

Parliamentary Democracy: A Triumph of Victorian Engineering

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To understand what's going on with Britain today we have to look back to the 19th century and the rise of industrial/mercantile capitalism, for it was during that period that the Victorians got into the business of myth-making in a big way, rewriting our history almost completely. Truly a triumph of Victorian engineering.

The vast movement of people not only from country to city but from artisan to wage labourer fractured our collective memory so completely that inventing a new, more capitalist-compliant version of 'our' history was relatively easy to do. Add to this the fact that even the oppressed working masses still benefited from the wealth of England's slave/colonial Empire, persuading people that 'Britannia Ruled the Waves' wasn't such a difficult task to accomplish. And we need only look at the USA for a current example of how Empire corrupts totally.

But in the late 19th century the rising power of organized (white, male) labour finally found political expression through the Labour Party and the (reluctant) acceptance by the ruling class that the working class wanted a part of the action, if not the whole ball of wax! Something had to be done to avert a possible disaster: Revolution.

Enter Parliamentary 'democracy' and the route chosen by organized labour as the one true road to socialism. And it's here that the role of myth-making was and remains crucial to the exercise of 'democracy', a ritual performed every 5 years as the political elite go through the motions of winning our votes.

However, once the Labour Party dropped any pretence at being the party of Labour in 1997, the cruel trick played on us for the past one hundred years is now clear for all to see. And right on cue, the 'crisis of legitimacy' descends on the ruling elite.

The mainstream politicians and their accomplices in the media, would have you believe that the coming election on May 6 is the most important since, well I suppose they mean 1945? The problem is that they're right but for all the wrong reasons.

The first is obvious: the political elite are desperate to restore some kind of legitimacy, nay belief in the 'system', that is to say, preserving their own power, seriously challenged following a series of (on-going) scandals and gargantuan examples of total incompetence eg. the government's disastrous attempt at digitizing the National Health Service, a J12 billion+ scandal that we all paid for and which doesn't work and/or nobody will dare use it. It is no exaggeration to state that virtually everything the Labour government has meddled with has been a total disaster. The only ones to benefit are Labour's business cronies with their 'public-private partnerships' et al who have walked away with billions of public money,

our money!

Thus a high turnout, driven I might add by an unprecedented media onslaught led by good ol' Auntie Beeb, would reflect some kind of restored 'trust' in the system, best exemplified by the rise of Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats, whose only claim to fame is that he isn't Cameron or Brown.

The degree to which the state is hanging on to its suit of Emperor's clothes by a thread is evident in the rise of the Liberal Democrats, vacuous as they are, looking almost like 'old' Labour minus the cloth caps. But I seriously doubt that the propaganda onslaught will have the desired effect, Nick Clegg notwithstanding.

In fact it's a sign that the electorate are grasping at straws, anything to get rid of what is obviously a corrupt and sclerotic political class. The problem is that the Lib-Dems are just as much a part of 'club' as the rest of them. Becoming an MP is just like joining the Masons, minus the secret handshake.

In any case, the electoral system is so rigged that even if the Lib-Dems gain the highest percentage of the votes cast, it will still end up being a Labour and/or Tory victory due to the 'first past the post' system that relies on the fact that it's based on population densities not on the total votes cast.

The bottom line is that it doesn't matter who 'wins', thus all the hot air about the dangers of a 'hung Parliament', one with no clear majority, is yet again an attempt to scare the electorate into voting (turnout has been in the 30-percentiles in recent elections, or as Gordon Brown said back in 2000 "a low turnout is a sign of a satisfied electorate").

The Parliamentary system, cunningly constructed by those devious Victorian imperialists, built on then newly constructed myths about England's history is, as they say, no longer fit for purpose. With no appreciable difference between the three controlling political parties, who between them have constructed a de facto one-party, 'democratic' security state, the electorate are left swinging in the wind.

