

Britain's Political Impasse in the Wake of the Elections: And the Winner is? The Media

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I admit to being one of the many millions of people who didn't watch any of the so-called Prime-Ministerial 'debates' that have swarmed over the television channels since the announcement of the date of the General Election on 6 May. Not that this meant that I escaped the media onslaught on what's left of our political senses even if, after the first 'debate', viewing figures for 'Debate No.2' plummeted by over 50%.^[1] If you've seen one, you've seen them all.

'Debates' on television between the major candidates are a new feature of the UK's alleged political life and clearly designed to whip up some kind of interest in the election given that around two-thirds of the electorate don't bother to vote. Thus the job of motivating has been given over to the media and don't we know it! Regardless of which channel I switch to, it's one of the three, Brown, Cameron and Clegg rabbiting on about, well the same thing really, as actual analysis of programs and policies to deal with the economic and political crisis didn't really figure in the 'debates' at all, let alone the disastrous wars conducted in our name.

"By the end of the second debate on April 22, the word 'Iraq' had been mentioned a total of five times over the course of the three hours of discussion." — 'The art of looking Prime Ministerial - The 2010 UK General Election', Media Lens, 28 April, 2010

The Media Lens piece continued:

"It is easy to become desensitised by the lack of sincerity, honesty and moral concern in the mainstream - even Clegg's level of dissent can seem impressive. But in the five years since the last UK general election, Iraq has continued to be torn to shreds - four million refugees continue to live in traumatised exile and misery, afforded negligible media coverage. Iraq is one of the great criminal acts and human disasters of modern times. Gordon Brown - who, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote the cheques to fund the war - is directly responsible. David Cameron is also deeply complicit. While it is true that the Liberal Democrats opposed the war, they discontinued that opposition the moment British troops began fighting. By any reasonable standard, Clegg's unwillingness to seriously address these issues was shocking."

The idea of televised debates between the candidates was first proposed forty-six years ago in 1964, and of course it was rejected.^[2] My, how times have changed reflecting as it does the desperate nature of the political class who fear not a 'hung Parliament' but ruling an

electorate that doesn't want any of them to rule. But without any kind of real alternative on offer, the electorate have to be beaten into submission by a concerted media onslaught, 'vote or else you'll get a hung Parliament'.

But times have moved on and we now have a relatively 'media savvy' political class barring the gaffs, eg, Gordon Brown's disastrous "she's a bigot" comment (for the vicarious amongst you watch the video, Gordon Brown Caught Calling Grandmother 'Bigoted'), which although true—the woman is a bigot—doesn't go down well with our xenophobic population, bombarded as it is with relentless propaganda about the alleged evils of immigration.

And Brown's faux pas is nothing compared to the comment by the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP) candidate for Dagenham, Richard Edmonds who said, when a woman told him she wouldn't vote BNP,

"Silly *****, aren't they? Maybe she's got a black kid, you see? That, I think, is always the explanation around here. Once they go with the blacks, they are part of the black tribe. Wicked, horrible, stupid. I've seen it many, many times."

But at least with the BNP we know what we're dealing with, not so with Labour, a party that has passed some of the most pernicious and racist immigration laws on the statute books.

With regard to our economic crisis, the record is just as abysmal, thus the banking bailout, to the tune of some £150 billion is presented to the electorate as a fait accompli. No mention of the fact that the record deficit of £163 billion is almost equal to the public bailout of the banks. I say almost because it's the banks we bailed out that the government is borrowing the £163 billion from, plus interest of course, bringing the total UK debt to £900 billion (by 2011 it will hit a staggering £1.3 trillion)! This year interest payments alone amount to £42.9 billion, a figure that accounts for the vast profits the banks are making.[3]

Thus the main objective of these 'debates', aside from getting the punters to the polling booths, is to rationalize the savage cuts that whatever government gets 'elected' will try to enforce, if we let them. And judging by past performance, that's just what we will let them do.

This is how the Independent ran with the story on its front page on the 28 April,

"Tell us the truth on the economy"

Something the Independent has had several years to do but as with the government, it too has also failed to inform. The Independent's front page continued:

"Labour: £44.1bn of cuts remain undefined"

"Conservatives: £52.5bn of cuts yet to be specified"

"Lib Dems: £34.4bn hole in deficit reduction plans"

The article continues on p.2,

“A damning indictment of the failure of all three political parties to tell the public the truth about the painful spending cuts that must follow the election has been issued by the nation’s leading think-tank on the public finances, the Institute for Fiscal Studies.”

A statement loaded with assumptions. Why must painful cuts be made? Who says the Institute for Fiscal Studies is the nation’s leading think-tank on fiscal studies? And what if they are? The assumption made by the Independent is that in order to save capitalism, us non-capitalists are going to have to pay for it. No alternative is offered either by the media or the political class.

