

The Tory War on Truth - and How to Fight Back

Labour should have made this election a referendum on the whole political system.

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“There’s all these facts flying around on social media – you don’t know what to believe”.

Wes lost his job as a builder in the crash and these days works as a receptionist at a major employer in Crewe. He reads about the election every day. But he probably won’t vote. “Policies? Democracy? Sod the lot of them – I don’t believe any of it”.

Coming out of her shift, Jade says something similar. “Am I receiving accurate information? All these policies are flying around Facebook.” She, too, is sceptical about voting.

I could cite Kay, Ian and Stephen in Hartlepool; stallholders in Montrose, reports from canvassers in Margate, Broxtowe, Cardiff and London. All of them – and many more besides – said roughly the same thing.

And what they said should terrify us. Because it points to a story about voter suppression, manufactured cynicism, and a Tory war on truth in the age of surveillance capitalism.

I’ve spoken to strangers about politics on streets across the UK pretty frequently since 2003. I’m used to distrust, cynicism and anger. I’m used to “They’re all the same”. But I’ve never come across so many people saying “They’re all liars,” so much angry, active abstention. It feels like something new.

In a pub in Montrose on Saturday, a man in his twenties who works in an oil industry warehouse drew the connections between the Prince Andrew scandal and Boris Johnson’s nonsense. His conclusion? If “they” all lie, why should he trust Labour to deliver its policies? He’s not going to vote.

Everywhere I’ve been in this election, people have cited Johnson’s lies. But rather than being enraged into sacking him, they disengage.

Labour’s pledges are often listed alongside the lies of the other parties, as though promising to nationalise OpenReach is in the same category as inventing a statistic. On the whole, the policies are popular. There’s rarely a suggestion that they would be impossible. But there isn’t sufficient trust in politics for people to believe Jeremy Corbyn will actually do any of it. “They’ll say anything to get elected”.

When I push, many produce left-wing ideas. “The rich will still get richer, the middle class like us will get poorer,” said a woman who planned not to vote in Midlothian, a Labour/Tory/SNP three-way marginal. This feeling crosses the Brexit divide – there are those

who denounce the failure to leave, and those who rage about referendum lies.

Get past the fury, and people who feel like this are usually fascinating. Too often, journalists take quick vox pops, hear tabloid headlines repeated back at them and record them, assuming that this is the best expression of people's deep feelings. Too frequently, active abstainers are treated as an afterthought.

Worst of all, these people are often described as "apathetic" – as though they don't care about their future or their children or their community. As if they aren't fussed about their health or wealth. This ludicrous idea that abstentionism implies apathy is perhaps the most pernicious lie of the neoliberal era.

How we live together

Over hundreds of conversations with those who "aren't interested" in politics over two decades, it's become clear that millions are enormously frustrated by a political system in which a spayed state is unable to deliver changes in their lives.

As a Hartlepool barman said, "They haven't done anything for us."

Over the past forty years, council housing was privatised, rent controls abolished, regulations slashed and public enterprises sold off. Decisions once made by those we elected were delegated to the market.

With this shift to neoliberalism, politics changed from a negotiation about how we live together to a crap reality TV contest, a minority interest. "I'm not a fan," says Stephen, who I met at a Hartlepool bus stop. "I'm a fan of video games."

We were changed from citizens into consumers. [Capitalist realism](#) bullied us into accepting that there is no alternative. So it's no surprise that we lost interest in democracy.

This election, though, it feels like something new has happened. The combination of a prime minister who is [incontinent with untruths](#); the Lib Dems' [litany of lies](#); the failure to deliver Brexit; Trump; and online lying and media manipulation has produced a deep cynicism about our political system.

This isn't just happening. It's being done. It's being done because the Tories are terrified of mass political participation.

Losing the keys to Downing Street

The modern Labour Party is built on a theory of power. When Corbyn became leader, his aim was to win not through obsequiousness, but through organising. Not through triangulation, but mobilisation.

Rather than genuflecting to big finance and the oligarch-owned press, the plan was to build a movement mighty enough to turn over the tables in the temple.

For pollsters, this strategy poses problems. Normally, in the run up to an election, things don't change much. The balance of power in the country is what it is. Institutions rise and fall over decades, but rarely in the month before a vote.

