

# Another planet

Before we can persuade non-voters that politics is worth saving, it needs to say something to them about their lives writes *Ed Wallis*



*Ed Wallis is Editor of the Fabian Review*

THERE IS A danger that politics is becoming detached from people at the very time they need it most. With tough economic times leaving lives increasingly insecure, the democratic process should be a vehicle through which people's concerns can be voiced and addressed. But politics is no longer seen as having any answers to the big questions people are asking.

Yet our new YouGov polling – featuring the first detailed study of non-voters since the last general election – suggests it would be a mistake to think that people have given up entirely on democracy; but the disconnection has deep roots, probably unreachable by the structural reforms our leaders tend to offer as solutions. What's rotten is the culture – the way our parties do politics.

Because people so rarely interact with politicians, we asked them to imagine a situation where they did. If you were on a long train or plane journey and an MP sat down next to you, would you talk to them? 44 per cent said no and only 49 per cent said yes. This was a much more negative response than for other professions: 72 per cent would be pleased to sit next to a well-known actor or pop star, 68 per cent a doctor or teacher, and 63 per cent an electrician or plumber. One slither of satisfaction for MPs is that they are losing the race to the bottom of the public's affections: bankers were the least appealing travelling companions of all, with only 42 per cent wanting to continue the conversation.

What does this tell us – that members of the public would rather while away a journey with a pop star than a politician? So far, so unsurprising perhaps. But we asked a dedicated sample of non-voters – those who sat on their hands in 2010 – for the reasons behind their responses and in so doing, revealed something about how this large group sees the political class.

There is anger: “they are all idiots who have no clue about real life”; “they are all beneath contempt”; even “I do not talk with fuckwits on planes”. Apathy is everywhere: the most common responses cited boredom or lack of interest as the primary reasons to avoid engagement. But beyond this lies something more subtle, maybe more fundamental. There is a pervasive sense of separate lives, of the MP inhabiting a different world. Even if you wanted to get to know it, you wouldn't be able to understand it.

“I don't feel that I would be able to keep up my side of conversation”

“I don't think a member of parliament would want to speak to me anyway, they're probably far more intelligent than me. It'd be awkward conversation”

“I do not feel we are on the same level”

“Would find it awkward, wouldn't know what to say”

We are sailing into uncharted emotional waters: a sense of sadness and confusion, a personal inferiority to the ruling class that makes people ill at ease. The usual sense that people think MPs are all lying scumbags can be found, for sure, but the theme that dominates is of a people trampled underfoot by their political culture.

These verbatim responses are augmented by our wider poll. We listed some positive attributes of politics and while there were some takers, by far the biggest winner was 'none of the above' (38 per cent). As you would expect, this was even higher (44 per cent) among non-voters. Only 7 per cent of non-voters agreed 'most MPs are basically honest' compared to 20 per cent of those who voted for one of the three main parties. 4 per cent of non-voters chose 'most MPs have a good feel for what is happening to the people who live in their constituencies', half as many as voters.

A list of criticisms of the way we do politics proved much more popular. There was a fairly even spread across statements covering our adversarial political culture (36 per cent agree 'Politicians are more interested in scoring political points than doing the right thing'), the professionalisation of politics (34 per cent agree 'Most MPs have too little experience of the real world before they go into politics') and the rarefied nature of the political class (31 per cent agree 'Politics is a game played by an out of touch elite who live on another planet – politics isn't made up of people like me'). The biggest winner by some distance, however, was that 'politicians seldom give straight answers to straight questions on radio and TV', with 57 per cent agreeing.

This is revealing. People often say politicians lie all the time. They clearly don't, but the fact that they often seem

Here are some criticisms that some people make about politics and politicians in Britain these days. Which two or three of these, if any, do you agree with most strongly? (%)

Which one or two, if any, of the following might make political parties seem more relevant to your life? (%)



evasive under questioning fuels the sense that they do. Clarity is crucial to building trust with the electorate and seeming like you're telling it straight. This is something the Labour party has struggled with in opposition. For example, the leadership didn't feel able to oppose the benefit cap because of its broad popularity, but couldn't fully embrace it due to its unpopularity with its core constituencies. The result was a muddled position which was hard to communicate to voters and ended up looking slippery.

