

## *How to talk about things we know nothing about*

DiPs at *The Blue Mugge*, Mon 11<sup>th</sup> April 2016 7.45pm > 9.15pm

Notes based on discussion circle Tue 15 Dec 09 at The Blue Mugge which used an openDemocracy article ([www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)), posted in 2008 by Keith Kahn-Harris of Goldsmith's College, University of London.

1. Keith KH refers to several books on this theme leading to focus on these questions: How is it possible to be culturally literate when

a) one cannot read everything b) one forgets much of what one reads c) one's knowledge of any book or area of knowledge is always partial?

2. By the end of the 19th Century it had become difficult, if not impossible, to be a polymath... to be expert in both the natural and the human sciences; (and more recently) difficult to achieve expertise outside one's own narrow field.... The age of the expert had arrived.

3. What happens when experts disagree? Experts interpret vast swathes of data in often mutually incompatible ways... Politics consists, in part, in choosing which expert to believe and choosing what response to expert knowledge is most appropriate.

4. The ability to judge things we know nothing about is indispensable ...The starting point of this ability should be an admission of the scope and nature of our ignorance. Donald Rumsfeld's 'known unknowns' is helpful here. We cannot know everything but we can, more or less, estimate accurately the dimensions of our ignorance.

5. Examples given of people making arrogant assumptions about things they know nothing about:

a) Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* - an expert on evolutionary biology writing about the evolutionary value of religion...

b) David Irving denying the holocaust. KKH argues that non-scholars can identify (with help at least) bad scholarship...

6. These examples suggest, paradoxically, that it is through honesty about what we do not know that we are able to speak with greater authority...

7. Arguments that acknowledge the possibility of positions being revised (open-ended) are more powerful...than arguments based on arrogance.

8. Owning up to what we do not know is difficult in our political system but for better policy making it is a necessity... Consider here the related argument made by a political theorist about voters' 'low-information rationality': in other words the British general election result in 1945, for example, was a very rational decision made by millions, the vast majority of whom were not knowledgeable about specific social, economic and political issues. Ditto most of our election results; and even 'apathetic non-voters' may sometimes be making a rational decision?

9. How, in a bewildering world, can human beings balance their inescapable ignorance against the necessity to act? Everybody should be encouraged to vote in the forthcoming EU referendum for all the reasons above? Facts and information on the issues are important, of course, but experts can be wrong and voters with more limited information can - often enough - be right?

10. We should recognise... areas on the map of knowledge that lie beyond one's understanding, should be met by respectful silence... An appreciation of irony, together with a tendency towards self-deprecation, should perhaps be a precondition for contributing to public discussion...