

The Nature and Character of the Nigerian State: Explaining Election Crisis in a Peripheral State.

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Introduction

The Nigerian political process has been very unstable since the country attained independence in 1960. Governmental instability is therefore a feature of Nigerian's political life and election crisis has become part of this instability. The problem of election crisis in Nigeria is therefore not a new one. It had started soon after independence and had occurred at different times and in varying degrees.

Indeed, election crises have been examined by scholars, with all conclusions either describing the problem as being caused by ethnicity, modernization or class relations. Even some of the explanations look at election crisis in Nigeria as a problem of class struggle without adequately clarifying the nature and form of class struggle that take place within the milieu of the Nigerian social formation. Election crisis in Nigeria, therefore, has always been explained with little attention paid to factional struggle for hegemony in a peripheral state.

However, what are the causes of election crisis and why should Nigerian politicians find it so difficult to conduct free and fair elections without ending them in chaos? And what are the explanations and panacea for this problem?

In this paper, attention is focused on the Nigerian state, with a view to discussing the nature of the Nigerian state, and election crises. The paper interrogates the nature and character of the state because it is the state that uses elections for the legitimation of power. Also, the character of the dominant class is discussed because in the first place, the character of the dominant class defines the nature of the state and the values of the dominant class also determine the form and outcome of elections. The paper argues further that the Nigerian state is weak, arising from the fragmentation of the dominant class and resulting in factional struggle for power and creating chaos which inhibits the institutionalization of hegemonic order, the order that should create the guiding values for the society. Thus, because the state is weak, and coupled with the fact that the dominant class is fragmented, they can not institute hegemonic process which will be the way the dominant class will maintain a dominant culture through the use of social institutions to formalize power.

As a result, election results, census figures, revenue allocation formula, all become contentious issues and disagreement over election results, in particular, could not be resolved amicably and had all ended in chaos.

Theories of State

The way men should organize themselves into an ordered collectivity has always been a puzzle and it has therefore occupied a central place in political philosophy since antiquity like the way it features in the writings of modern social and political theorists. We however see this puzzle as the main kernel of politics. And this is because to develop a form of governance among a collectivity of individuals in a given community, there will be some intense pressure especially when different social groups come into conflict in the process of social production and over the distribution of scarce resources

But what is the state, its functions, nature and character? How does it emerge in society? Is its emergence a deliberate creation of men or is it accidental or does it arise from the biological imperative of growth responding to societal development, itself a biological thing? Thus, in contemporary political theory, scholars want to know what should be the role of the state vis-à-vis the individuals and society and also the consequences of the state in action.

History is replete with ideas about the state and like the way history had been interpreted in different ways so the ideas about the state had developed in diverse versions. The variety of the theories of state is a reflection of the needs of the times at which periods

the ideas were developed. Therefore, in contemporary political analysis, the tendency is to see the state as the main issue in politics.

The role of the state therefore becomes crucial to us, especially as the Nigerian social formation is undergoing a transition; from the tribal groups to a nation-state. It is therefore against this background that the attendant political problems with Nigerian state formation betoken the need for us to go back to the foundations of politics and seek a new (Laski, 1976), an explanation for the nature of the Nigerian state in order to understand the problem of election crisis in Nigeria.

However, the movement of thoughts on the concept of state is from the Natural, Divine, Social Contract and Force theories. We shall briefly elucidate each theory.

First, the natural theory defines the state in philosophical terms, seen as an organic entity, an independent community, organized as government and governed and supreme within a defined geographical area.

It is a theory often regarded as organic analogy because the state is like a living body whose nature is like that of biology. The theory explains the state as society, organized as a sovereign political body, a natural phenomenon, superior to and more valuable than the individuals who are its citizens. The natural theory conceives of the state as an integrated organism, set above individuals, a whole, greater than its component parts (Goodwin, 1982; Sabine and Thorson, 1973)

Second, the divine theory of state deals with the community and the ruler. In the time of antiquity politics merged with religious beliefs but more significantly was the fact that there was no method of evolving sanction against the kingship than through the divine will. That was because the notion that the ruler was God's appointed agent on earth legitimated the king's power and made it unquestionable. Consequently, the theory is based on an assumption that some people are God's chosen ones.