Enter stage right the British National Party (BNP), a thinly disguised neo-nazi party—that under other circumstances, wouldn't warrant a mention in the MSM—has been legitimized in a back-handed sort of way and held up to 'middle England' as the alternative— unless we toe the line and come back into the fold and restore the status quo. The 'choices' are the right or the far-right.

So where is the left?

The state is faced with a dual crisis, economic and political, surely fertile ground for the Left to make a comeback? But it ain't happening. Why?

The problem in part is that the idea of socialism has been discredited in both fact and fiction. So how to put socialism back on the agenda? And possibly the only chance we have got of saving our sorry selves.

It's not as if buried under the stultifying weight of corporate 'culture' the desire for radical change doesn't exist (I have referred to it elsewhere). But as with everything else our desire for change is hijacked and corporatized by the dominant culture, channelled into harmless

pursuits or yet more consumption, 'Green' or otherwise.

What I am about to propose is no doubt bordering on heresy to the traditional left but it's fairly obvious that the 'new' working class is what we used to call the middle class (with key elements of the traditional working class included, especially the public service and transport sectors. The state is after all the biggest single employer and the public service unions are also the biggest unions and all are joined at the hip to the Labour Party).

Currently 'middle class' discontent is being channelled into either corporate expressions or it's fragmented into 'single issue' oriented concerns. The closest it has come to a political expression is the Green Party but the Green Party doesn't have a real alternative to offer, merely palliatives to the current order, none of which the ruling elite would in any case tolerate should by some miracle they gain even a modicum of representation, which in any case is impossible under the current electoral system.

The traditional left wants nothing to do with this new working class, seeing them not as allies but as enemies. But it's this 'middle class' who hold the keys to the castle, without them capitalism simply can't function. They now occupy a comparable position in the economic order that factory workers once occupied.

The fallacy should by now be apparent. 'Reforming' capitalism is just not on. Instead, we have actually gone backwards in terms of political involvement and the ability to change the system. We now have a distinct professional political class, entirely divorced from civil society who now openly represent the interests of big capital, regardless of political party as well as preserving their own privilege.

And it's not just the endemic corruption that reveals the true state of affairs, after all, it's the end-product of a system designed and built by the political class that uses it, so without proper accountability, these clowns are able to do whatever they please whether they be of the alleged left or the right.

Let's face it, change is not going to come through the existing parliamentary system, it's a broke-down engine, built for another age and, as the election gets closer, we see Labour and the Lib-Dems talking about 'changing the electoral system', desperate to reach an electorate that has deserted them and done it right across the so-called political divide between the parties.

To hang or not to hang?

I opened up this essay asserting that yes, this is the most important election in sixty-five years but not because of which party 'wins' but because the outcome will determine whether Parliamentary 'democracy' can survive or not.

What the pundits choose to call a 'Hung Parliament' in actuality reveals the real relationship between the political parties exposed for all to see, a relationship that will undoubtedly end in some kind of coalition, and judging by the latest reports, a Lib-Dem/Labour coalition. Whatever the result we will have an electorate alienated from the three main parties and whatever government emerges from this farce.

"Alan Johnson, the Home Secretary, yesterday revealed cracks in Labour Unity as he called for sweeping electoral reform and told colleagues not to be

“frightened” of sharing power with the Liberal Democrats.

/.../

“His comments were seen last night as a sign that ministers are beginning to contemplate attempting to form a coalition government, a move that would probably require Gordon Brown to step down.” — The Independent, 26 April, 2010.

So, are there any alternatives? As I have pointed out elsewhere, the desire for a more modest and above all, inclusive society does exist, even if currently small (but growing) and largely confined to a section of the (middle) working class and all but ignored by the traditional left, who still pin their hopes on a working class that effectively no longer exists.

Aside from the totally misnamed Liberal Democrats, this key section of the working class have only the Green Party to articulate their demands, a party devoid of a coherent alternative to consumer capitalism.

Thus it would be more accurate to say that it's not the election per se which is important but what happens after the election. Inevitably, whoever wins they will resort to traditional methods, that is to say making working people pay the price for the crisis of capital. How we on the left respond is the real challenge.

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