To predict tonight, we are better off asking this: have the institutions of the British establishment degenerated since June 2017? Is the ruling class more divided than it was under Theresa May? Have the intertwining movements pushing for a Labour-led government grown?

With the collapse of the traditional press, the 2008 crash and the erosion of Anglo-British identity, it's clear that our establishment is struggling. As [Aeron Davis argues](#), it has lost hegemonic coherence. It could plausibly lose the keys to Downing Street.

Over the course of 2014-2015 the British establishment lost control of Scotland and of Labour – one of their two biggest countries, and one of their two biggest parties. Over the course of this election, the Tories have lost Rory Stewart – the public's [joint-preferred candidate](#) for prime minister in their recent leadership election – David Lidington – their last de-facto deputy prime minister – and their most respected living former prime minister, John Major. And [some pretty](#) influential conservative [voices in the media too](#).

On the other hand, Momentum is [better organised than ever](#), a million Remainers have marched, and Corbynism has grown up.

Old battles, new strategies

In response, the Conservatives and their proxies have adopted a new strategy.

As I reported [last week](#), they have imported smear machines from the US. Going undercover at right wing events, I've met political operatives bringing the most sophisticated US dark arts to Europe. A plethora of para-political organisations have sprung up, primarily attacking Corbyn, including the Facebook pages pouring bile into the timelines of many of the people I've interviewed.

As [Cambridge Analytica](#) showed, disinformation and attack ads aren't expected to convince people to vote for your candidate. The aim is to turn your opponents' potential fans into cynics. The point is to bung up Labour's most ferocious weapon: enthusiasm.

In this, the smearers are aided by many sneerers in the press, too.

From dressing up their Twitter account up as FactCheckUK to their endless Himalayan lies, the idea that 'you can't trust any of them' is the key meme of the Conservative campaign. And much of the media has been more than happy to give this message a megaphone, with false equivalence and bullshit balance.

Independent [fact checkers](#) have found that 88% of Tory Facebook adverts contain lies, while 0% of Labour's do. But the BBC led their story on this report with the headline: "[General election 2019: Ads are 'indecent, dishonest and untruthful'](#)".



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Brass neck's been one of central features of this campaign – Johnson on checks (remember he DID admit back in Oct there'd be extra checks under Brexit deal however much he obfuscates over it now – define check, and define customs declaration), or Corbyn on watching the Queen

07:30 · 09/12/2019 · [Twitter Web App](#)

The BBC political editor

When I've asked people up and down the country how they feel about the election, fury with the media is perhaps the most common answer. And they're right to rage: from The Sun spreading [neo-Nazi 'research'](#) to the BBC parroting propaganda, never before have so many journalists so publicly soiled themselves. And never before have so many people told me they're disgusted.

This distrust of democracy is a victory for the right because Conservatives make no promise about the ability of politics to transform lives. They believe in leaving it to the market.

In this context, Tories thrive because they don't promise nice things. They win because they drive down turnout among those who would benefit most from progressive policies. And because they are the default, ruling-class party. And because people have spent their lives being told that the posh ought to be in charge.

Scotland's Yes movement thrived by tapping into righteous anger at the system. Dominic Cummings won the Brexit vote by turning it into a rage against how we're governed: "Take back control." Labour could have won this election by calling his bluff. By campaigning to give power to the people, they could have made this a referendum on the political system as a whole.

If Labour doesn't win it will be because they have failed to capitalise on this rage, and they haven't offered a road away from alienation.

What most people want

In 2017, Labour surged by shocking the media with a manifesto which took the extraordinary step of proposing the sorts of policies most voters want. Corbyn and John McDonnell baited commentators into attacking them on their strongest turf: social democracy. This quarrel drew attention, shaped the election and swung voters.

In 2019, they've tried to repeat this trick, running a cinematic sequel: a couple of flashy new ideas beside many of the same old lines. This time, though, the billionaire press has learnt from its mistakes. Rather than denounce rent controls, taxes for the rich and rail nationalisation, they've given ideas zero oxygen. Instead, they've highlighted Labour's biggest failure: anti-Semitism.