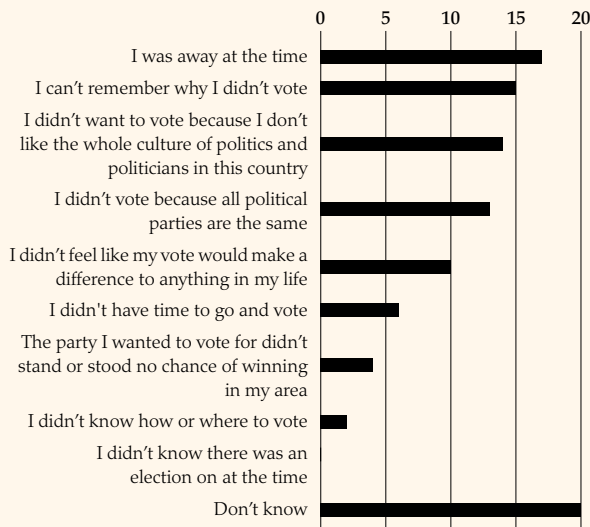
Why don't people vote? The results are perhaps more encouraging than expected: 'don't know', 'I was away at the time' and 'can't remember' make up over half of the responses, indicating it is not a potentially combustible 'anti-politics' fervour that is keeping many away from polling stations but something more prosaic and passive. This is overwhelmingly the case for 18–24 year olds (69 per cent), who also scored 'I didn't feel like my vote would make a difference to anything in my life' relatively higher than any other age group; a shrugged shoulder rather than a raised middle finger from

a group who are increasingly politically active in campaigns like Occupy, UK Uncut and 38 Degrees, but who see diminishing returns from political parties.

Could anything bring non-voters back into the democratic fold? For some in political circles this is a pointless question: non-voters don't vote and that's that. But our poll shows that a quarter of non-voters intend to vote at the next election, even before any improvements that might or might not be put in place. Of course there is still time between now and the next election for the political class to persuade them not to bother. But this is surely evidence that not every non-voter is an unreachable lost cause?

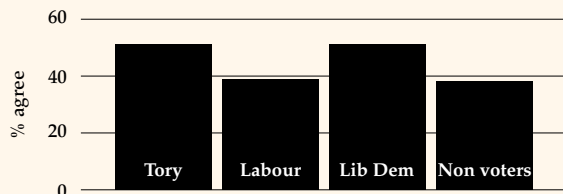
The thing that would make non-voters most likely to vote at the next election would be 'if people in political parties spent less time trying to win my vote and more time doing good work in my neighbourhood'. This scored 25 per cent, compared to just 2 per cent who said they'd be more likely to vote if 'a party official knocked on my door to discuss political issues, or I received a telephone call or a letter'. This insight needs to

### Thinking back to May 2010, which of these was the main reason you did not vote? (%)



### Signs of coalition resilience?

Political parties would seem more relevant to my life if they stopped arguing for a minute and tried to work together to solve the big issues of the day



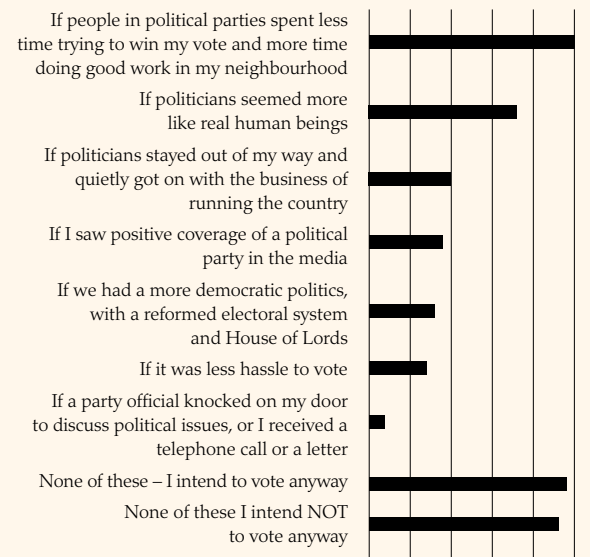
form the core of our new political culture. If the only interaction people have with party members is about their voting intention, it feeds a cynical and transactional view of politics. If political parties were more involved in local issues and doing things that people could see were making a difference, some semblance of faith in the power of politics might be restored. It would show rather than tell voters what a party can do.

People want parties to work together, with the coalition spirit seeming in relatively rude health: 51 per cent of both Conservative and Lib Dem voters want political parties to stop 'arguing for a minute and try to work together to solve the big issues of the day', compared to on 39 per cent of Labour voters and 38 per cent of non-voters. The bad news is that the advent of coalition hasn't changed the terms of political trade: people still think politicians prioritise pointless bickering over solving problems.

