

# Brexit means Brexit: the narcissism in an idea

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## Introduction

As psychotherapists we focus on the individual stories of our clients' lives. We tend to leave the politics that shape their lives to events beyond the consulting room. Ethically we are reluctant to apply mental health diagnostics to public figures such as politicians. However, there are times when a psychological formulation captures the political mood. At the time of writing, in the Autumn of 2016 that mood centres on narcissism (Smith 2016).

This article turns the focus away from the narcissism of politicians and looks at the narcissism invested in the ideas which they promote. It views narcissism as a property in and of the idea rather than the person. It is a less confronting, less shaming and more relational approach. It helps see how narcissistic patterns are established and maintained through the inflation of ideas. And there is much wider scope to look at the relational dynamics of narcissism as a social and psychological structure. As will be shown, there are many ways to respond to the narcissistic over-valuation of an idea ranging from flag waving devotion to self-promotion or cynical debunking.

This paper will seek to define and then map out the narcissism in and of an idea (figure 1) and apply it to a clinical example which in turn maps on to the political example of Brexit in the UK and similar patterns relating to Trump's campaign to be elected as president in the USA. The paper is not taking a view in support of one political programme or another but seeking to show how the narcissistic properties of any political idea can limit open dialogue and weaken democracy. The paper concludes with another map (figure 2) that tracks being in dialogue with ideas as an alternative to the narcissism of an idea. Throughout, narcissism is understood as a pattern of relating that operates within and between us individually, interpersonally and culturally. This relational approach is greatly helped by the concepts and methods of Cognitive Analytic Therapy (Ryle and Kerr 2003). Exploring the narcissism of ideas in politics may help us see similar patterns clinically, in organisations, in our social identities and culturally.

## Narcissus and Echo

The classic myth of Echo and Narcissus is a useful starting point for thinking relationally about contemporary narcissism. A young woman called Echo wants a relationship with Narcissus, a

handsome, self-regarding huntsman. He dismisses and ignores her and as punishment the Gods make him fall in love with nothing more than an idea of himself: an image of his own beauty in a still pool of water before him. He is innocently transfixed by love for this image, calls to it. "I love you." He has no time or thought for anything else. Echo mistakes his calling out to his image in the pool as a call to her and calls back in 'echo'. She pines away until only her echo of his love (of an idea) remains. Echo becomes an echo. They both wither away for love of an idea with which no dialogue is possible and with which no other ideas can be allowed. Imagine though, the conversation if Echo and Narcissus could step out of the confines of the myth and be in real dialogue. Narcissus might acknowledge to Echo. "We were both losers in the end, me directly to the idea and you indirectly because of my neglect of you." And Echo would reply. "How humiliating is that? You chose a virtual relationship with an idea rather than a real relationship with me." But Narcissus replies. "It felt perfectly real at the time. It was wonderful and complete. I had no sense that there was nothing to it."

## The narcissism in and of an idea

The narcissism in and of an idea arises when a particular belief has such a powerful appeal it becomes overvalued and overloaded as an expression of our needs for meaning and belonging. The idea can take on a life and personality of its own. We give part of ourselves to the idea. Then we defend the idea to protect the investment of ourselves in it. At its most extreme, neighbouring ideas fall under its orchestral sway, and competing views are also lost to us because they are denied and devalued as ridiculous or foreign for fear they may expose or contaminate our precious idea. Attachment needs for belonging and self-regard outweigh our curiosity and need for truth.

This double loss of ourselves to the idea, and the loss of other ideas to ourselves, creates a third, more public loss of our capacity to connect and think openly together. Dialogue is lost and personal and political debate is diminished and loses its grace.

## Normal and extreme narcissism

The narcissism of an idea varies in its intensity, rigidity and extreme. At the normal, developmental and healthy end of the narcissism of ideas we let them carry us away a bit and then negotiate a reasonable relationship with them. A degree of idealisation is necessary to be inspired (Kohut 1979, 2007) or strike up a conversation; get attention or make a mark in the public realm. It is a stepping-stone: a temporary identity marker in the process of negotiating our way in the world. Our relationship is neither overly associative with one idea or dissociative of others but shimmering back and forth somewhere in the 'Goldilocks' zone of human dialogue in the middle.