In February, a poll showed that [just 9%](#) of people in Great Britain think that their political system isn't broken. If Labour had shocked the establishment by proposing to rip up its rule-book, it could have baited them into another fight that would have put most people on Corbyn's side. Miserably, even Nigel Farage has done a better job of this. When asked during the 'Question Time' debate what he stands for apart from Brexit, he [proposed](#) replacing the UK's broken political system.

The British state is a world centre for money and reputation laundering, cripplingly centralised, an outpost of a fading imperial ruling class. It's a barely democratic weavel-ridden mess used largely to protect wealth for oligarchs. People are right to hate it.

For those of us who have been making this case for years now, it's been desperately depressing to watch as Labour has failed to tap into this energy.

[Labour's manifesto](#) includes a brief section on the political system, including a commitment to House of Lords reform and a constitutional convention – which could mean anything from tidying up some mess to deep systemic change. This is all to the good, but hardly their Peterloo.

With Johnson's constitutional vandalism and the deep sense of alienation, why not demand that the rules of our democracy be written by the people, for the people, giving power to the people? Why not announce that the Cayman Islands and British Virgin Islands and Gibraltar must charge British taxes or declare independence and renounce the protection of the Royal Navy? Why not spar with the media barons? Even [Ed Miliband](#) did that. Why not promise to end the constitutional protection of the City of London? Why not shout about participatory budgeting, local control and a fair voting system? Why hasn't Corbyn denounced elite rule at every opportunity? People hate it.

In modern politics, victory is for those who offer change commensurate with the scale of the crisis people feel. Labour has looked the climate emergency in the eye, and addressed the economic disaster. The party promised a string of strong, appealing policies. It has even come to a conclusion on Brexit.

But unless you convince people that democracy is capable of delivering, all of this crumbles to dust. And voters are right to sense this. If Labour fails to confront the British state, it won't succeed in squeezing justice from it. Even the best dairy can't [milk a vulture](#).

It is still possible that Corbyn will become prime minister. On Facebook, my timeline is full of Labour activists in key marginals, enthusiastic about a day of door-knocking. More than

28,000 people have used Momentum's app to target their election day campaigning.

Their victory will be because there's nothing as extraordinary as a murmur of activists flitting at full tilt. It will be because of tens of thousands of warm conversations on frosty doorsteps. It will be because millions are excited to vote for a manifesto which offers hope, and millions more are desperate to sack "[Britain Trump](#)".

It will be because real grassroots can outgrow AstroTurf; because cynical attempts at voter suppression are nothing to the enthusiastic smile of a young activist in a woolly hat on a cold night.

It will be because of people power. And so making people-power permanent should have been Labour's core message.

Postscript: what comes next



Craig | Image: Adam Ramsay

Craig had worked as a fisherman since he was 13. He had to quit in 2016 because his boss got a boat that could go out to sea for a fortnight at a time, and he could no longer care for his sick mother.

When his mum died, he went to look after his dad for a bit. His landlord posted an "abandoned" notice on his house, and because he didn't return for two weeks, kicked him out.

Universal credit wasn't enough for a new home. Sleeping rough led to ulcers on his legs, which were amputated in May. He is regularly harassed and sometimes assaulted -

“tortured” he says – by two teenage boys who tell me “we clean filth like that off the streets,” using derogatory terms for homeless, black and British Asian people. “It’s because of people like him that Hartlepool is a shit-hole,” they say.

This fascism is the next stage in the process of alienation. If they can’t do anything about the distant and powerful, too many will listen to those who blame the proximate, and powerless.

Last year, Craig tried to take his own life.

He doesn’t care about Brexit. He isn’t registered to vote. But he was desperate to see the back of Universal Credit. And desperate to see the end of the Tories. “It’s a mess. The country is in a mess”.

Labour is right to run against the institutions which cost Craig his home and his legs. They have the support of the street-sleepers I’ve met and the [Gypsies and Travellers](#) I’ve spoken to, of the young and the hopeful, the marginalised and the maligned. They’ll borrow votes from the anti-Brexitters and the anti-Borisers. And their activists will inspire many of the actively alienated in the final hours. Will that be enough?

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