“What is most striking, and highly relevant to the assessment of this week’s IFS intervention, is that at no point did the monetarist economists – or their neoliberal successors – explain why any particular limit to public deficits and debt was economically necessary. Instead we are offered, then as now, an entirely circular argument. We are told that deficit cuts are necessary because international bond markets require them. So why do international bond markets require them? Because they think that cuts are necessary. And why is that? Because the economic experts say so!” — ‘Cutting Public Debt: Economic Science or Class War?’ By Hugo Radice, The Bullet, 4 May, 2010

In any case what party ever won an election by telling the electorate that once in power they were going to screw the voters big time?

So too with all the talk of the dangers of a ‘hung parliament’, that is to say, where no one party has a governing majority. With no appreciable difference between the three main parties, what difference does it make which one ‘wins’? And this view is reinforced by the opinion polls that tell us that very many people see no difference between the three and thus why there are so many ‘undecided’.

With a rigged electoral system, successive governments whether Labour or Conservative have ‘won’ with around one-third of the votes, even less if you take into account the fact that about two-thirds don’t bother to vote.

So what if you want to know what the other candidates in our rigged electoral system have to say? Well dream on as none had a look in, not even the Scottish National Party, probably the biggest of the smaller parties. Thus the ‘debates’ were nothing more than a variation on a theme, the theme being ‘vote for me’, with all the airs of a presidential candidate, not the (unelected) heads of political parties.

Back in the 1960s, the constituency Labour Party (as opposed to the Parliamentary Labour Party) had around 500,000 members at the grassroots level. We also had over half (55%) of the working population in trade unions which also had MPs (allegedly) representing them in Parliament.[4]

Today the constituency Labour Party is a shadow of its former self as are the trade unions. The lack of involvement in political affairs explains in part how the Labour Party has been able to mislead the electorate. With no voice of our own (even a reformist one) today, more than ever before we are ruled by a kleptocracy, desperate to hang on, not to power (that’s not an issue) but to restore legitimacy in the rule of capital. Hence the unprecedented (and tedious) media onslaught on our senses.

And what of the trade unions today? The media and entertainment union, BECTU for example advises the following:

“As polling day arrives, many are still deciding who to vote for. A comparison of the main parties’ manifestos coupled with a look at their records in office makes clear that on the issues most important to BECTU members – whether it’s the minimum wage, the BBC or broadcasting generally, film, arts funding, pensions, trade union rights – we are safer with Labour and most threatened by the Conservatives.” — ‘Labour Party ‘closest ally’ on industry issues’ BECTU

Thus working people can expect no real leadership from the trade unions on the fundamental issues of today, just protecting sectional interests (they hope), but this is after all what they are meant to do. But “safer with Labour”? This is the same Labour government that as part of its 1997 election manifesto promised to restore rights to the trade unions taken away by Thatcher and the Tories, but of course never did.

When you have a key trade union like BECTU joined at the hip to a corporatist and ‘democratic-fascist’ Labour Party is it any wonder that the electorate are fatalistic and thoroughly disenchanted with the political process?

Notes

1. According to the audience ratings, ‘Debate No.1’ had 9.4 million viewers, ‘Debate No.2’ had 4.1 million viewers. I haven’t been able to track down figures for ‘Debate No.3’ but I’ll wager they were as low as No.2 or lower.

2. “A proposal for leaders debates was first mooted at the 1964 general election when Harold Wilson challenged then Prime Minister Alec Douglas Home to an election debate. Home rejected the proposal on the grounds that: “You’ll get a sort of Top of the Pops contest. You’ll then get the best actor as leader of the country and the actor will be prompted by a scriptwriter.” Wilson himself rejected Ted Heath’s proposal for debates, worried about the unpredictability of such a debate and not wishing to give Heath exposure as a potential Prime Minister. In 1979, Jim Callaghan became the first incumbent Prime Minister to agree to a debate but the idea was rejected by Margaret Thatcher on the grounds that presidential-style debates were alien to Britain. Both Thatcher and her successor as Prime Minister, John Major, rejected Labour leader Neil Kinnock’s debate proposal, with Major commenting that “every party politician that expects to lose tries that trick of debates and every politician who expects to win says no.” — ‘General Election Debates, 2010’, Wikipedia

3. Debt Bombshell

4. “Trade union membership has declined over the last two decades. In 1979 13.3 million people were members of trade unions and the proportion of employees who were union members stood at 55%... In 2003, union membership in Britain, estimated from the Labour Force Survey, was 7.42 million. The proportion of all employees who were union members was 29.1%. Source: bized.co.uk.

In 2007 it stood at 28.4 per cent. Source: National Statistic Online in 2009 it was even lower

at 23.5%, almost one-third of its 1979 number. Source: 'How union membership has grown - and shrunk', The Guardian.

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