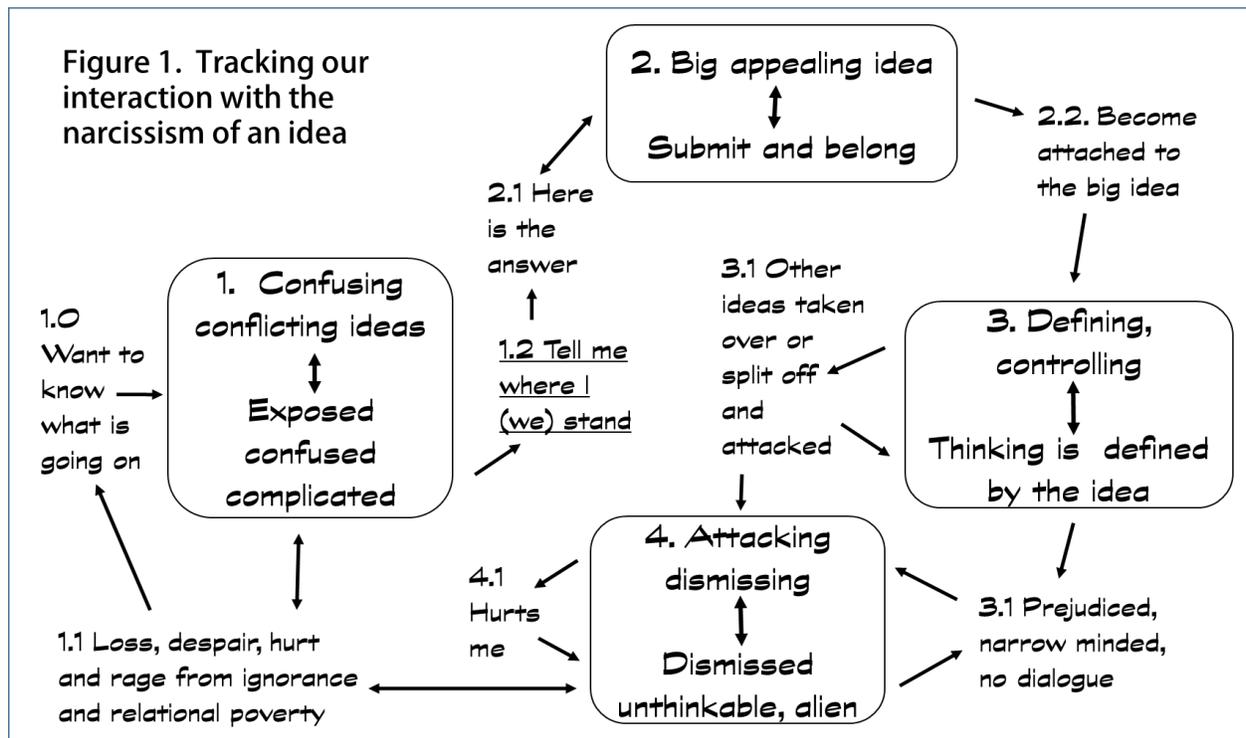
A normal narcissism in ideas is most apparent in our early development and most useful at times of transition and crisis such as adolescence when, for fear of being at sea, we throw a line to one identity hook or another, to buy into an idea of ourselves that moves us on. Metaphorically you

might call it a T-shirt moment where the idea is penned onto the cotton fabric but goes not much deeper.

In contrast, at the extreme end of a scale of the narcissism of an idea, like the mythical Narcissus, we are so taken up by an idea projected before us that we lose ourselves to it. It swallows us up and defines us. The idea defines us. It is tattooed on our forehead; etched in our memory. We are so in love with the idea - so associated with it - that we cannot see any harm in it or share any reflective thought about it. And the tragedy is that in the process we devalue and unconsciously dismiss ideas around us for fear that our separation from them is in doubt.

