

## WHO CARES ABOUT THE GENERAL ELECTION?

By COLIN TUDGE

Gordon Brown cares about the election. So does David Cameron. And Nick Clegg. So do all their supporters, the pros and the hobbyists, who go round with leaflets. But who else? It's a fair bet that half of us won't vote at all. Of those who do, some will vote ritualistically for candidates they know have no chance of winning. (I will vote Green).

For why bother? All three major parties are the same. They try to look different: one may not increase VAT, and one may increase VAT (I can't remember which); one promises to make cuts while the other promises to make slightly different cuts; and one promises electoral reform while the others promise slightly different electoral reform; and so on.

But they have all signed up irredeemably to what is called "the free global market" -- "neoliberalism" -- and to finance capitalism. Only one senior politician -- Vince Cable -- gives the impression that he knows what this really means, and he implies that he doesn't much care for it, but he also knows there is no point in saying so -- and if he won't act on what he really thinks, does it matter what he really thinks?

In truth, if the free market really was "free" in the sense that Adam Smith envisaged it more than two centuries ago it could probably be a good thing. He saw it, after all, as a virtual infinity of traders with a virtual infinity of customers, all with perfect information. It was an ideal, in short; never a practical reality. Always it would become biased one way or another -- the laws of complexity tell us this, although they were not formulated in Smith's day -- and so it has come about. In reality, the "free" market is dominated by the biggest players -- who of course are the transnational corporates. They are more powerful than governments who survive, as Britain's has done ever since Thatcher's government first signed up to this, by tagging along behind and creaming off some of the profit (if they can collect the taxes). All -- the market itself, governments, and of course all the intellectuals and experts who actually want to be employed -- have become the corporates' handmaidens. So what difference does it make which handmaiden we elect?

Finance capitalism is a separate phenomenon that runs in grisly parallel. It gives pre-eminence to money. Money ceases to be a way of keeping score and of oiling the wheels of trade and becomes a commodity in itself -- the chief object of trade. The declared aim of all big modern

governments, their “target” as the anomalously titled “New Labour” would put it, is to maximize the amount of money produced in a year. The amount of money produced in a year is called the GDP, Gross Domestic Product. Increase in GDP year on year is called “economic growth”, and this is the only idea that Gordon Brown takes seriously. If “growth” increases year by year then the government has met its target and all is deemed to be well. But none of this has anything to do with civilization. As John Maynard Keynes pointed out the better part of a century ago, GDP has nothing whatever to do with human wellbeing. In practice, demonstrably, the rich are growing richer while the poor grow poorer, both within countries (including rich countries) and between countries. But “growth” is the “target” nonetheless, the modern foul equivalent of the Holy Grail.

For it is not deemed to matter *how* the money is produced. In practice, of course, the money is not “produced” at all; it is merely deemed to exist. It is notional. The whole economy operates on debt, on the vague idea that what we spend now may be paid back in the future. Thus we are constantly urged not to panic.

But the non-existent money would not be deemed to exist unless there was some human activity in the background – and the kind of human activity that generates most money most quickly is on the whole destructive. Gold mining is lucrative. Oil extraction is lucrative. Burning the oil is even more lucrative. Modern industrial agriculture which burns loads of oil is lucrative: and like all other forms of mining, is highly destructive, despite denials from on high. In fact: the most reliable way to produce a lot of money quickly is to turn the fabric of the whole world as rapidly as possible into a saleable commodity. So that is what is done. No-one can take their foot off the accelerator partly because this year’s debt must be paid for by next year’s endeavour; and this must be even bigger than this year’s to balance the books. But to make things worse, the whole system is designed to be maximally competitive (provided it protects the interests of the biggest players) – so an enterprise that merely does a good job and returns a modest profit is liable to be displaced that does the same thing more profitably, which generally means more cheaply, irrespective of the collateral damage which in practice does not have to be paid for. Then, as the coup de grace, the money that has been generated by whatever means is largely siphoned off by the people whose job it is to control its flow. They thus become extraordinarily rich without doing anything at all. Their wealth is notional but it still has buying power. So they can buy the nicest houses in the nicest places and fill the

fertile fields with their daughters' ponies, and with notice boards saying keep out.

It surely is obvious that it really does not make sense to commodify the fabric of the world itself, and all the other creatures that live in it. We live here. This is our only home. If we turn it all into a desert we will die, even if we generate a pile of money as big as the Himalayas (although it wouldn't be because it is really only a figure in a computer). We cannot live without our fellow creatures – including the ones that don't on the face of things seem to be immediately useful. So even from a purely anthropocentric point of view an economy rooted in destruction makes no sense. Some might suggest, too (such voices can still be heard) that human beings are not the only species that counts. From a geocentric or a biocentric point of view, our present antics are simply wicked. Bigger than a “crime against humanity”. A crime against life.

Many, in the history of the world, have suggested that it is the job of governments to look after the people who elected them. But our present government, and whichever one happens to succeed it, have given up on governance. They no longer govern in any worthwhile sense of the word: they merely interfere with our lives, ever more minutely. This is the very antithesis of what Jefferson and the other great founders of the United States conceived that government should be. Governments since Thatcher have in effect abdicated, although they still occupy the premises and take their salaries. They have given up their power, partly to the European Union – which on the whole is surely a good thing; but also and far more profoundly to the World Trade Organization, the club for members of the “free” market, and to the World Bank and the IMF, and that is a disaster. If UKIP had any sense, this is what it would be fighting against. But of course it does not. Sense has gone missing. Note too that the enemy is not capitalism per se, but the modern, neoliberal version of it. Jefferson and his colleagues dreamed of a democratic state rooted in free trade (properly managed), and free enterprise. If only the USA had stuck to the principles of its founders the world would be a far better place.

Right now we need, as the Greens and every sentient person must surely acknowledge, to look after the fabric of the world and the creatures within it – crudely known as “the environment”. As a subset of this endeavour we need as a matter of urgency to devise systems of agriculture that are actually designed to feed people, and are capable of doing so, without adding to the wreckage, as the present system, designed on neoliberal lines exclusively for profit, so obviously does. Above all perhaps we need governments to take farming seriously. But “New Labour's” only

agricultural strategy, if such it can be called, is an open invitation to Monsanto, Cargill, and Tesco, to fill their boots. Which they are doing. Thus at this year's Oxford Farming Conference (not to be confused with the Oxford *Real* Farming Conference!) Hilary Benn told us that we must produce more food at home – but added, though I paraphrase, “only if we can do it more cheaply than the Brazilians”.

I would vote for a baboon if it showed any sign of taking “the environment” in general and farming in particular seriously. But no baboons are standing, and I can't recall any of the party leaders mentioning either “the environment” or agriculture in the build-up to the forthcoming election. Apparently the laws of physics, which relate atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> to global warming, are being put on hold while Gordon Brown sorts out the economy, if such it can be called, or David Cameron, or whoever it might be.

So there really is no point in voting for either, or for Mr Clegg who despite his protestations and the reassuring presence of Mr Cable offers more of the same with a slightly different gloss.

The only point is to do what this Campaign is designed for: bring together people who give a damn, to do something different *despite* the government and its corporate and financial supporters and its expert and intellectual advisers. We need the Renaissance, in short. It is a very long shot. The power is all with the powers-that-be. But if we don't go for it we've had our chips.

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