

## ANY MAN POLITICS: WILL THE NEW BREED OF POLITICAL COMEDIANS CONVINCING THE ELECTORATE?

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Maeve Clare Ambrosino, Executive Officer at Parliament Street, explains why we need good, smart conservative policies and not populist, easy rhetoric.

The recent sense of distrust for politicians and for party politics as we know it, which has been growing among certain groups, and the perception that Westminster is out of touch with voters' needs and disconnected to heartland issues, is one which needs to be addressed if the values which we all take for granted are to be safeguarded. As a direct result, there has been an insurgence of populist politics, and all over the country there are small niche parties whose leaders attempt to attract votes with emotive rhetoric and often incendiary manifestos. What these tend to have in common is that their form is greater than their content and there is no attempt at providing solutions. While it may be considered democratic to offer voters the chance to support issues which have direct relevance to them, the result is fragmentary and risks undermining the foundations of our nation. One thing is certain; there has never been a greater need for good, smart politics and good, smart politicians. Indeed, it may well be said, without even a tongue in cheek, that *"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."*

## ANY MAN POLITICS

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### WHAT BELIES THE LACK OF ENGAGEMENT

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Perhaps one reason for the lack of engagement with party politics is the lack of in-depth information and a diminishing readership of political journalists. In an age where the public expects to download information for free, the great British press is struggling for survival, and strives to gain readers by churning out celebrity drivel, at the expense of serious political analysis. In addition, the advent of 24-hour news has tended to reduce information to the immediacy of the moment and if an issue is not 'breaking', it is soon forgotten. This widespread dumbing down of the news has arguably changed the way we read newspapers with many young people admitting that there is little time to dedicate to critical thinking. Indeed, thinking itself may be going out of fashion, in the age of technology where everybody has a voice, there seems to be more desire to speak than to think and internet forums provide everyone with a soap box to do so.

While the advantages in having access to the news 'as it happens' are undeniable, and a platform on which to speak is part of our great British tradition, it could be argued that, as a direct result of these developments, the voting public is becoming disengaged with mainstream politics. Increasingly, it seems, young people are feeling that the decisions taken in Westminster have little relevance to their lives and tend to look for political inspiration on the web, rather than to political journalists. In a society which is becoming increasingly individualistic, voters are focussing on issues which are directly connected with their own interests, whether these are campaigns to save their local park or even to release information on UFOs. Useful and interesting as these campaigns are, they do nothing to resolve broader political issues and the small groups which represent them only serve to fragment the vote.

So far, to cite W.B. Yeats, we have not yet reached the stage of "mere anarchy" being let loose upon the world. However, it is certainly true

## SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

that the gyre is widening and voters are losing connection with the traditional three party system. In fact, there is an insurgence of small niche parties with made-to-measure policies which nurture the dreams and fears of their target voters, usually without the need to provide solutions. The modus operandi of these parties is to identify a problem, preferably one that resonates with as many people as possible, decry it and promise to resolve it. There is often no attempt to provide details of how they will resolve the issues or to analyse what the long term consequences might be. From the point of view of Conservative thinkers, this type of politics goes strongly against the grain. Conservatism, as defined by the third Marquis of Salisbury consists of “impeding events from happening until the point that they are no longer dangerous.”

Interestingly, this phenomenon of anti-politics is not unique to the UK but is widespread throughout the world. In Italy, whose population may be said to have lost faith in the representative actions of their politicians somewhat earlier than most, a movement called Any Man’s Front was set up between 1946 and 1949. Its emblem depicted a man being squeezed for money and sweat, a man who was tired of State demands and only asked to be left in peace. The aims of Any Man Front can be described as follows: To fight against communism; to fight against industrial capitalism; to propagate individual economic liberalism; to limit taxation and a general distaste of State intervention and regulation.

The Front provides a template for many other Any Men in other countries; very different from the British idea of the Common Man, protected by Common Law, which encompasses so many Conservative core values. In Common law, the state is placed in an overarching position, with a duty to safeguard the rights of citizens and conserve century-old laws; the anti-political Any Man, is a DIY enthusiast. According to his context, Any Man changes face, political colour and ideology and uses facile rhetoric to gain popular

## ANY MAN POLITICS

consensus, usually based on fear. Some of the parties which represent him are left-wing in nature and believe that the state should play a strong role to redress problems; others are liberal and aim to limit the powers of the state. Some examples of left-wing parties are Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and Sinn Féin in Ireland, while a fascinating example of an anti-state, anti-political party is the Danish Progress Party, founded in 1972 by Mogens Glistrup, economist and author of bestselling books on how to avoid paying taxes. One of his more memorable suggestions included cutting defence costs by playing recordings of declarations of military surrender in Russian!

In modern day Britain, Any Man finds expression in UKIP who have a bi-forked agenda: they are anti-immigration and they are anti-European. Any Man, however, is also at home in the multiple autonomous and sometimes pro-independence parties such as Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Yorkshire First, Yorkshire Independent Party, Cornwall's Mebyon Kernow and The North East Party which render the Political horizon even more fragmented. This desire for autonomy is in direct contrast with the core values of the Conservative party, which is also very much in favour of preserving local heritage but tends to act in the way, described by Roger Scruton; to "Feel locally, Think nationally".