## Mapping the relational dynamics of narcissism

The process of relational mapping (Potter 2016) using CAT’s reciprocal role procedures, (Ryle and Kerr 2003) can help track our individual and collective interaction with the narcissism in and of an idea. In figure 1, In our search to know what to understand and know what is going on (1.0) presents us with conflicting and complicated ideas. A common response is to look for clarity (1.2)



(“tell me where I stand”) and waiting temptingly in response is a big appealing idea which offers not just meaning but also belonging (2). We submit to the idea and gain identity and belonging (2.2). However, the price is twofold: it becomes a defining idea and other ideas are subordinated to it and the whole process of thinking is narrowed by it (3). At the same time competing ideas and, or groups who are rival idea makers, are attacked and dismissed as a threat (4). This further locks in and narrows our thinking but also hurts us as we become aware of a stark reality: belong to the overvalued idea and feel included or be part of the devalued ideas and be excluded. The

latter hurts the individual and the wider culture 4.1). And yet, in the face of loss and despair the longing (rageful or dreamlike) for a magical big idea grows stronger.

This internal narcissistic surrender (as individuals or communities) to the force of the idea is compounded by an external loss of connection with the wider world of ideas. In a process of selective attention and selective inattention, we cannot think outside the box in which the idea puts us. The process of association (these ideas are me/us) is tightly bound up with an equally powerful process of dissociation (these ideas are not me/us) (see theories of Harry Stack Sullivan 1953 and in Barton 1995). Those who attempt to think the unthinkable (dissociated ideas) are ridiculed or seen as stupid and alien (box 4). All ideas are tarred by the narcissistic brush and either overvalued or devalued. The public and private result is a diminished capacity for debate and dialogue.

Personalities and groups that are suited to such a climate tend to dominate. The more populist and crude elements of democracy (referenda, rallies, tweeting and campaign meetings) are overvalued and win out over the more refined and challenging elements (parliaments, coalitions, committees and debate) which in turn are devalued. Events like a referendum (Yes or no, in or out, for us or against us) feed and echo more polarised identity politics. They encourage an extreme narcissism of ideas in ways that narrow and limit our democratic resources and take us out of dialogue with ourselves and society. It is a matter of conjecture whether social media amplify this process. There is a 'twitter tunnel' effect as people who follow ideas by sound bites become more narrow, cynical or polarised. A more personal pattern of voting according to personal feeling replaces citizenship and voting on balance of considerations.

## Multiple responses

Once an idea has been inflated with narcissistic properties, the claims on it become more important than truths in it. There are a variety of reciprocal positions which can be taken. By mapping them along the lines of figure 1 the forces which establish and maintain narcissism can be more easily understood. Each of the following responses can be potentially matched to a place on the map as numbered on Figure 1. There are further combinations and elaborations of these responses which the reader can map out in each political or clinical story.

- There is the flag waver who sustains the inflated the idea with his/her admiration but does not draw the limelight on to themselves. (2.1)
- There is the big head who inflates themselves by taking the attention generated by the idea onto themselves. He or she puts themselves in the frame of the idea and makes a 'selfie' of it. 'This is me and my big, special idea.' (2.0)
- There is the devotee who faithfully submits to the inflated idea and becomes such a believer they are at risk of being lost and empty without it. (2)
- There is the cynic who mocks all forms of commitment to the idea thereby protecting themselves from strong feelings of belonging and consequent abandonment or vulnerability. (4)

- There is the iconoclast who knocks all ideas down for fear that otherwise they will be dangerously inflated (4).
- There is the lost, hurt soul whose idea has been abandoned and deflated and has nothing to commit to and wanders in search of an idea to love or a love to give him/her and idea. (1.1) They are at risk of hurt and rage at the loss of their idealisation and an even more extreme search for a big, rescuing idea.

There are other responses to the narcissism of the idea beyond the space of this paper: the magpie who will pinch ideas from elsewhere and use them to line the nest of the idea he or she loves. The flirt who plays with one idea after another, exciting all without committing to any. The floater who dares not risk commitment and fights shy of having an idea about anything. This last is a kind of anti-narcissism of the idea in the sense of having no idea (see the far left of the scale in figure 3 at the end of this article). There is the intellectual for whom the narcissism of the idea is but a part of its curiosity and who seeks, like a cognitive anthropologist to see where the idea came from, to whom it belongs and how it gets around. And there is the therapist for whom ideas are part of our make-up and is seeking to understand how they became composed and orchestrated in the way they are and how negotiation between ideas can be enabled.

