

I'M A CELEBRITY, GET ME INTO THERE



At the moment, serious politics in Britain has imploded. The outrageous abuse, by some MPs, of the Parliamentary allowances system has led to a general denunciation of everyone. Newspapers have discovered that they no longer need to distinguish between serious offences - which should have been referred to the Police - and those where the defects are in the system itself. Worse still, is the pattern of MPs being denounced for things that are either trivia or untrue. All that seems to matter is that the public are to be fed a daily message that all MPs are crap and should be thrown out.

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Iraq, the drift into means testing the poor, whilst feather-bedding the rich; the transfer of power from citizens to corporations; the emasculation of Parliament by Government; the abandonment of the real economy in favour of a gambler's casino; and our criminal failure to make climate change the centrepiece of the only economics that might get us through this century. I can think of a lot of grounds upon which I might make the same case. It's just that mine would be focused on the big issues around which Parliament and Government has failed the public: the illegal war on Iraq, the drift into means testing the poor, whilst feather-bedding the rich; the transfer of power from citizens to corporations; the emasculation of Parliament by Government; the abandonment of the real economy in favour of a gambler's casino; and our criminal failure to make climate change the centrepiece of the only economics that might get us through this century.

Unfortunately, none of this even figures in the daily denunciations on offer. Of course the allowances system has to change. I have never understood why it should apply to anything more than a contribution to the costs faced by non-London MPs, arising out of having to spend half of the week or more in London. It should never have applied to constituency homes, be they small apartments or palatial manors. This may mean changing the salary paid to an MP (which may in turn have to be paid for by reducing the size of Parliament), but it isn't rocket science. The truth, however, is that the press aren't really interested in a cleaner system of accountability. The agenda is more visceral.

At a time when we face spiralling unemployment, rising repossessions, generations of debt to bail out the banks and the prospects of an era of austere spending cuts, the press know that the public want blood. They don't want a parliament full of saints. They just want MPs to share the pain. At such a time, tabloid denunciations know that they have a ready audience that is keen to punish and willing to hide behind any nonsense about solutions. So it is that we end up with a floodtide of celebrity suggestions about who should form a 'cleaner' Parliament.

Let me now go into my own confession. I have seen the future. The other evening I made myself look at the world from which such a 'Parliament of all the talents' might be drawn from. Untainted by political

associations, they had come from all across the country. They were the would-be celebrities who would reach the semi-final stage of television's 'Britain's Got Talent' competition.

Nobody could say there was not a rich and diverse choice on offer. Take your pick. It could range from the 70 year old break-dancing granddad to the tap-dancing dog. You could have the stripper with flashing nipple tassels or the grossly overweight belly dancing drag queen. For those looking for MPs willing to endure pain, you could go for the man using an electric drill to pierce his nose. Alternatively, anyone harbouring a secret admiration for the Tories who strut their wealth around the political stage, could vote for DJ Talent whose only quality appears to be a mouth full of gold teeth. It was a gruesome evening that could only have delivered a gruesome and superficial Parliament. So, no different from where we are now you might say.

However, before taking such a leap into the celebrity wilderness it might be worth contemplating where this might take us. Some established celebrity names are already coming forward as possible parliamentary candidates. The trouble is, it is hard to know what any of them stand for, apart from being cleaner (and undeniably richer) than the current incumbents. None of this is remotely sufficient for the seriousness of our times. Nothing short of a political revolution will take us beyond the mess we are in.

Whether he genuinely believes this or not, David Cameron has again touched upon the core of this in a way that Labour has not. Such a revolution has to see a shift in power from bureaucracy to democracy, from Government to Parliament, and (where tight lines of accountability are to be delivered) from the central state to the local one. This does not apply to national infrastructures and national targets. It is more about a bonfire of quangos and the transfer of duties to bodies where decision makers can be both voted in and voted out.

At a Parliamentary level it may indeed call for a different breed of MPs. In the middle of this press barrage against the character of MPs, Parliament had an opportunity to demonstrate what exactly it should be about. The House had to decide about the role of the new Infrastructure Planning Commission and how Parliament would deal with the matters to be referred to it. We are not talking here about proposed loft extensions or even a local school. The IPC will consider questions about the location of nuclear power stations, nuclear waste disposal sites, airport expansion proposals and the whole gamut of big, contentious decisions that Government has to make.

Some of us moved an amendment saying that Parliament should be able to vote on the issues and proposals themselves. The Government line was that it was quite happy to have scrutiny by a Select Committee and a general debate of the whole House thereafter. What it didn't want was for MPs to retain a direct vote on the issues themselves. At best, Parliament will retain the right to vote to 'adjourn' at the end of the debate or not to. You try explaining to constituents about the heroic stand you make around the question of 'should we carry on a meaningless debate or should we go home?'

The majority of Labour MPs dutifully followed the Government Whip and voted to take no political responsibility for the decision being made. The comfort zone that New Labour has constructed for itself is one in which the Government of the day remains in office, but not in power. So many of the big decisions affecting the quality of life are now passed to unelected regulators rather than the elected Parliament.

New Labour even rigged the Regulator's decisions themselves in advance, so that the main criteria

favour the pursuit of privatisation, deregulation and 'price only' competition. In energy policy, for example, the Government may have a legal duty to end fuel poverty in Britain by 2016, but it cannot require OFGEM to make this a requirement on energy companies as well. Neither fuel poverty nor climate change obligations can override OFGEM's duty to create a competitive market. It applies to every area covered by a Regulator's duties. When markets fail the Regulator has no remit to apply an overriding 'public interest' test on what happens next. The Parliamentary Labour Party no longer exercises a right to consider bringing sectors of the economy into direct public ownership (at no more than fire-sale prices), because we have taken such political decisions out of the public arena.

So it was with the illegal war on Iraq and the ongoing war in Afghanistan. There will be no independent inquiry, before the next election, on the disingenuous claims that tied Britain into the Bush war plan. MPs do not want to be reminded that they voted for a lie without a shred of real evidence about weapons of mass destruction. They do not wish to be reminded of a similar lack of rigour about our involvement in Afghanistan and whether there is a military solution there at all.

Too many MPs still settle for having their knees fondled with assurances that emissions trading schemes will provide the market solutions necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change. Every scientist knows, however, that the timescale left for us requires a more urgent and fundamental restructuring of markets themselves, along ethical and sustainable lines. Every economist also knows that the whole paraphernalia of emissions trading schemes, pollution offsetting, carbon credits and Clean Development Mechanisms, is no more than a scam for ensuring that climate change is just another area in which banks and speculators can profiteer.

These are the big issues around which we are crap. These are the towering challenges that the political system has to address. Celebrities who are would-be politicians looking for a different stage to play on have to treat Parliament as more than just another game show. The 'I'm a Celebrity Get Me into There' mood, fostered by tabloid newspapers, will take us only into tabloid politics. The one celebrity who seems to have understood this was Stephen Fry, when he said:-

"Let's not confuse what politicians get really wrong. Things like wars, things where people die, with the rather tedious bourgeois obsession of whether or not they're charged for their wisteria".

If we are on our way to hell in a handcart it won't be the wisteria that takes us there.