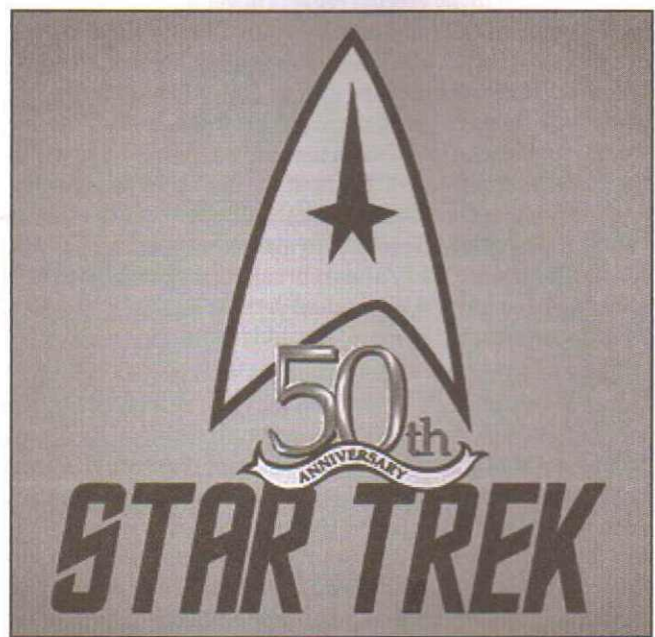
If there is a more tragic indictment of democratic apathy, I've yet to find it.

Science Fiction and fantasy not only offer us engaging stories filled with the 'What if?' scenario, they also provide social and political commentary on present day events. From Ray Bradbury to Ernest Cline, from *Star Trek* to *The Walking Dead*, popular entertainment thrives on science fiction and fantasy. Today in the UK we have a 'Walking Dead' electorate: disengaged, unhappy and generally apathetic. But what if we didn't? What if everyone engaged in political and social debate like the United Federation of Planets aspires to in *Star Trek*? What if we set aside culture, class and other personal differences like Rick and co. in *The Walking Dead*? What if one person was able and willing to influence change for the better like Wade in *Ready Player One*?

Science Fiction often provides keys to the voting hearts of millions that modern politicians never seem able (or willing) to find.

The Present Day

Electoral turnout in the UK has been declining since the end of the Second World War. Barring a few peaks in the 1970s and another in 1992, the percentage of registered voters casting a vote in General Elections has declined. The 2010 turnout of 65.1% might have been an improvement on the 2005 and 2001 turnouts of 61.4% and 59.4%, but we are still a long way off the 1950 peak of 83.9%. To my knowledge there is yet to be a 100% turnout.



All writers are told to write what they know. Science fiction often hides behind the veneer of fantasy in order to voice an opinion on the present and the potential future. The 'What If?' questions posed by great writers are best when filtered through the prism of science fiction. Ray Bradbury warned against the dangers of state suppression of free speech and information in *Fahrenheit 451*. Gene Roddenberry idly wondered what humankind could achieve were we to work more closely together in *Star Trek*. Isaac Asimov was thinking about the potential benefits and dangers of Artificial Intelligence long before anyone had a PC or an iphone. Socio-political commentary is prevalent throughout most science fiction. It's possible to view the genre as a 'guidebook', covering what different sections of society truly care about. Yet present day politicians rarely, (if ever!) pay attention to it.

So what can politics learn – if anything – from science fiction?

Star Trek in 2015

At the same time the US goes to the polls to elect a new President in 2016, *Star Trek* celebrates its 50th birthday. The small budget show pitched as 'Wagon Train to the Stars!' is only 3 years younger than *Doctor Who*. To date there have been 726 episodes, twelve films (a thirteenth is planned for release in 2016), an animated series, and thousands of books. This isn't bad for a show that only ran for three years in the 1960s. Like a lot of science fiction, *Star Trek* is more popular than any elected politician of the modern age. So what can an MP learn from science fiction like *Star Trek*?

Captain Kirk

'Gentlemen, I have no great love for you, your planet or your culture. Despite that, Mr Spock and I are going to go out there and quite probably die in an attempt to show you that some things are worth dying for.'

William Shatner's portrayal of the first Captain of the Enterprise was one of idealistic (possibly naïve) brashness. Kirk would try and communicate with a new alien or planet, but if he ever felt threatened he didn't hesitate to fire phasers. Despite this, the original series portrayed a ship and crew boldly exploring uncharted areas of space, seeking out new life and new civilisations (I'm paraphrasing just in case a Trekkie highlights the inaccuracy). In reality they were exploring new ideas and new ways of doing things. Kirk might have been a bit trigger happy, but his mission was essentially peaceful. He boasted a multicultural crew and his first officer was an alien. Perhaps if the UK Parliament represented the many different sections of our culture and society as it is today, people might be more inclined to vote.

Captain Picard

'No being is so important that he can usurp the rights of another.'