## About Narcissism

Narcissism is among the most widely explored subjects for psychotherapists. Sigmund Freud talked of the miracle power or grandiosity that could be invested in words. (On Narcissism 1914). There are reviews of both concept and myth in Holmes (2001), Symington (1995) and a rich exploration of the personality and developmental dynamics in Stephen Johnson's book, *Character Styles* (2007). Narcissism is covered from a Cognitive Analytic perspective by Nehmad (1997). There is no direct reference to a narcissism in or of ideas in the literature though it seems implicit when read from a more dialogical and relational perspective. See for example Kohut's concept of the self-object (Kohut 1977, 2009). It is as if narcissism has always been understood as a two-way psycho-dynamic process in terms of self-love or loss of self to particular self-states. The narcissism in and of ideas points to a three-way relationship between an overvalued idea, the inner workings of self and the interactions with wider society. In this way narcissism is a relational theory rather than a formulation of individual psychology. This chimes well with the more dialogic perspective based on the work of Bakhtin (Holquist 1994).

Relational psychotherapies can track this dialogic complexity. In particular, the cognitive analytic concept of reciprocal role procedures (as shown in Figure 1 and 2) can link ideas and human relations in a multi-layered dialogic sequence (Leiman 2002). At the heart of CAT's reciprocal role procedure is the relationship between self and others through a coping 'idea' (assumption, schema, core belief) which is meant to serve as a way of understanding and managing difficult feelings. To view the narcissism invested in an idea in this way is to turn a cognitive therapy into a cognitive relational therapy which can be simultaneously interpersonal, social and inter-subjective. Without a dialogic or relational view of ideas, we separate thought (as a purely

cognitive activity) from relating (as a purely interpersonal activity) when in fact our ideas and processes of thinking are deeply woven into our relationships with each other and the society around us.

## A clinical example

As a clinical example, the narcissism of the idea of thinness (for example in forms of anorexia) can take over the individual to the point that it becomes a solution to the need for an identity. The idea that I am thin takes under its wing other ideas such as being beautiful, in control, worthy of love and superior. The idea dominates the person's relational imagination in a fusion of thought and feeling. The idea of thinness is not negotiable. Any thoughts which challenge the dominant idea such as neglecting health or being isolated are dismissed and devalued. All those who care and want to help begin to feel like Echo to Narcissus. We love you but for you love means thinness. Real help withers away until it is only an echo of help.

The detailed work of being and staying thin feels powerful as if on top of the world. The clinical challenge is not going head-to-head and argue with the person's relationship with the idea of thinness but to develop more open thinking in a neighbouring area which is free of narcissistic investment. In this relatively free territory, the capacity to negotiate, reflect and make links between self, others and ideas might be more easily enabled and then carried tentatively over to the main problem. Other examples in mental health abound. The mission statements of public organisations become idealised and staff reciprocate with the narcissism of the idea in their different ways. Middle managers claim powers or excuse their lack of power (it is more than my job is worth, do it by the book) in the name of the narcissism of the organisation's guiding principle or professional code. The very idea of getting well or of being sorted can be invested in narcissistically by helpers and patient alike. Intermediate steps are devalued and just being okay is dismissed.

## Brexit and other political examples

Like thinness, the narcissism in and of the idea of Brexit is that the political processes that sustain and govern a country can be reduced to the projection on to the body politic of one over-valued idea. Like thinness, Brexit is promoted as the idea that brings with it all manner of benefits: national sovereignty, lower immigration, money back for the NHS and a general feeling of 'taking back control'. But this diversity of ideas is swallowed up by the Brexit idea. We, like Echo to Narcissus, hear the words 'take back control' and whisper in echo to ourselves. 'With Brexit I will 'take back control of my life.'

The up and down, yoyo dynamic of a narcissism of ideas shows up in the sequence for Nigel Farage (BBC 2016) of carrying a narcissistic wound from his early years promoting a British exit from the European Community and being met in the European parliament by laughter (as he recalled it). On attending parliament after his referendum triumph with the Brexit idea he was, by all accounts, strident and contemptuous of his parliamentary colleagues, saying "You are not

laughing now”. Shortly after he resigned as leader of UKIP saying, as if Narcissus waking from his loss of self to the idea of Brexit. “I want my life back.” Perhaps a politician risks losing themselves to an idea and thereby losing the capacity to be in dialogue with it.

Boris Johnson occupied a different position according to some speculations he was more cynical about Brexit. He was suspected of using the narcissism in and of the idea of Brexit to aggrandise himself rather than champion a particular idea.

