

# Britain's Elections: The Real Lessons of the Tory Victory

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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*There's much that could be said about the Conservative party's victory today in Britain's election. Not least David Cameron has emerged stronger: he now has a small but absolute majority in parliament, compared to his last government, in which he had to share power, a little of it anyway, with his minor coalition partners, the Lib Dems.*

According to the rules of the British system, he has won a supposed mandate to carry out all his party's policies, even though the Tories gained the support of slightly less than 25% of the total electorate, and little more than a third of those who actually voted. That in itself should be enough to discredit the idea that Britain is a democracy in any meaningful sense.

But I want to focus on two issues that this particular election highlighted. Although this refers to the British election, the lessons apply equally to US elections.

The first is a debate that gripped some on the far left after Russell Brand interviewed Labour leader Ed Miliband and subsequently gave Miliband his backing. This was quite a surprise – and disappointment – given that Brand had shaken up British politics over the previous 18 months by arguing that the whole political system was inherently flawed and undemocratic. He had called on people not to vote as a way to show that the system had no popular legitimacy, and invest their energies instead in a different kind of grassroots politics. Britain's two main parties, Brand and others argued, represented the interests of the big corporations that now dominate Britain and much of the globe.

The labels of Conservative and Labour are the misleading vestiges of a time when there was some sort of class politics in Britain: the Tories representing the unalloyed interests of the capitalist class, and Labour the interests of organised labour. But the Tories under Margaret Thatcher long ago destroyed the power of the trade unions. Labour became a shell of its former self, its finances and ability to organise workers crumbled as the corporations entrenched their power, assisted by the Tories.

Under a power-hungry Tony Blair, Labour allowed itself to be captured by those same corporations, famously illustrated by his Faustian pact with media tycoon Rupert Murdoch. Labour sold what was left of its soul, becoming a Tory-lite party, and winning the support of Murdoch and his media empire as a result.

Brand seemed to understand this, arguing that what we needed was to turn our back on sham elections every five years between two parties representing the interests of the 1%. Instead the people needed to foment a non-violent political revolution, and take back power. How did voting for Miliband, a man who had largely adopted the Blair credo, make sense in the light of Brand's earlier claims?

Brand justified his change of mind using a familiar argument. He admitted Miliband was far from perfect but was still the preferable choice because he was prepared to listen to the people, unlike Cameron's Conservatives. He was the "lesser evil" choice.

The problem with his logic – aside from its faith-based component – was that the same argument could have been used about any recent British election. It was an excuse to avoid engaging in real politics.

Supporters of Tony Blair, even after he committed the supreme war crime by invading Iraq, could have argued quite convincingly that the Tories too would have invaded Iraq – plus they would have done worse things at home, inflicting greater damage on the health and education systems. Thus, on the lesser-evil argument, it was legitimate to vote for the war criminal Blair. A man like Blair could destroy another nation, cause suffering on a scale unimaginable to most of us, and yet still claim the moral high ground because the alternative would be even worse.

The faulty logic of the lesser-evil argument is apparent the moment we consider the Blair case. If there is no political cost for committing the ultimate war crime, because the other guys are worse, what real leverage can the electorate ever have on the political system. The "left" vote will always gravitate to the slightly less nasty party of capital. No change is really possible. In fact, over time the political centre of gravity is likely to shift – as has in fact happened – ever more to the right, as the corporations accrete ever greater power.

Further, where does Brand's logic take us now that Miliband has lost. If we were supposed to have faith that Miliband would have listened had he achieved power, then why not extend that faith to his successor? If we are satisfied by the lesser-evil argument, why not wait till the next election to see if we can get another slightly less nasty candidate into Downing Street? We can defer the choice to demand real change indefinitely.

The second point is that the programme of extreme austerity at the heart of Cameron's manifesto has been fully discredited by most economists over the past few years. Not only does it penalise the overwhelming majority of the population by redistributing wealth away from the working and middle classes to the financial elite, but it also inflicts great damage on the long term health of the economy. In other words, British voters look like supreme masochists. They voted to seriously harm their own, and their country's, interests. Are Britons collectively insane?

Of course, not. So how can we explain their insane choice this week? The answer is staring us in the face. In fact, Blair showed us what was required to win a British election. A party hoping to win power needed first to seduce the corporations, and their media divisions. Without most of the media on your side, no party stands a chance of winning because the media subtly controls the narrative of the election: what count as "the issues", how the leaders and their platforms are presented, what and who is considered credible.

Miliband's failure was that, unlike Blair, he looked a little half-hearted about his desire to be the 1%'s mouthpiece in parliament and Downing Street. Maybe what seduced Brand about Miliband was the sliver of humanity that was still just visible below the surface of the corporate employee the Labour party had groomed their leader to become.

The revolution that we need in Britain and the US has to start with a disengagement from the mainstream media's representation of events. We have to discard their narratives.

Even more important than an overhauled electoral system, one that fairly reflects the electorate's preferences, we need a grassroots media that is free of the control of fabulously wealthy proprietors and major corporations, that does not depend on the massive subsidies of corporations (in the form of advertising), and that does not rely, like the BBC, on funding from government. We need independent journalists, and we need to demand a new funding model for the media. And we need to do all this while the mainstream media entirely control the narrative about what a free media is.

It is a huge challenge - and one that reflects the extent of our own ideological confinement. Just like the political parties, we have been captured by the 1%. We cannot imagine a different world, a different economic system, a different media landscape, because our intellectual horizons have been so totally restricted by the media conglomerates that control our newspapers, our TV and radio stations, the films we watch, the video games we play, the music we listen to. We are so imaginatively confined we cannot even see the narrow walls within which our minds are allowed to wander.

As long as the media represent the span of interests of the 1% - from the psychopathic Murdoch empire to the capitalism with a little heart of the Guardian Media Group - our politicians will range from the Blue Tories of the Conservative party to the Red Tories of the Labour party. And we will remain enslaved.

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