Third, the social contract theory, by emphasizing the human nature makes it different from both the Natural and Divine theories. The central theme of the theory is that the ruler and the ruled agreed on their respective roles and had obligations to one another. Thus, the contract was established when the all-powerful or sovereign, i.e. the people made an agreement that created the state and gave the ruler of the state certain powers. In other words the social contract theory was based on the concept of popular sovereignty in which the ultimate source of the power of the state was the people (Baradat, 1984)

The contract theory was formulated to take care of the problems of authority and individual freedom in society which, as argued by Unger, are the master problems of politics (Unger, 1975)

Lastly, the force theory of the state to begin with, is devoid of the religious myth of the divine theory, the philosophical rationality and phenomenological appearance of the natural theory and also the metaphysical and romanticism of the social contract theory. The force theory appears to be a doctrine that has the subtlety of two bull elephants engaged in mortal combat (Knuttila and Wendee, 2000). The force theory does not see the state as the natural expression of the whole of an evolving society, nor a community chosen by God or an organized community based on contract but as the means by which a small number of people impose their will on a more reluctant majority.

With the force theory, the state ceases to be co-extensive with society and becomes more closely identified with what is called the dominant class (Weldon, 1962; Ramaswamy, 2007). There are two dimensions to the force theory. One dimension holds that force has to be applied to maintain stability while the other dimension holds that society is a battlefield

between social classes and force is used by a dominant social class to hold other classes to submission.

To the Marxists, the state was not built on any contract neither can it be an organic unity but it is built on force and usurpation because society is an imbroglio of class conflict of which the state's very existence is symptomatic (Goodwin, 1982; Knuttila and Wendee, 2000).

Marx Weber argues that force is a means specific to the state and the state is a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. Weber's theory of state becomes relevant to us because his theory verges on class domination and the dominating class to him must use force to maintain domination. Because, to him again, the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate violence. Thus Weber argues that if the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the power that be. (Gerth and Mills, 1972)

Thus, in this paper our reference to the state shall mean the force theory of the state which regards the state as being historically determined because the state is like the society which arose and developed from the material world and whose understanding requires the full understanding of the material world. The force theory of the state considers the emergence of the state in terms of events and actions that arise in the process of social production, unlike the way the social contract theories tie the state to idealism, which explains the state and its formation in terms of the conscious efforts of the people to organize the community (Fadakinte, 2002)

The Peripheral State

In our description of the peripheral state, we shall look at Alavi and Ake in explaining the nature of the peripheral state. However, there are other scholars (Smith, 2009; Goulbourn, 1979; Osaghae, 2005; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1999; Beall and Hassim, 2005) who have come up with different perspectives and descriptions of the African state, but in terms of the explanations of the African state from its roots, i.e. colonialism being responsible for the conditions of the post-colonial state, both Alavi and Ake stand logically and highly pertinent.

Hamza Alavi (1979) argues that the peripheral state is the product of "the historical specificity which arises from structural changes brought about by the colonial experience and alignments of classes and by the super structures and alignments of classes and the super structures of political and administrative institutions which were established in that context and secondly from radical realignments of class forces which have been brought about in the post-colonial situation." Thus, the peripheral state possesses an outstanding feature i.e. of being characterized by relatively and highly over developed state apparatus/institution. And this is because the origin of the state is rooted in the metropolitan countries, which, having dominated the classes in the colonies became overdeveloped and autonomous with a strong bureaucratic military oligarchy. In other words, the apparatus of state was transplanted from the metropolitan state. Again, the super structure in the colony is therefore "overdeveloped" in relation to the structure in the colony, for its basis lies in the metropolitan structure itself, from which it is later separated at the time of independence (Alavi, 1975)

From Alavi's analysis of the peripheral/ post-colonial state, the following pertinent observations can be made. First, the classes that were formed in African societies were without a dominant and ruling class but a complex and multi-class relationship, thereby giving the military bureaucratic oligarchy a special role of mediating the competing interests of the social classes. Second, the strong influence of the metropolitan bourgeoisie still continues even after independence and as a result the subordination of local bourgeoisie automatically turns them weak. Third because the local bourgeoisie are weak, they become

unable to subordinate the relatively highly/developed colonial state apparatus and again because the metropolitan power still exercises dominion over it. Fourth, the state is therefore no longer an instrument of a particular class and it becomes relatively autonomous.