Each politician responded to the narcissism of the idea of Brexit in a different way but the power of the idea in the process was further inflated by the noise of their diverse support.

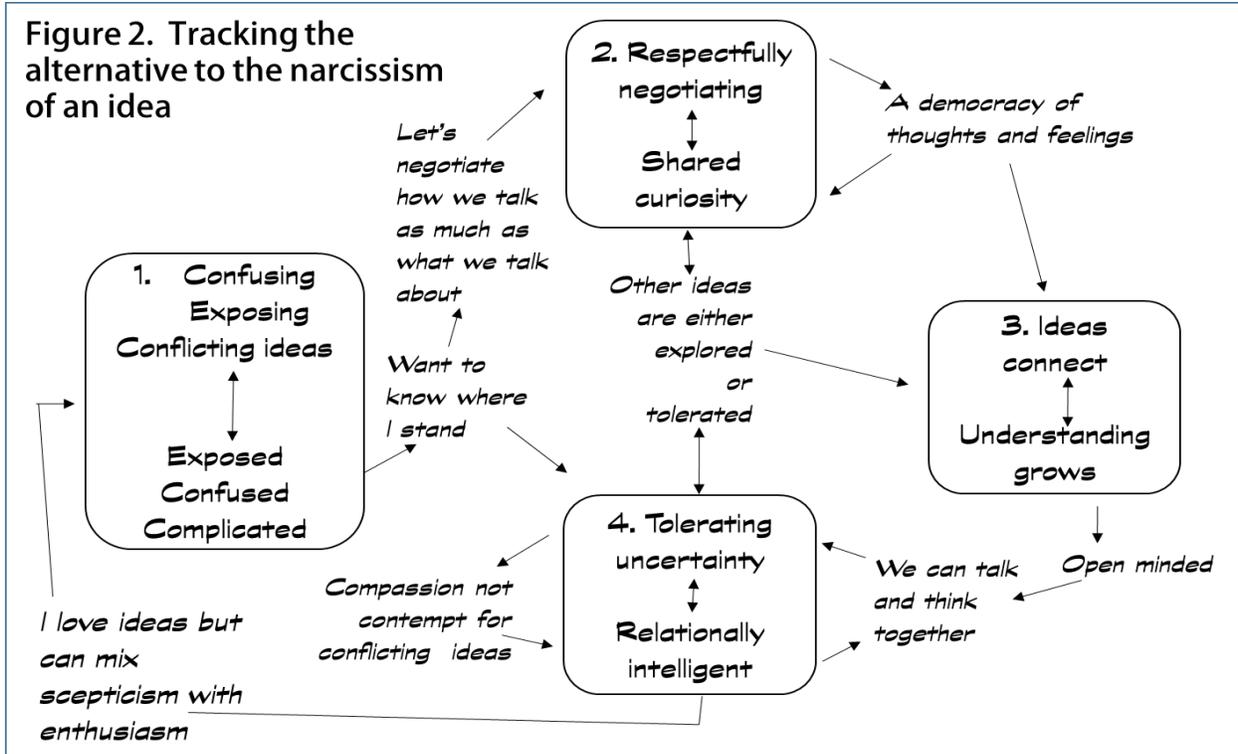
In a climate saturated by a narcissism in and of ideas extremists can prevail from all sides. The increase in hate crimes and the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP show how extreme forms of narcissistic investment in ideas can lead people to lose themselves to an idea in ways that are danger to others.

For those supporting the remain side of the referendum vote their own narcissistic investment in the idea of Europe seemed utterly taken from them and they felt abandoned, depleted and unable to think (4).

A different relationship to the narcissism in and of ideas is a feature of Donald Trump’s election campaign where inflated ideas are chanted back and forth between him and his followers: ‘Crooked Hilary’, ‘Make them Pay’ (the Mexican People for the Wall), ‘Make America Great Again’ (New York Times 2016). The audience are intoxicated by the ideas and bond with each other and Trump through them. Trump’s skill is to be enchanted by the ideas he throws out but not seemingly the author of them. He talks of we as if he is part of the crowd following a movement of ideas that is greater and truer than he and they can know. He is both Echo and Narcissus. A striking example is his promotion of the idea that the current US President, Barack Obama was not born in America. With his arms outstretched and hands open as if confessing a truth which is not of his own making Trump declares it this way: “People say, people say (repeated twice), Obama was not born in America. People say this. I don’t know but people say this.” What this leaves, is a truth claim built around the idea that ‘people say’ and that what people say is important. He draws his own narcissistic fuel from the idea but at the same denies responsibility for it. The idea calls the tune and defines the relationship with his supporters who also draw strength by his apparent solidarity with them. Like Narcissus’s love for his idea of himself these political ideas are hollow inside. Nothing can be asked of them because once inflated nothing is there to discover except a great big narcissistic bubble of an idea. People say is the perfect hollow platform for a presidential campaign. People say can mean anything. People say means people say.