A more representative politics where people 'look more like the society they were supposed to represent' appears to be a pre-occupation of Labour and Lib Dem voters only, with 31 per cent and 25 per cent respectively listing it as a priority. Tories are, perhaps expectedly, less concerned (only 12 per cent) but so too are non-voters (13 per cent). But with politics a different world, perhaps non-voters can't imagine or don't care about making it more accessible.

What can we learn from these findings? Ultimately voters

### Which one or two, if any, of the following would make you more likely to vote in the next general election? (%)



### Representative politics is a pre-occupation of Labour and Lib Dem voters?

Political parties would seem more relevant to my life if they looked more like the society they are supposed to represent: more working class, more women, more ethnic minority MPs (% agree)



and non-voters alike mostly agree that politics is 'not perfect but it's the best way we have of collectively tackling the big issues of the day and making the big choices that face society'. But they want a political culture that is less adversarial, less distant and more in tune with real life. One positive step would be slowing the special adviser's fast track to power. Our leaders spend whole careers in Westminster, grow up in government: they learn the language of professional politics and the public get lost in translation. The steps taken by parties to address problems of underrepresentation have yielded positive results in recent years, such as Labour's all-women shortlists and the Conservatives' A-list. We need to try similar measures to stop the stranglehold of special advisers on safe seats: all-local or non-spad shortlists. Unless we turn the tide against the increasing professionalisation of politics, politicians will remain from Mars and voters from Venus, beaming out messages people feel they wouldn't be able to understand even if they bothered to try. **F**

*This research was supported by a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd and by John Jackson. Total sample size was 2,018 adults. YouGov survey undertaken between 31st August-3rd September 2012. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).*

## Becoming real

The artificiality of so much of today's political discourse needs to be banished  
says *Peter Kellner*

To make sense of Britain's non-voters, we must first clear away some statistical cobwebs. Turnout in 2010 was 65 per cent. That is, around 45 million names were on the electoral register, and 29 million of them voted. So 16 million people failed to vote, right?

Wrong. The register is an imperfect record of eligible electors. It doesn't allow for people who die between compilation (September/October) and election (May in 2010). It counts some people twice or more – people who move home and are registered at both their new and old addresses. (Some councils still take a while to remove out-of-date names.) Students are often registered in both their college constituency and at their family home. On the other hand, the register omits many people who don't complete the registration form for one reason or another.

Then there are electors who move home between the autumn registration and the spring election and don't exercise their right to be registered at their new address as soon as they move. They fall into a grey area of people who could vote but for whom the task of protecting their right to vote is a bit of a hassle. The same could be said of people who fall ill, or are in long-term care. Taking everything into account, including straightforward registration errors, if every single person who could easily vote did so, the nominal national turnout would probably climb no higher than 90 per cent.

Then there are people who are on the register and at the right address but never vote. Many are people who are alienated from the political system. They seldom discuss politics or follow the news. Life is a grind and they have given up hope that any government will help them. And/or they speak little English and live outside the political discourse that the rest of us engage with. Not only do they not vote, they seldom give their views to pollsters. They live below the political and polling radar. As



a guesstimate, I'd say that adds another 10 per cent to the tally of non-voters.

This is why recorded turnout never exceeds 80 per cent nationally nowadays. Of the 16 million notional non-voters, perhaps nine million are realistically beyond our reach, at least in the short term. Or, to be more precise, it would need a massive effort in political engagement, social integration and accurate registration, to bring that number down significantly.

### Non-voters are not a different breed from voters, merely a bit further down the road to disillusion

What about the other seven million? These are the kind of people who used to vote (or would have done had they been old enough) when turnout approached 80 per cent, as it last did in 1992. The reasons, or excuses, listed above do not apply to them. They are the *voluntary* non-voters, in that they could fairly easily have voted in 2010 but chose not to. They are the people that YouGov questioned in this survey.