However, Ake (1975) begins his theory of postcolonial state with the development of productive forces, which made the state to have very limited autonomy and the limited autonomization of the state reflects the rudimentary development of commodity production and exchange.

To Ake the development of the state in Africa remains at a low level of the primitive accumulation with massive intervention of force in the labour process. Consequently, because of the low level of the development of the state, it is unable to mediate the struggle between classes and the struggle within the dominant class. Thus, the struggle to control, and the use of state power, becomes warfare. Consequently, power in Nigeria is over-valued and security lies only on getting more and more power. As a result, there is hardly any restraint on the means of acquiring power, on holding it and on using it. Hence, there is political instability because political competition becomes norm less and is carried to the extreme thereby turning political competition into warfare and the political class thus operates in a state of siege (Ihonvbere, 1989; Schraeder, 2004).

The following observations can be drawn from Ake's argument. First, that the level of state formation is very low in Nigeria to the extent that it can be argued that the state has not emerged. Second, that political domination is not autonomised and the class differences become sharper and class alienation deeper. Third, due to the intense and norm less nature of political competition, the political class becomes preoccupied with politics, i.e. with securing power and does not function as the capitalist, or ruling class and is not effective as the leader in the processes of transformation. Thus, the faction in power does not bother to engage in entrepreneurial activity because, the economic sphere has no autonomy while in the context of political struggle, and the tendency is to incapacitate and to liquidate opponents (Ake, 1975).

The Nigerian Colonial State

Whenever we make reference to the colonial state in Nigeria we mean the colonial administration and government in the colony from 1900, when the Charter of the Royal Niger Company was revoked, to 1960 when Nigeria attained flag independence. Thus, the instruments of state coercion, military, police, courts and prisons were created and a new administrative bureaucracy was set up.

We however need to know the nature and essences of the colonial state in order to understand the socio-political structure of Nigeria and the class politics it engendered in the society.

First, we have to reveal the essence of the colonial state by pointing out the most important principal features of its activities.

The British institutionalized colonial rule in order to protect her capital and to use the colonial state as the servant of imperialism. It was also to protect all those metropolitan interests which owed their existence to the continuance of imperialism (Ekundare, 1973; Toyo, 2002)

The colonial state was therefore, not a product of antagonistic interests among social classes, i.e., the colonial state did not emerge because of lack of unity of interests among social classes in the society nor because the society was turn apart by irreconcilable contradictions. Indeed, the colonial state was not an instrument of any indigenous social class that developed to mediate between social classes whose interests were irreconcilable. The colonial state was basically an agent of imperialism, an instrument of economic exploitation.

Thus, the colonial state played a major role in the process of restructuring the colonial social formation in order to facilitate or induce commodity production and surplus accumulation (Ekekwe, 1986; Akinterinwa, 2007).

The colonial state was used by the metropolitan bourgeoisie to restructure the pre-capitalist economy. Like the way the liberals will define the role of the state, the colonial state maintained law and order, provided defence against attack and preserved the way of life of the colonial society; of course in a manner that made it conducive to capitalist expansion. In short, the colonial state represented the capitalist class in metropolitan Europe, with a vested interest and in maintaining their dominance inside colonial society (Brett, 1982; Schraeder, 2004).

The Nigerian Post-Colonial State

The period of the nationalist movement was a period of intense class struggle, the struggle between the dominant indigenous social class and the metropolitan bourgeoisie. In other words, the dominant indigenous social class and the colonial state were engaged in a battle for the control of state apparatus.

However, immediately after independence the class character of the nationalist leaders began to show in their activities particularly when they began to assume political positions of authority. They appeared not to bother about the abject conditions of their people and the inherent injustice which colonialism had created in the societies. The petty-bourgeoisie now in position of political authority focused more on relations of distribution and were more desirous of imbibing the life style and privileges of colonialism than in abolishing its injustice and oppression of the Nigerian masses (Ekekwe, 1986). Thus at independence the common enemy was eliminated and the masses were confronted with an indigenous ruling class which was content to inherit the colonial economy with no aim of transforming it.

Also, at independence Nigeria began to evolve a political class, a class that was made up of those who took over from the colonial state hierarchy. Members of the class were mere agents of western capital who came to power to execute policies that were necessarily geared towards promoting the interest of metropolitan bourgeoisie like the way the colonial state did.

