

WHY BOTHER VOTING?



“when it comes to solving your problems, voting is usually about as effective as wishing on a star”

The general election is here, and once again the parties are falling over themselves to promise us the earth. They talk blandly about “fairness”, “opportunity”, “security” and “a better future”, doing their best to avoid saying anything meaningful.

But a whopping 83% of the UK general public do not trust politicians, according to a 2009 poll. Just 13% think that they tell the truth. MPs came bottom of the list of least trusted occupations – even lower than journalists and lawyers! This is hardly surprising. If anything, it’s hard to work out what the 13% who do still trust politicians are thinking – have they ever paid attention to an election campaign?

Everyone knows that parties make promises in their manifestos that they have no intention of keeping. For example, when first elected 13 years ago, Labour promised to end child poverty by 2010. Today 4m children in Britain are living in poverty – more than in any other European country. It’s not hard to find other examples of politicians lying through their teeth, from local councillors trying to inflate their own importance, to the massive pack of lies Tony Blair came out with to justify the invasion of Iraq. Events of 2009 further underlined how untrustworthy our rulers are, as many of them were revealed to be fiddling their expenses – despite earning £64,766 a year – and using various other sleazy tricks, such as employing members of their own families. Meanwhile many of the rest of have to scrape by on a minimum wage of £5.80 an hour.

Despite superficial differences in their rhetoric, in reality life under any of the parties will feature the same things – cuts to public services, attacks on pensions, over-crowded classrooms, job losses, poor housing, under-equipped hospitals, poor public transport, and more war. Before the economic crisis, politicians were coming out with wild claims about the end of the cycle of boom and bust – an idea few of them would defend today. Then when the banks went into meltdown, they threw billions of pounds at them. The official cost of the bank bailout is a staggering £850 billion. That’s a bill we will be forced to pay through cuts in public spending, no matter which party wins the election. Labour cuts will hurt as much as Tory cuts or Liberal Democrat cuts or Scottish or Welsh nationalist cuts.

Governments don’t serve us, whether they’re Labour, Tory, Lib Dem, BNP, SNP, Sinn Féin, Green or whatever. And the “alternative” left-wing parties are no better. Respect promised to be a radical alternative to traditional parties, but all it produced was George Galloway’s cat impressions on Celebrity Big Brother.

But now it’s election time and politicians want our vote, so they’re desperate to convince us that they care what we think. Like spam emailers or nuisance callers trying to sell us car insurance we don’t

need, they turn up on our doorsteps, push their leaflets through our letterboxes, and appear every night on our TVs. Of course once they get into parliament they won’t give us another thought for the next five years. But at the moment, they’re all over us like a rash.

Well, we’re all busy nowadays, and there are a lot of things that are more important, more useful, or just more fun than voting. It’s hard to blame people who can’t see the point of trudging down to their local polling booth to put a cross next to the name of someone who doesn’t really care what they think. The simple truth is that our “representatives” don’t represent us, and voting doesn’t give us any say in the decisions that really matter. That’s why turnout in elections is dropping right across Europe – not because people are lazy or apathetic, but because they know that voting doesn’t change anything.



In fact people are realising that voting isn’t part of the solution – it’s part of the problem. Voting means accepting this rotten set-up, pretending that we have a meaningful say in how things are run. The fact is that politicians couldn’t really change anything even if they wanted to, because of the way the political system is set up. The main aim of parliament is to keep things going the way they always have, so that a rich few at the top have all the power and the vast majority of us have none. Voting just props the whole system up by making it look democratic.

Not voting or spoiling your ballot paper is a symbol of wanting something better. The millions and millions of us who won’t vote will be doing so because we don’t believe the lies the politicians come out with, because we recognise that they’re a part of our problems, not the answer to them, and because we want a better world.

Instead of voting for some politician’s empty promises to solve our problems, we’ll be talking to the people around us – our friends, families, neighbours and workmates – about what we can actually do to solve our problems ourselves. We believe that real change comes through direct action, solidarity and campaigning. Won’t you join us?