The reasons they give for not voting are varied; but more, 41 per cent gave a political reason (such as dislike of Britain's political culture, or "all parties are the same") than a practical reason, 25 per cent (such as "I was away at the time"). However, fully 35 per cent didn't know or couldn't remember why they hadn't voted. This suggests that many non-voters are so detached from politics

that even a closely-fought general election largely passes them by these days.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. The two great engines of political passion for much of the twentieth century – social class and ideological conflict – are much weaker than they used to be. Far fewer people now than half a century ago identify with any political party. And in today's multi-channel, culturally-fragmented world, broadcast news – one of the great shared experiences of British life from the 1940s to the 1980s – is easily avoided. When I was growing up, it took some ingenuity, or a specially active social life, to avoid the news on BBC or ITV; today, it takes a positive effort to choose the news. Indeed, I remember the moment when I realised that the world was changing. In a taxi to a TV studio at the start of the 1983 election campaign to discuss the polls, the driver said, with evident relief that now he had a video recorder, he needn't watch the election at all.

YouGov's figures provide some important clues to what politicians need to do to re-engage with non-voters. (And, come to that, to re-engage with voters: one important conclusion from this research is that non-voters are not a different breed from voters, merely a bit further down the road to disillusion.) The two biggest failings they need to banish are their frequent failure to give straight answers to straight questions, and their habit of arguing with each other for the sake of it.

That's not to say that genuine disagreements should be hidden, rather than the artificiality of so much of today's processed, spin-doctored, "lines to take" political discourse needs to be banished. Politicians must persuade sceptical electors that they understand real life, can talk normally and admit their mistakes – in short to show that they belong to the same planet as the people they represent. ■

*Peter Kellner is President of YouGov*

## Straight talking could get people tuning back in

The challenges highlighted by the Fabian polling are not straightforward. They demand a sophisticated response writes *Katie Ghose*

You Gov's research for the Fabian Society gives fresh insights into the widening gulf, highlighted in the most recent Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement, between modern citizens' expectations of representative democracy and their actual perceptions and experiences.

The political class has never been universally admired. It is not surprising that this research finds more people would chat to an actor or pop star than a member of parliament. Nearly half (49 per cent) however would want to speak to a politician sat next to them on a plane – if only to berate them on the state of the economy!

More seriously, this research tells us that politics is not connecting for many people. The results suggest that voters and non-voters alike feel unrepresented; that politics is not populated by 'people like us'. 31 per cent of respondents agreed with the criticism that 'Politics is a game played by an out of touch elite who live on another planet – politics isn't made up of people like me'; 34 per cent felt that 'Most MPs have too little experience of the real world before they go into politics'; 19 per cent thought that if political parties 'looked more like the society they are supposed to represent: more working class, more women, more ethnic minority MPs' they might seem more relevant to their lives. Parliament cannot be a mirror image of our society but these findings suggest a desire to make it more reflective of Britain today.

This disconnect is also apparent in the type of politics on offer. The survey reveals a dislike of adversarial Westminster politics with 44 per cent of respondents agreeing that political parties would seem more relevant if they 'stopped arguing for a minute and tried to work together to solve the big issues of the day'. 36 per cent agreed with the criticism that 'politicians are more interested in scoring points than doing the right thing' and 29 per cent that 'politicians



spend too much time arguing with each other and too little saying where they agree'. The public will of course judge formal governing coalitions on their merits. Recent polls show declining support for coalitions, generally attributed to the waning popularity of the current UK coalition government. But the findings of this survey do suggest that people will reward those politicians and parties who can be more open to voicing agreements or to collaborating across party lines on selected issues.

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An overriding sense that politics is alien emerges from the survey. 18 per cent of respondents said they would be more likely to vote if 'politicians seemed more like human beings' and 18 per cent felt that political parties would seem more relevant if they 'used less jargon and spoke in the same language as everybody else'.

Yet this is accompanied by support for what MPs do, even if views diverge on what that should be. The positive statement receiving the most support (24 per cent)

claimed that 'Most politicians do their best to help constituents who have problems'. Partisan positioning at Westminster received little admiration with respondents claiming they would be more likely to vote for a party next time round 'if [they] spent less time trying to win my vote and more time doing good work in the neighbourhood'.

Whilst the model of representative democracy on offer is not matching expectations, some findings give cause for cautious optimism. Asked why they didn't vote, 18 per cent of respondents simply said they didn't know. This rises to 42 per cent amongst non-voters aged 18–24. For this age group it seems they have not yet been given a reason to vote but likewise are not yet convinced of reasons not to.