Post independent Nigeria therefore evolved a political class, which was created by colonialism but with its own trajectory of development based on the unleashing of capitalist forces (Teresa Turner, 1980; Drake, 2010).

Colonialism, as a historical factor in the development of the Nigerian State made her own variant of capitalist formation to possess some unique characteristics. Thus, the Nigerian capitalist formation is devoid of certain similarities, which do not make her to be quite the same with other capitalist states of Europe, where the state is the “classic state in the sense that it is the instrument of the capitalist class to maintain its domination over the other classes in the society” (Nnoli, 1986:63). That was because as at that time, the capitalists had evolved from the civil society and the capitalist class had already gained dominance over the local economy and they used that opportunity to dominate the political process as well.

In spite of the institutionalization of the capitalist mode of production, at independence, the level of economic and capitalist social values or cultural development were low with very weak liberal political traditions. All this serves to retard the growth of the masses’ political consciousness and activity and as a result, the masses ‘level of participation in social and political affairs was low. This was because the civil society associated with the institutions of state power which support and reinforce institutions had not emerged at independence. Unlike in Europe, where civil society emerged before the capitalist state was formed, the Nigerian post colonial capitalist state merged when the society was just making

an inroad into the civil society (Ikenna Nzimiro, 1986; Seligman, 1992; Harbeson, Rothchild and Chazan, 1994). Thus, four critical characteristics of the Nigerian postcolonial state can be seen from the above description.

First, a capitalist state was being formed when the society was not sufficiently in the civil society. In other words, quite unlike the developed capitalist states of Europe at that time, the Nigerian dominant social class aimed first at capturing state power prior to those of socio-economic powers.

Second and consequence on the above, the economic and internal bases of the postcolonial state were weak and the state became very fragile. It continued to depend on metropolitan power for support in order for it to maintain domination over the people and also to help in its other tasks such as establishing the structures and institutions of capitalist state formation with its concomitant values and ideologies.

Third, the postcolonial state was not strictly one that emerged to mediate between indigenous classes whose interests were irreconcilable. In other words, the post colonial state was artificial because it did not possess the autonomy to function, and it depended essentially on external forces to maintain class hegemony.

Fourth, the Nigerian social formation had not sufficiently developed well-defined class structures. In other words, at independence, there was no clear-cut alignment of all the class forces, which meant that, state formation process had just begun. In addition, the non arrival of the people into the civil society makes the dominant social class not to achieve their position of pre-eminence on a strong economic base. Rather, the achievement of such position was because they had championed the struggle against foreign domination (Gavin Williams, 1980)

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that because the Nigerian indigenous capitalist state did not evolve slowly as it happened in developed capitalist states of Europe, the Nigerian post-colonial state could not perform an ideological function of presenting itself as neutral both in class struggles and other sectional squabbles in order to seek the unity of all classes in the society and legitimize the social order.

Consequently, the post-colonial state which should be a system of special organs and agencies, to engage in the exercise of power was so weak that it could not perform any ideological function and could not represent a particular class and therefore could not establish any hegemonic order. In other words, the post colonial state could not demonstrate leadership, intellectualism and therefore did not possess the capacity for domination. Consequently, the different elements of the petty-bourgeoisie could not agree on any actions of the state. Thus, the interests of the different factions of the petty-bourgeoisie became antagonistic and democracy, like the state, was used to serve the interests of particular factions. This situation therefore transformed political power into an element that is analogous to a material possession and was made to be rooted in force. Indeed, this scenario explains why political power co-terminated with violence and constraints, making itself meaningful in physical, economic and social weapons (Friedrich, 1974; Collier, 2010).

The above manifestation of crisis of state, explains two phenomena about the postcolonial state. These are, namely, that first, because the Nigerian society had just begun the process of state formation, the dominant class split into factions to struggle for state power and second, state power became the most useful instrument in the society with which to acquire and wield control. Indeed, the way factions violently struggled for power showed that in the immediate years after independence, state power was the ultimate.

