

CELEBRITY BIG TROUBLE



Do you laugh or cry when a nation retreats from serious issues and descends into slapstick? Much of the press has been obsessed with the latest television series of Celebrity Big Brother. It was inevitable that they would focus on the folly of George Galloway in agreeing to take part in the 'realitysoap' programme.

Set against his triumphant appearance before the US Senate committee hearings, George's presence in the Big Brother house marks an undoubted low in his contribution to the anti-war movement. Still, the country seems besotted with the question of who will 'survive' in the house out of the motley selection of cross-dressers, Page Three pinups and failed media stars.

Apparently the twist (to titillate the viewers) is that one of the housemates is a complete fraud. Having never watched a second of

the programme I cannot say how much of the nation holds its breath in anticipation of the final denouement. Normally, I wouldn't even mention such a programme, but it takes place alongside another Big Brother event that does not even get recognised as part of the same slapstick. I refer, of course, to the political leadership of the nation.

When the press has turned its gaze from the Big Brother house to the House of Commons, it has been to select potential leadership figures against the same bland criteria it applies to Big Brother. The Lib Dem Leadership race is well underway and all of the 'hopefuls' are under the microscope. Too young, too old, too conservative, too radical, too boring... the judgements pour forth. But the judgements themselves are more about personalities than principles or policies.

We have already seen the same happen in the leadership of the Tory Party. David Cameron is hailed as the Conservatives' bright new future. In reality he is no more than Blair without the baggage. The political threat he poses is that he offers the electorate a credible prospect of the continuation of Thatcherite economics after Blair. Cameron will tell the public that he, rather than Gordon Brown, is the real continuation of New Labour.

Gordon Brown may (or may not) be respected for his commitment to means-testing the poor far more than the rich, or his obsession with making public services dependent on private finance. But in celebrity soap box terms he has the same appeal as George Galloway in the Big Brother house. Gauche and austere, he would be an uncertain asset in selling the dreams of immortality that New Labour still harbours for social authoritarianism and neo-liberal economics. If this were a TV programme, presenter, Davina McCall, would now pop on your screen bursting with excitement and a secret to tell: one of the celebrity political contestants in the House was a fraud. The public would get to know something withheld from the contestants; something which changed the whole nature of the contest itself.

Without any of the fanfare, this is what has actually happened. In the middle of the leadership contests

and political preening a different commentator has popped up. Sir James Lovelock is not a TV pundit. The mild-mannered, far sighted scientist long ago presented the world with his Gaia theory of how the planet protected and nurtured itself, as a single living organism. Today his message is different.

Lovelock has made no comment on the leadership qualities of any of the major politicians. His message is all the more devastating: the game itself is a fraud. It can, of course, continue to be played to its inevitable self-destruction. But the game – of current economic and political priorities – is a game of death. Continue as we are and the planet will not survive this century.

Actually, the planet will survive. It is only people who probably won't... unless we radically re-think how we live within the next five to ten years (maximum). This is where the question of real political leadership comes in. There is not a candidate in the field (of any party) with the vision or courage to say that the game of globalised, free-for-all economics cannot go on.

At best, most of Britain's current political leaders want little more than a greening of the edges of globalisation. Tony Blair and his would be successors, share a set of environmental perspectives that melt away in the sunlight of the first corporate lobby. If Lovelock is right, we have already passed the point at which the planet can heal itself without a major crisis. In the same way that the body uses a fever to fight a virus, climate change will accelerate and render 'normal life' impossible.

I am still convinced that new norms can be put in place for a future that is both sustainable and civilised. But these norms require a break from where we are now, not a continuation of it. Unlike Big Brother, we do not have the option of simply switching the TV off. Ignore it and the show goes on. We have to change the programme, not just the channel.

Many of us have argued that socialism has always been about vision; a willingness to address the landscape of a different future rather than repaint the road signs of inequality and exploitation. The architects of New Labour/the Washington Consensus scoffed at this in their fulsome embrace of the politics of contentment and the cult of individual choice. As the framework of contentment breaks down all bets will be off, and vision will be back.

In a Big Brother house that no longer protected against the heat or the cold, no longer guaranteed food or water or energy, the contestants would face a simple choice of survival; socialism or barbarism. In reality, there is only one choice. It is us, collectively and interdependently. And if the leaders cannot see what the public (or the party) already knows, it isn't the public that needs to be thrown out.