People want their politicians to be more like them and to focus on good local deeds; and for parties to be distinct yet collaborative. They like the idea of more direct democracy but nearly half agree the current system isn't perfect but 'is the best way we have of collectively tackling the big issues of the day and making the big choices that face society.' This supports existing research which shows widespread support for the model of representative democracy accompanied by a desire for it to work better in practice. These are not straightforward challenges. They demand a sophisticated response from politicians to a population that does not fit the neat core/swing voter categories the parties have relied on for so long.

In the meantime, MPs could heed the strongest criticism of the poll, their failure on radio or television to give 'straight answers to straight questions'. This could reflect a more media-trained, professionalised political class. Politicians are never going to be our first choice of flight companion. But straight talking could get people tuning back in. **F**

*Katie Ghose is Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society*

## Celebrate debate

Too often political parties try to cover up disagreement or controversy. But to re-engage people, politicians should embrace argument, within as well as between parties argues *Lisa Nandy*

How to reconnect people with politics is a preoccupation in the Westminster village, but it is the wrong starting point. The majority of the public are not apathetic, but many are seriously disillusioned with mainstream political parties. As one of my constituents put it recently: "as far as I'm concerned, you're all paddling in the same canoe." Young people in particular are intensely political, but sceptical about the major political parties and unlikely to vote for them, let alone join. Yet protest movements have emerged and volunteering is high. Civil society is alive and well, but party politics has taken a wrong turn. Instead of reconnecting people with politics, politics needs to reconnect with people.

How to do this is a problem for all of the major political parties but perhaps more so for the Labour party than any other. After more than a decade in government the party lost its ability to communicate policies that made sense, on issues that mattered, in a language people understood.

Political slogans like 'hard working families', 'the progressive consensus' and 'joined-up thinking' became too prevalent, alienating people rather than inspiring them. Too often slogans like these seek to cover up disagreement or controversy, when what is badly needed is politicians on the left who are prepared to tell the truth, even when it goes against prevailing public attitudes, and make the case for change.

No wonder then that the priorities that dominate in Westminster are often a million miles away from the priorities people have in my Wigan constituency. House of Lords reform, the alternative vote, and rifts in the coalition have dominated discussion at Westminster and the media, but in two years have not featured in my mailbag while the social care crisis for the elderly and disabled is pushing families up and down the country to breaking point.



While all the parties chase the centreground, millions of people are denied a voice. This trend, adopted as a deliberate election strategy by Labour, has become a source of weakness, and poses a greater risk for Labour than for the other parties. Harold Wilson once said that Labour is nothing if not a moral crusade. To gain public trust and support we must seek clear definition, not just seek the centreground. It is our morality which gives us our integrity and our strength.

**A Labour party that tries to control and dictate from the centre fails to make the best use of its greatest strength: its members**

This also means taking on the difficult issues that too often the left is reluctant to confront. Emulating the Tories is one problem, but abdicating difficult political territory to them is another. There are too few mainstream politicians of any party who are prepared to take on issues like welfare reform and immigration with a sense of generosity and humanity. Because of this, those debates are overwhelmingly negative, helping to fuel the very anti-politics all parties should seek to dispel.

The way to make major political parties relevant again is to loosen up the political debate and bring in a range of voices that

reflect the range of views held by the people we are elected to represent. This is, and was always, Labour's greatest strength; we are a grassroots party with reach into communities across the country. If used wisely it helps the leadership to stay in touch, not just to get messages out but to take messages in; to listen as well as to lead. Over the last few decades that ability has been diminished, with increasing control from the centre that at times reduced party activists with much to contribute to little more than leafleters and minute takers. The advent of social media makes it impossible to exert that level of central control anymore and it presents an opportunity for Labour to become again the broad church of political opinion, with a range of voices that reflect the diversity of the country and the people who live in it.

Coherence matters to people – that the Labour party can reach agreement and stand for election on a platform of priorities and policies that makes sense is essential – but so too is the debate that precedes good policies. It is no use pretending that the pressing national issues are black and white. How to fund higher education? How to meet the growing needs of a population living longer? So often the answers to these questions are in shades of grey, and our political debate ought to not only reflect but embrace and celebrate that, within as well as between parties.

A Labour party that tries to control and dictate from the centre fails to make the best use of its greatest strength: its members. Labour has a leader who instinctively understands that. But as the next election approaches, this doesn't mean merely following rather than leading: we must openly embrace debate and make the moral case for change. It's what so many people have been waiting for, for so long. **F**

*Lisa Nandy is MP for Wigan*