ANTI-MAN

TIME FOR CHANGE— THE TORY MASTERPLAN TO MAKE EVERYTHING EVEN WORSE

Perhaps the most impressive thing about Gordon Brown's government is that they've managed to be so terrible that even the Tories look like a decent alternative. But now that Labour have demonstrated their utter incompetence, what do the Tories have to offer? Their "plan for change" starts by promising to spend less – in other words, to cut wages and fire people. That's the unemployment problem sorted, then! They also promise "a government that is unashamedly pro-aspiration" – which translated into English seems to mean "a government that is pro-rich people getting even richer".

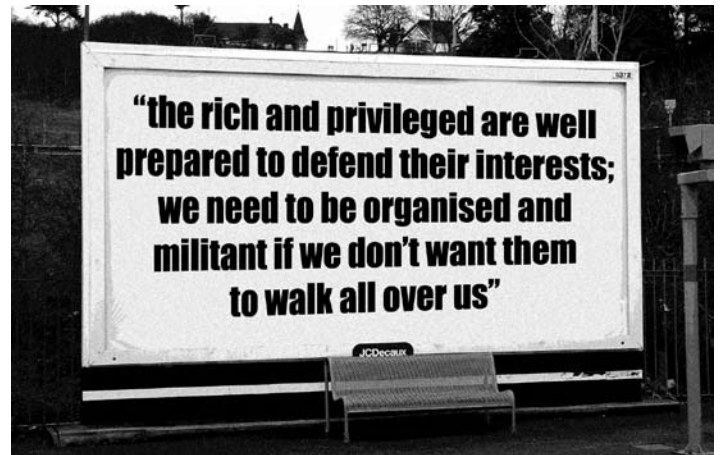
The Tories also say that their priorities are summed up in three letters: NHS. That's a bit like a fox saying that it's going to make hens a priority – it might be true, but not in a good way. For example, they're promising to introduce a "payment-by-results" system throughout the NHS, which will mean that healthcare providers who are struggling to cope will face budget cuts rather than the extra resources they need. The Tories also promise to apply the free-market obsession with "choice" (which usually means privatisation) to healthcare. Of course, if everyone had a decent GP surgery and hospital in their local area, there'd be no need to "choose" another one, but the Tories are determined to introduce competition to every area of life. When you look at the state of the privatised railways, Cameron's promise to "open up the NHS to include new independent providers" starts to sound very scary indeed.

Of course, behind all the friendly, inclusive rhetoric, some things haven't changed about the Tories, and their promise to be "pro-aspiration" definitely doesn't include supporting workers who aspire to improve or defend their pay. Cameron has warned trade unionists that they face a "very determined" group of people, and says that he "would be very happy to strengthen" laws against workers taking workplace action to improve their pay or conditions. He may say that he hates "big government", but Cameron clearly thinks that it's a good thing when it stops ordinary people from acting together to protect themselves.

CLASS WAR?— LABOUR OFFER NO CHOICE FOR THE WORKING CLASS

The Labour Party have a pretty impossible job ahead of them at the moment: having completely bugged up the economy, they now have to convince voters that they should carry on running everything (or at least trying to). It's unlikely to work, but it's worth taking a look at their attempts to win us over.

Their "Choice for Britain" manifesto sets out their "proposals for a post-crisis economy". It includes a tough line on bonuses which promises that there will be "no return to business as usual in the banks" – which is a bit rich coming from the party that was so shamelessly (Gordon) Brown-nosing the banks right up until the



very moment of the crash in 2008. But in case the anti-bankers pledge makes Labour sound a bit too different from the Tories, the manifesto goes on to state that they stand "resolutely in the centre ground of British politics" – bad news for anyone who still deludes themselves that Labour might uphold any left-wing values. They also promise to "face up to hard facts and common sense" – which is a bit late now, but seems to translate into the same thing the Tories are promising: wage cuts and job losses.

Labour have a tricky problem here, as they need to make themselves look different from the opposition while getting ready to implement exactly the same anti-working-class measures as the Tories. So in a desperate attempt to move the discussion away from actual policies, they've tried to launch what the media have dubbed a "class war" campaign, playing up the presence of Eton-educated toffs among Cameron's team. There is some truth in this, because the tax-dodging aristos that populate the Tory leadership are obviously going to look out for their own class interests. But raising the question of class is a very dangerous move for Labour. Considering the Labour Minister for Defence Equipment is a Cambridge graduate named Quentin who spent twenty years as a Tory MP and claimed over £20,000 for repairs to the bell tower of his £5m house, it's hard to see them as champions of the poor and downtrodden.