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## THE EFFECTS OF FRAGMENTATION

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While most of these parties are of negligible influence, UKIP, and to an extent, the SNP has succeeded in tapping into the populist fears, regardless of political colour and seriously risks fragmenting the voting population to the detriment of good, smart politics. UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage, by embracing the celebrity culture largely fed by a press which is desperate to compete with internet gossip and win back readership, has carefully cultivated his brand image, using every rhetorical device available. Appearances on high and low brow television programmes, which he uses mainly to ensure we knew his

## SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

face and how to pronounce his name, photo opportunities with pint in hand, the use of down to earth, Any Man's language and decrying of the issues which are perceived by many as reasons to be fearful, have all contributed to the very successful portrayal of a British, or in any case English Any Man. With his self-deprecating, flawed but affable, smoking, drinking, plain speaking persona, Farage is the archetypal lovable rogue, the flamboyant cavalier, the pint swigging, weaver of homespun politics - The Englishman in the Pub! So efficiently has Farage built his image that his followers seem blind to the paradoxes - that he earns a comfortable salary in the EU parliament, that he is married to an EU national and even that he is not Any Man at all, but is privately educated. The fact that Farage and his party offer no real solutions to the threats faced by the Englishman seems also to be of little consequence. As for immigration, it is interesting that UKIP also wins consensus in areas where immigration is less pronounced - in Essex for example.

And then there is Russell Brand, the stand-up comedian whose re-invented persona has taken him from foul mouthed, self-confessed heroin addicted wild-child to messianic bringer of truth. With this honed and polished image, another cavalier, Brand has become a new type of Any Man and already begun his steady march along the path first taken by Italian stand-up comedian Beppe Grillo, now leader of the nebulous 5 Star Movement, Brazilian comic Tiririca, Mexican comic Lagrimita and French comic Dieudonné. All of these comics present themselves as anti-political Any Men and believe they are proposing some form of new democracy, a beacon of hope to their respective Any Men voters. Yet they are all anti-political in nature and they hide real dangers to the very foundation of democracy. While Russell Brand is using his thorough knowledge of the art of rhetoric at its darkest, to rally his followers to abandon the voting system, in Italy, Grillo, using his own, can also be said to be subverting democracy, in true double speak fashion, under the banner of greater democracy. Based on followers of his blog, which while it is one of the

## ANY MAN POLITICS

most followed in the world, its numbers still only represent a small proportion of the people who actually voted for him, Grillo submits proposed policies to his followers before discussing them in Parliament. The mantra is 'The web decides'. This apparently democratic way of deciding policy however, does not take into account the fact that not all of the party's supporters are followers of the blog, or have access to a computer. Blog followers who actually vote, number on average only 20,000, a figure that would be derided as non-representational were it a referendum, are well 'primed' before being asked to decide on a policy and dissidents are not well accepted and are actually expelled. So what is the meaning of this rise in Any Man politics? What are the dangers of this trend of comedians, professional and otherwise, who present themselves as political leaders, sometimes targeting a particular social class or ideology and sometimes presenting themselves as all things to all men?

The answer is that there are many and they are grave. While the idea of being able to cherry-pick political ideas in line with our already established views is attractive, actually basing a party on such limited policies is unrealistic. It is not possible to govern a country based on voters' momentary whims, indeed to try to do so would make Plato's vision of the Ship of Fools a reality. Politics is not a joke; we are not talking about choosing this year's winner of The X-Factor. By weakening a political system which has developed over centuries there is a risk that the very foundations of civilisation, of human rights and of world peace are undermined. The implications are serious and politicians must step up to the mark. Now, more than ever, there is a need for renewed rigour and the political class must pull out all the stops to ensure that the fabric of democracy is not unravelled.

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SMART POLITICS AND SMART POLITICIANS

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## SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

Integrity is vital and it is important that political representatives must win back credibility in the eyes of the voters, particularly the disenchanted young. This should not be done superficially. For example, social media may be an excellent way to connect with voters and get a message across but it is also an excellent way of making clamorous mistakes and should be used with extreme care. When, for example, politicians take to Twitter to ridicule the UKIP voter who drives a white van, they are sinking to the lowest level of political activity. By the same token, pitching Farage against an even more strident Any Man in the Pub, a landlord indeed, who promises to slash the price of beer, may be effective in the short term, in the long term it will further fragment society and a fragmented society is open to becoming a tyranny. As Plato said, *“Excess of liberty, whether in states or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery.”*

Regardless of political leanings, conservative values are at the heart of the British identity and for this reason the Conservative Party has a fundamental role to play in regaining the trust of the electorate as it traverses the 21st century. In his recently published book, *“How to be a Conservative”*, Roger Scruton says that institutions should never be uprooted, but pruned and tended, to allow for healthy growth and development. This is the way forward for our democratic system. If democracy is to survive, it is important that a party's political identity is solid and decisions taken with a long term view and not simply to obtain a vote in the moment. The Conservative Party has traditionally responded to its voters in a pondered and balanced way and they continue to do so. One illustration of Conservative adaptability is its promise, in light of the British public's expressed perplexities on the EU and immigration, of a referendum to give every voter a say in our continued membership of the European Union. This exemplifies the Conservative tradition of promoting healthy growth by pruning, even drastically, when required. However, what is certain is that should the referendum result in our leaving the Union, it will not be without an in depth campaign to educate voters on all aspects of the decision and