

Labour: The Argument

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/05/05/labour-the-argument/

2008-5-5

The Labour Party is going through some soul-searching post-local elections. But is the debate online better than we would have had in the past?

In the old days party workers would have retreated to smoke-filled rooms at the back of pubs or made coded speeches at Union and Party conferences. Now we can read as Labour politicians debate the next step live and online.

[Liberal Conspiracy](#) is a kind of metrosexual ethnically left political blog with contributors with ironic (I hope) names such as 'Shiraz Socialist'. Alan Thomas describes himself as:

... a blogger, activist and member of Unite-TGWU. His main interests outside of UK left politics are in Turkey, Kurdistan and the USA. And is also always delighted to write about wine and fine food when he's in less of an intellectual mood.

That has got to be a parody worthy of [Bird and Fortune](#)? But Alan is serious and this is what he feels Lefties should do next:

There is, it seems to me, no alternative to the slow and patient work of building a working class political movement outside of the Labour Party. Such a stance may even entail endorsing a vote for certain Labour candidates at times, or candidates from other parties such as the Socialist Party or the Greens.

So far, so predictably irrelevant. I would hazard a guess that the fact this thinking is online and so accessible to anybody who has broadband and wants to build a working class movement does not mean it will have any more success in the real world. And here is the reaction of [Bob Piper](#) a Labour councillor who is very much in the real world of Midlands local government. Bob doesn't entirely share Alan's perspective but he is prepared to give it a (ironic) try:

Well, thanks for that, then, Alan. I think I'll call it a day. I'll nip in to the Council House tomorrow and tell the Chief Executive I'm resigning my seat and I think we should hand it over to the Conservative who came second in my election. He was opposed to all of the extra expenditure on Health and Education, he wants to send immigrants and asylum seekers back to from where they came, he doesn't believe in social housing, or safety nets for the poorest in our communities. He thinks the minimum wage, employment rights for workers, four weeks paid holiday, health and safety regulations and increased parental rights are nothing more than burdens on business.

Well this is real debate and we can all join in. But will it create better politics?

This reminds me of an excellent book by an American journalist Matt Bai called [The Argument](#). He argues that online political debate in the States among Democrats is not an entirely good thing. Activists got so caught up in the Internet debate on sites like [The Daily Kos](#) or [Huffington Post](#) that they forgot about real politics. He says that the energy of party supporters was used up on blogging battles. Instead of thinking about policy they were worrying

about email lists, software and avatars.

Matt Bai also points out that it is the techno-savvy who have the time, or the liberal billionaires like Huffington who have the money, who can end up controlling the online political debate.

I think that British politics online is different. We have a strong set of political bloggers like Guido and Dizzy who are clearly partisan but also very effective as journalists. They break stories and provide tons of passionate (and very biased) commentary. If, or rather when, Labour loses power I suspect that the number of left-leaning pol-journo-bloggers will increase.

There are also increasing numbers of politicians like Bob Piper who now converse with the electorate directly online. It is a mix of voices that sounds to me like a reasonably healthy political conversation. (And the Right blogosphere is even more vibrant – have a read of [this](#) brilliant posting by Tory MP [David Jones](#) dissecting a Gordon Brown TV interview).

But I am surprised at how slow organisations such as the trades unions have been to create online communities and encourage debate through blogs, wikis etc. At this moment of political transition, surely it is the time for all civil society bodies to take to the Internet to stir up debate?

Here's one source for ammunition in the coming political battles. It's another plug for [Politicshome](#) which appears to be a good way to get a taste of the political blogs. It has a live update on breaking pol-blog posts. Politicshome is still in beta stage but seems to provide a pretty balanced guide to both mainstream and new media political coverage. It has been set up by a Tory (Stephan Shakespeare: disclaimer – he is on the Polis advisory board) but has got enough of a mix (Martin Bright, Tim Montgomerie, Andrew Rawnsley) to make you feel that it will not be captured by a single cause.

Let the Argument begin.

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