In the immediate years after independence again, politics became a competition with intense anxiety in which the struggle by the factions was done with fraud, repression,

coercion, intimidation, brute force and even physical combat. And all these were possible because the factions to the struggle had their struggle reinforced precisely because there was no sufficient restraint on the abuse of power as the state had not really emerged to mediate between the factions. (Ake, 1988)

Thus, State formation process became characterized by fragmented dominant class whose struggle for power exposed a contradiction as a concomitant part of the development of a capitalist state formation. The contradiction was between conformity and consensus. This was the contradiction that explained why the factions could not obey the rules for the bourgeois politics of “one man, one vote”. Hence, the factions could not tolerate opposition and were hostile to competition, competition that ought to be an element of liberal democracy.

The Nigerian post-colonial state immediately after independence lacked internal cohesion and, also, with no enduring institutions to form the basis of a stable regime. Consequently, factions had to struggle for power and whichever faction won power privatized the office. Those who won political power used it as a private tool. Thus, anything that affects the prospects of power in Nigeria is contested bitterly, lawlessly and violently and therefore whenever it is election time, factions become lawless, with no regard of law and they engage in the use of private armies and thugs (Ake, 1988; Collier, 2010)

The Nigerian State and Elections

At the beginning of regional government in 1954, a unique feature of the structure of the Nigerian society emerged. It was the inverted relation between economic power and political power. Thus, instead of possessing economic power and then use that to contest political power, the dominant class was given political power without economic power. Consequently, the state became a source of economic power as well as an instrument of it. Again, state power was used to suppress opponents and state power became a measure of supremacy by the faction that possessed it and the faction automatically became the economically and politically dominant one (Ekekwe, 1986). It is against this background that it can be argued that although the petty-bourgeoisie became the governing class, we cannot really describe them as the ruling class.

This was because even though they had political power, they did not have economic power and because of that they had to embark on different means and tactics to acquire economic power. For a ruling class “is that class in society in whose dominant economic interests to a large extent determine the nature of state power and intervention” (Ekekwe, 1986: 81). The ruling class as at that time remained the metropolitan bourgeoisie because that was the class that dominated the economy.

When the local petty-bourgeoisie got political power at independence, they made the acquisition of economic wealth, of material possession and economic power their preoccupations. So, at independence, the distribution of rewards became a major concern which made politics as a means of class competition to be extremely severe. Thus, the values and norms in which the petit-bourgeoisie were socialized became the socio-political values of the hope for accumulation and therefore to be a participant in class competition (politics) one had to develop a keen sense of violent competition within the dominant class.

Thus, soon after independence, politics became synonymous with severe competition, partly because the various elements of the petty-bourgeoisie never agreed on the actions of the colonial state and, partly because politics by its own nature is something for class competition. Although, the intensity and fierceness with which classes compete in politics are functions of the development of the classes.

One thing that came out very clearly even from the 1959 Federal elections was that with the social and political structures of Nigeria both at the Federal and as well as in the regions, it could not be said that there were significant component of a firm, durable, consistent interest or value-oriented unified petty-bourgeoisie. Thus, none of the political parties evolved by the different factions of the petit-bourgeoisie possessed the qualities required for high stability performance (Bretton, 1962; Dode, 2010).

Up till 1964 therefore, we could only talk of political administration or government but certainly not a state. And we have to bear this in mind because the objective character of the social formation then, made it explicit that there was no pure idea of state in Nigeria, especially the way we have tried to give broad definitions, categorizations and classifications of states. Thus, after independence, what could be described as the Nigerian state was in a flux and the dominant class was unable to evolve a class project and could not establish its hegemony (Ihonvbere, 1989; Rawlence and Albin-Lackey, 2007). Thus, whichever faction gained ascendancy and accumulated resources including political power, it began to redress other factions and sometimes embarked on exterminating them.

Consequently, it became imperative that in order to engage in accumulation, access to and control of state apparatus became a *since qua non* for such an enterprise. Thus those who are able to win power monopolized it and also monopolized the use of state resources and patronage particularly in strengthening their economic position (Ekekwe, 1986). In such a situation, opposition had little hope of achieving power even constitutionally and the opposition is aware of his exclusion to access for resources. So, election, as a means of legitimating political power, for distribution, became overvalued thereby reducing democracy to elections only. Little wonder therefore that during the 2007 general elections campaign, the former President, Olusegun Obasanjo, declared that the April 2007 general elections would be a do or die affair.

