
Bigotry in the UK

AS THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN enters its final week it is worth considering the state of political life in Britain. *Campaign 2010* has been marked by the Leaders' Debate on television and by the surge in support for Nick Clegg, who rather like an English tennis star is expected to win a good place in the rankings but not, of course, to come first. There was also the intervention of Gillian Duffy the pensioner from Rochdale who after complaining about oodles and oodles of foreigners messing up Britain was roundly denounced as a "bigoted woman" by Brown. Apart from that, nothing much has happened.

Yet, commentators are, breathlessly describing the contest as "the most exciting ever". They are excited by the possibility that the election might not produce an overall winner. However, their enthusiasm serves only to distract from the failure of the competitors to explain how they are going to solve the country's problems. It is true that Nick Clegg comes out of this somewhat better than Brown or Cameron (which is why I shall vote for him), but he has not been capable of telling the truth either.

Labour, Tory, and LibDems have told us that they will cut £10bn, £6bn, or £9bn, from the budget deficit respectively. Apart from this they have said nothing. The general public seems to be aware that this is nonsense – most people one meets think that things will be much worse. In this they agree with the Institute for Fiscal Studies who have forecast that Labour, Tory, and LibDems will cut public services spending by a further £44.1bn, £52.4bn, or £34.5bn, respectively. The differences between the parties are accounted for by the degree to which they intend to raise taxes. The ratio of spending cuts to tax increases for Labour, Tory, and LibDems is 2:1, 4:1, or 2½:1

respectively. So the Tories want to cut more and tax less than the other two – nothing new there then.

What is surprising is that although the deficit caused by the recession, the banking crisis, and the bailout, is the key problem confronting the country our politicians appear to believe that it is *cosa nostra* – private business amongst themselves. They have not told us that their plans imply further borrowing of £604bn (Tories) or £643bn (Labour and LibDems) over the next seven years. They have decided not to tell us that assuming that there is no change in borrowing beyond 2017-18 that all three parties would succeed in pulling government debt below forty per cent of national income in the year 2031-32.

Despite the *Election Briefing Note 2010*, published last week by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which spelled out the scale of the catastrophe in exquisite detail none of the party leaders deigned to discuss the matter. In fact the leaders continued to conduct themselves as if they thought that the general public believe what they have to say. Indeed, this is the most surprising thing about our politicians: they don't seem to grasp what the public thinks about anything.

Assuming that we can all agree that a “bigot” is someone who is devoted to their own opinions and prejudices, regardless of evidence or arguments to the contrary, it becomes clear that bigotry is *not* restricted to white old age pensioners in Rochdale. There seems to be quite a few bigoted opinions and prejudices, which inform our political class. They seem to be committed to the idea that the electorate should *not* be subjected to a frank discussion of the fiscal crisis facing the country – we, “poor dears”, are simply too dumb and too self-absorbed to be able to handle such difficult matters. Evidently, this is what our politicians think about us.

The most surprising thing about Gordon Brown's encounter with Gillian Duffy was that he thought that a white pensioner, living in a depressed town in the north of England, being dismayed by the fact that a third of the population in her town is composed of

immigrants, is in some sense surprising! What is surprising about this? If she had launched a diatribe against people of different races, or not been prepared to listen to Brown's responses, one might have concluded that she was a "bigot". In the event she didn't – she simply voiced the common opinion of herself and her neighbours confronted by mass unemployment, a shortage of decent housing, and a significant growth in foreigners moving into the town.

Brown and the political class more generally could have spent the last few years engaging in a serious discussion about the positive and negative effects of immigration. They could have developed concrete plans to assist neighbourhoods and regions dealing, perhaps disproportionately, with the impact of large numbers of foreign-born workers. They could have sought to develop an understanding of globalisation, and of the impossibility of hermetically sealing the country off from enormous social, cultural, and economic transformations – transformations that make the goal of re-establishing the old cultural homogeneities a self-defeating and baleful illusion.

They could have done this. But because of their bigoted belief in the impossibility of discussing complex and difficult questions with us – the general public – whom they clearly regard as radically stupid – they have opted for a combination of saccharine lies, half truths, and the ruthless suppression of open debate of "sensitive issues". Leading politicians become even more entertaining when they start "getting tough" in the bizarre belief that we'll fall for it.

For example, both Tory and Labour make much of their intention of getting tough with welfare scroungers. They both boast of their preparedness of throwing people off benefits who refuse jobs offered to them. Well, with two and a half million people out of work and the certainty of large job losses in the public sector we know, along with the "benefit scroungers", that the prospect of *Job Centre Plus* finding them a job offer to refuse is about zero – even supposing they could work out what to do about the children of

claimants whose benefits they so ruthlessly promise to cut off. If they stopped the parent's benefit they would have to take their kids into care which as everybody knows would be rather more expensive than leaving them on benefit, even supposing they could persuade social workers and Job Centre officials actually to implement such a draconian policy. Just because *they* can't do 'joined-up government' they think *we*, the general public, can't do joined-up thinking.

The truth is none of the parties can tackle welfare dependency without spending a great deal of money on quality education and training programmes, at the same time as expanding the economy and creating jobs. Unless and until they can explain how they are going to achieve these twin objectives they should stop boasting about how tough they're going to be with loafers and freeloaders.

The ignorance and prejudices with which most of our politicians view the general public was revealed by the expenses scandal and has been underlined by the election campaign. Most politicians simply did not grasp that the voters think that expenses are paid for necessary spending *over and above* the ordinary commitments of their jobs. They expect to have to account for every single penny with receipts and full accounts, and they simply cannot understand why MPs who earn sixty-odd thousand a year should be able to claim for televisions, furniture, and food, quite apart from all the other nonsense.

Clearly we need politicians who know what's going on, who understand the people they're supposed to represent, and who are committed to root and branch reform. We want the House of Lords to be replaced by a fully elected senate, we want the number of parliamentary seats secured to correspond (at least roughly) to the number of popular votes won, and we want MPs who will discuss problems openly with the people, and hold the Government and the Civil Service to account. Above all we want politicians who will dump bigoted opinions about our inability to handle difficult choices and complex problems.