The history of the Labour Party offers a sad lesson to anyone who'd like to see a better world. Set up by people who genuinely wanted to see a fairer and more equal society, it gradually abandoned more and more of its values in the hope of gaining power, until it reached its current sad state: utterly bereft of real identity or guiding principles, and soon to be without any power either.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS?

If Labour and the Tories are fighting over the centre of a very narrow political spectrum, where does that leave the Liberal Democrats? To be fair, they have come up with a set of ideas that do set them apart from the other two major parties. The only problem is, they won't be able to do anything about any of them. After coming out with bold promises to scrap student tuition

MANIFESTO

fees and to introduce free child care for two-year-olds, a citizen's pension, and free personal care for the elderly, Nick Clegg has now admitted that there's no chance of them doing any of those things. In fact he has declared that Britain needs "savage" cuts, so there's clearly no way that public services would be safer in Lib Dem hands than under the Tories. If they got into power, the Lib Dems would face exactly the same task as the other two parties: making sure that working-class people pay for as much of the recession as possible, and that the market system that got us into this mess carries on functioning as normal. The Lib Dems will never challenge any of the basic assumptions of this crazy economy, and so they're doomed to remain a poor imitation of the other two parties: perhaps a bit blander and less nasty, but still committed to keeping power in the hands of a tiny minority and fighting any attempt by ordinary people to change things.

THE BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY— A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE?

If there's one thing that everyone agrees on about the BNP, it's that they're different from the other parties. Anti-racists and anti-fascists will tell you that the BNP's different and worse, the BNP will say that they're different and better, but they all agree that they're different. It's a lot rarer to see anyone point out that, in a lot of important ways, the BNP actually stand for keeping things the same. They may talk big about scaring the political elite and empowering ordinary people, but their promises are just as hollow as the ones you hear from the other politicians.

It was perhaps last year's expenses scandal more than anything else that discredited the mainstream political parties, and the BNP would like you to think they're different. But a look at their record shows they're as sleazy as the rest. In Barking & Dagenham, seven BNP councillors attended only 27% of meetings – but each still pocketed the full £9,810 allowance. One BNP councillor in Sandwell attended no meetings at all for six months and was booted off the council – but he still took his allowance. They've avoided paying income tax and National Insurance contributions by pretending that some staff were self-employed, and their 2007 party accounts failed their audit

as several thousand pounds of expenditure were not properly recorded. That wasn't a one-off mistake, either: their accounts for 2008 were filed six months late, and an independent auditor said that the records failed to "give a true and fair view" of the BNP's finances. They've now been fined five times in the last two years for their dodgy account-keeping.

The fact that the BNP are a greedy bunch of expenses-fiddling chancers should be enough to stop them posing as any kind of alternative, but there's also the question of what they actually stand for. They say they want "British jobs for British workers", but in fact they're against any attempts by workers to protect their jobs. Their confused attitude was shown in Merseyside last year when they managed to get a whole six activists together for a protest against the TUC. If it wasn't already clear enough, their contempt for ordinary working-class people was spelled out when their councillor Simon Smith declared that "white working class scum will be swept away by a future BNP government." The BNP says that people who are sick of out-of-touch toffs like David Cameron should vote instead for Nick Griffin – but he's really just another greedy, sleazy politician born into a rich Tory family who was educated at a private school before going on to study at Cambridge.

A lot of the time, anyone who'd even consider voting for the BNP is dismissed as a Nazi or unhinged. We don't think things are quite that simple. The people who vote BNP because they're scared or angry about issues like jobs and housing are right to be angry – although they're wrong to blame these problems on immigrants – and when the BNP say that mainstream politicians have abandoned ordinary people they're telling the truth. The difference is in how we react to these problems.

Unlike the BNP, we don't want you to vote for us and we don't think you should trust us to solve all your problems. We want to see ordinary people taking direct action to improve their lives, and we're committed to supporting this wherever we see it happen. Compared to this genuine alternative, the BNP's big talk can be seen for what it really is: another set of empty promises from another bunch of cynical politicians hoping to line their pockets.