Patrick Stewart took the helm of the new Enterprise D as a very different sort of Captain. Focusing much more on diplomacy and understanding, Picard led the crew on a voyage to explore humankind's very nature. There are many examples of socio-political commentary throughout *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In one episode the Federation signs a treaty with a neighbouring species. The result changes border lines and displaces millions of the Federation's own citizens without consulting them. The story illustrated a common flaw in centralised government – that of failing to take into account the wishes of the people it has been elected to govern. In

another episode Picard has to learn to communicate with a man so alien that they cannot understand one another at all. Yet if he fails, they both die. Politicians give up trying to understand another point of view far too easily.

Captain Sisko

'It's easy to be a saint in paradise. But they do not live in paradise. Out there, there are no saints, just people – angry, scared, determined people who are going to do whatever it takes to survive, whether it meets with Federation approval or not.'

Ben Sisko wasn't only the Commander of a strategically important base; he was a father and a religious icon. Throughout the show, Sisko had to try and maintain a fragile peace in a region of space that was highly contentious. He had the highly spiritual Bajorans (angry survivors of a fifty year occupation) versus the seemingly cruel but highly nuanced Cardassians (a race trying to hold onto fading political influence). Many instantly drew parallels between Israel and Palestine. Yet the show was more about demonstrating the futility of ongoing conflict and unwillingness to try and understand another view point. Sisko epitomised a leader we would all like to see in modern politics – someone able to bridge the gap between diametrically opposed viewpoints. The show dealt with race rows, social class, disengaged and angry citizens, and war. This should sound familiar to any modern politician.

Captain Janeway

'It never fails to impress me. No matter how vast the differences may be between cultures, people always have something that someone else wants, and trade is born.'

Kathryn Janeway had to deal with being cut off from the support of the familiar. Stranded, alone and surrounded by millions of new species, this Captain spent seven years leading a mixed crew of rebels and officers home from an uncharted area of space. Janeway was both practical and pragmatic – someone trying to hold onto their own principles whilst negotiating with races that had none. In a very real way *Star Trek: Voyager* mixed the original series theme of exploration and understanding with relatable questions of survival and conflict. How do you negotiate with people you don't like whilst maintaining your own principles? Janeway dealt with the dilemma of trying not to interfere with other cultures. At the same time, she tried not to overlook oppression and brutality. Her decision to

prevent the genocide of an alien race by destroying the only technology that could get Voyager home is a case in point. She rescued several species from annihilation and even helped rehabilitate a victim of rape (Seven of Nine). Janeway explored the unknown and recognised the only way to positively influence people was to set a good example. How often do we wish current politicians had the self awareness to do the same? Instead we get MPs behaving like eight-year-olds, more interested in yelling and talking over each other in Parliament. Our MPs have more in common with naughty school children than they do with elected officials of state.

An Oasis of Hope

Star Trek is merely one example of how politicians can learn a great deal from science fiction. There are many others. Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* was published in 2013 and has since been optioned by Hollywood. Not only is it a great story, it shows a very plausible future in which society as we know it is in a state of near collapse. Business has been reduced to two huge corporations vying for control of the planet and everyone spends most of their time in a virtual reality world called 'Oasis'. Without giving away too many plot details, the story is told through the eyes of Wade, a poor kid living in the stacks (converted caravans sitting on top of one another). Wade is not happy with his real life and lives a virtual life within Oasis. There he goes to school, has friends, and enjoys himself. When the creator of Oasis dies, his death activates a hidden Easter egg style quest within the virtual reality. The winner of the three hidden challenges inherits control of the designer's company and money. When Wade figures out and resolves the first challenge it triggers a hunt for him by the rival company.

Ready Player One shows us a world where politicians have become so enthralled to big corporations, that big corporations are all that's left. People have become cut off from reality as a result and live out their lives within a facsimile of something better. Wade himself starts off as a disillusioned teenager completely uninterested in the real world around him. All that matters is Oasis. It is only as he begins to connect with other people through the VR world,

that the real world becomes slowly more attractive.

The book is primarily a work of fiction, but it does posit a believable futuristic world. *Ready Player One* serves as a frightening reminder of what could happen if we lose total interest in politics and voting. Wade doesn't believe there is anything worth fighting for until he realises what would happen if one company gained control of everything. Hitler tried to do something very similar in the 1930s.

Lessons from the Future

'It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.'

—Winston Churchill



Sometimes Churchill had his tongue firmly in cheek, but not when it came to matters of free speech and democracy. Whilst flawed, we have yet to find a better way in which to govern ourselves. Science fiction manages to explore new ideas and new ways of thinking that show us potential paths. It doesn't claim to hold the answers to all of life's problems, but it does teach us to open our minds and imagine the possibilities. You only need to look at the advances in technology to know how influential science fiction has been in this area. So it is with politics. The only difference is in terms of subtlety.

To Boldly Go Forward

If we are to stand any hope of a bright and wonderful future, we must continue to ask the most interesting question, 'What if?'; that is the question the best stories ask and the question great science fiction often works from. What if we all voted in elections? What if we taught children about politics in school in order to engage them in democracy from an early age? What if one day we are all able to come together to celebrate our differences instead of fearing and demeaning them? If that day is to ever come, it will only dawn whilst people like you and I continue to read and tell stories asking us all to think 'What if?'

Churchill once said 'Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen'. Perhaps it is time we all, politicians and voters alike, listened to the lessons that science fiction can teach.