Thus what we had at independence was a dominant class who was given political power but who did not have economic power. The result was that the dominant class, who had broken into factions during the period of nationalist struggle, began to struggle, among themselves, for resources, political and economic, with the aim of taking control of state power and consolidating it. In other words, those with political power did not have control of the economy and the implication was that at independence, there was no ruling class except political elite, those who had attained their political positions only because they had championed the struggle for self-determination. Therefore, conscious of the necessity to fuse political power and economic power and in their attempt at the realization of this imperative, the indigenous dominant class could not agree among themselves on the *modus operandi* of some socio-economic and political processes. Hence, election results, census figures, revenue allocation formula all became contentious issues and disagreements over election results, in particular, could not be resolved amicably and had ended in chaos. And the problem of intra-class struggle got aggravated at election time because election is a means by which the legitimation of domination is achieved and also the means by which the legitimate use of the coercive instrument of state apparatus is used.

Thus, the nature and character of the Nigerian state, since independence can not guarantee free and fair elections nor can it ensure violent and crisis free elections and that is because the character of the dominant class is not in tune with the liberal ideology. And that is also because the dominant class does not possess the democratic ethos, such as tolerance, class consciousness and democratic temper to engage in class competition (politics).

At the inception of independence, an emergent post colonial state became weak because the society had just been incorporated into the international capitalist economy, at a time when there were no natives as capitalists. As a result, there was neither a ruling class nor

a cohesive dominant class whose interests will be protected by the state. Consequently, the fragmentation of the dominant class led to violent factional struggle for power and the ensuing chaos also led to the inhibition of the institutionalization of hegemonic order, the order that should create the guiding values for the society. Thus, because the state is weak and coupled with the fact that the dominant class is fragmented, they are not able to institute hegemonic process which will be the way the dominant class will maintain dominant culture through the use of social institutions to formalize power. Hence, the fragmented dominant class is preoccupied with winning elections, at all cost, because they realized that political power is highly valuable.

In the process, the society became crisis ridden, making the state violent, irrational and intolerant of opposition, with Nigerian leaders becoming lawless. Thus, elections are rigged, oppositions decimated and even assassinated just because the faction with political power does not want to lose it.

Conclusion

Thus far, we can argue that the crisis at the level of the Nigerian state is the genesis of the election crisis and political instability in the country; and this is because dominant values in society at any historical epoch are the values of the dominant class and since the state is a representative of the dominant class, the unstable nature of the state – i.e. lack of cohesion among the dominant class – leads to the absence of dominant and coherent political values and arrangement, including institutional machinery for leadership succession, one of which is elections.

Election crisis in Nigeria, indeed, is a problem that reflects one of the attendant problems of state formation in emergent democracies. Thus, this stage in the history of Nigerian socio-economic formation explains that the state is institutionally constituted in such a way that it enjoys limited independence from the social classes, particularly the dominant social class. This situation of limited independence becomes a problem because autonomisation is the very essence of the state as a modality of domination. (Ake, 1985) Accordingly, state formation in Nigeria is still at the stage where its character and nature become nebulous and opaque thereby making intra-class struggle for power an endemic phenomenon. The Nigerian post-colonial state is still not cohesive with common interest, necessary to establish it as a modality of mechanism for domination; for it is when the state is autonomous that it will cease to be an instrument of a single class and be above all classes.

What then is the way forward?

In the first place, an environment must be created where, from amongst the dominant elites, those with economic power be encouraged to also hold political power. The ensued development will lead to the evolution of a ruling class with paternalistic interest and in the process create hegemonic order. This position will also encourage the fractionalized dominant elites to be cohesive and more united because of their interest to protect capital. The present situation only produces individual politicians who do not have any interest to protect and who are ready to set the society ablaze whenever election results do not favor them.

Lastly, the over concentration of political and economic powers at the federal level should be reviewed. The states should be more autonomous in order to reduce the powers at the centre, with the tensions it generates, so that the centre will stop the constant bullying and harassment of the citizens and coercing the states. In other words, Nigeria should adopt true federalism, where the states of the federation will enjoy high degree of autonomy, With that arrangement, the present federal – unitarism will cease to exist and there will be no imperial power at the centre, which uses its powers in the most reckless and irresponsible manner.

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