"plan for change"
"the Choice for Britain" =
"Britain needs 'savage' cuts"

pain
unemployment
crisis
social division
austerity

Looking for work

WE CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS— THEY CAN'T CHANGE THINGS

We don't support any of the parties standing in this election. They might come out with apparently different messages, but all of them basically want to do the same thing: to keep the economy functioning the way it does now, which means trampling all over anyone who gets in its way. The fact is that, after the bankers' bailout, the next government is going to need more money from somewhere, no matter which party gets in. And all of the parties seem to think that money should come from cuts to public services and workers' pay. For example, Nick Clegg recently announced that the Liberal Democrats "can no longer afford" many of their key pledges because "the politics of plenty are over." (Those of us living on low wages might never have noticed "the politics of plenty" starting in the first place, but never mind.) Clegg's promises of

"savage cuts" are matched by similar promises of cuts by Labour, not to mention Cameron's declaration that he'd be "very happy" to strengthen laws against workers trying to protect their pay and conditions.

It's obvious that the problem goes deeper than any particular politician or party. That's why we want to see a fundamental change in the way the economy is run, so that it's brought under the control of everyone in society. That might sound like a big challenge, but we think it can be done. It's worth remembering that the power of politicians is limited – not just by the state of the economy, but also by what ordinary people will let them get away with. The level of cuts we face won't be determined by which party gets in, but by how hard we fight back. Well-organised communities and groups of workers have managed to force governments to back down before, even during a recession. The rich and privileged are well prepared to defend their interests. We need to be organised and militant if we don't want them to walk all over us.

THE PRACTICAL OPTION

Many people will agree with some of our arguments, but still say you should vote anyway, because it's the "practical" or "realistic" thing to do. But we're convinced that voting is not a realistic way to solve anyone's problems. Most of the time, voting comes down to picking a politician because you like some of the things they promise to do – or maybe just dislike them a bit less than the other candidates – and then hoping that they'll live up to their promises, even though you have no way of forcing them to, and they're often unable to do so even if they want to. When it comes to solving your problems, voting is about as effective as wishing on a star.

So what alternatives do anarchists suggest? Most of what we propose can be described as "direct action". This is exactly what it sounds like: people acting together to solve their problems directly, without relying on anyone else to do it for them.



Perhaps the best-known and most obvious type of direct action is the traditional workplace strike. There are many examples of strikes winning real victories quickly, from the Tower Hamlets College staff who saved jobs through strike action last year, to the low-paid tube cleaners who managed to win a living wage by bringing the London Underground to a halt in 2007. How many examples can you think of where people have improved their pay or saved their jobs by asking a politician for help?

Traditional strikes aren't the only way to take direct action in the workplace. There are also "good work strikes", which are designed to minimise disruption to the public while putting as much pressure as possible on employers. At Mercy

Hospital in France, instead of endangering patients by going on strike, staff just refused to fill in the paperwork to charge them for treatment. The hospital's income was cut by half, and the bosses gave in to all their demands in three days. In New York, restaurant workers took strike action and lost, so instead they started giving customers double helpings and undercharging them for their meals, until the restaurant owners gave in to some of their demands.

But direct action isn't just something that happens in the workplace. For example, when the local council threatened to close down a school in Lewisham, parents reacted by taking direct action: they occupied the school building and forced the council to back down. Another example of direct action is when people refuse to put up with unaffordable rents and decide to squat instead. Direct action can also be taken against high prices, such as in Italy in the 1970s when people in large groups would go into supermarkets, take what they wanted from the shelves, and pay what they considered to be a fair price instead of what the supermarket was asking. And one of the most famous examples of effective direct action on a massive scale here in the UK was when Thatcher's poll tax was beaten in the 1990s. Many people at the time were claiming that the only way to stop the poll tax was to vote Labour, but it was scrapped years before Labour got in, thanks to a massive campaign based around people simply refusing to pay.

So, are anarchists impractical dreamers? It's true that we're still a long way from achieving our goals. But when you look at all the victories that direct action has achieved, it seems a lot more practical than just putting your trust in a politician and hoping that things will turn out all right.



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