## In dialogue with ideas

The opposite of a narcissism of ideas is being in dialogue with ideas. In figure 2 the patterns of relating to ideas, loving them, investing in them in an open dialogue is mapped out using the same template as figure 1. We still want to know where we stand in the face of conflicting and confusing ideas (1). We still shimmer between using ideas to share understanding and to affirm belonging. We still wobble between ‘true’ think and ‘groupthink’. The more open our dialogue the less narcissism in and of our ideas. But being in dialogue means that we value how we share



our ideas as much as what they are about. We can put heart and soul into an idea but only if we can equally stand back from them and negotiate their worth. Respectful negotiation (2) brings out a shared curiosity and enables more democracy of thoughts and feelings. Ideas connect (3) more than they are split off and we develop understanding and tolerance for uncertainty (4). There is compassion more than contempt for conflicting ideas. Within and between us, we encourage a negotiator’s mind (Potter 2016). Our human love of ideas and attachment to them as a source of meaning and identity is mixed with scepticism and open mindedness. We are more likely to work side by side with competing ideas and not go head-to-head with the person who holds ideas divergent from ours. Compassion and reflection replace contempt and ignorance.

## Science and Art

Science and art are the two great counters to the narcissism in and of ideas. Their importance should be self-evident but in recent times it has needed asserting and defending. Firstly, science invites us to be curious, relational, rational and reflective in response to ideas. The methods and

values of science take the narcissistic paint from the idea and it is seen for what it is worth through a careful accounting of the facts before us. No doubt there is plenty of narcissism of ideas among scientist and academics, but the scientific method is a transparent, verifiable debunker of such tendencies. The good authority, openness to scrutiny, the diligence to test and retest ideas creates in science a good authority and expertise which is at the heart of what we do best.

On the other side we have art in all its diversity of intent and expression. Art takes all the positions on our narcissistic ideas map and helps us feel and see what has been over inflated, surrendered to, denied or dismissed. Its role is to invite us to play with perspective and intention by loosening the fixed idea, debunking the idealised solution and exposing false authority. Art invites us to be excited and anxious, engaged and detached in our love of ideas and the power they can hold over us.

## Conclusions

This paper has offered a provisional look at how our need to love ideas, lose ourselves in them, stake our lives on them, feel big by association with them or like Echo feel abandoned and rendered worthless by neglect of them has features of narcissism. On a continuum of being completely interested and invested narcissistically in an idea or being completely unrelated to and uninvolved in an idea, there is a middle hovering and shimmering point of being in dialogue



(see figure 3). There is a developmental necessity for a narcissism in and of ideas from the very

beginning of our lives. This has not been explored here. This paper has been mostly concerned with the narrowing of minds, the loss of dialogue that results from the narcissistic overvaluing of one idea. It is not just the denied ideas which are at risk of being lost, the love of an idea can also be the death of an idea because it gets isolated from the community of ideas around it. The more an idea is inflated, and our narcissistic needs are invested in it the more opinion gets stronger and thought gets weaker. Shouting gets louder and respect declines. The public become followers, take sides or become cynical or apathetic.

Political history gives us plentiful accounts of the narcissism in an idea that draws a mob or a dictatorship in its support. Equally there are plentiful examples where the narcissism in an idea becomes institutionalised and part of a national code or ideology. God save the king. Rule Britannia. We may also turn good politicians into narcissists, simply by the way we and the media invest in their ideas. The new wave of identity politics and confrontational movements is one of the drivers of this narcissism in and of ideas. By this belief we will be defined. It is the opposite of a rational and pragmatic politics. It risks weakening the delicate structures of democracy until

they only survive as an echo of the political will. We are struggling to find the balance between passion and perspective.

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