

POLITICS OF THE DOWN AND DIRTY



It used to be an entirely American obsession, ridiculed by everyone else as evidence of the corrosive character of politics without policies. Now, it seems, 'negative campaigning' has poisoned its way into much of the European political landscape too. This is where the Third Way, the Washington Consensus, or whatever you want to call it, inevitably takes you; knee deep into the politics of fear and denigration.

Italy's recent general election rarely lifted its head above the torrent of abuse that candidates hurled at each other. When Berlusconi publicly attacked those not intending to vote for him as 'coglioni' (dickheads) you would have thought this was the desperate flailing of someone who knows they are about to be given a big time kicking by the electorate. Instead, it was a calculated move to show that, in an

election campaign that had been pretty grubby and personalised, Berlusconi could talk dirty with the best of them. It was a strategy that almost worked.

To be fair, the Left have to take their own share of responsibility for the closeness of the result. Berlusconi chose to occupy the battleground of abuse and, with the exception of Bertinotti, the Left responded in kind. Bertinotti's reward was to see the Rifondazione votes increase across the country, giving them 41 MPs in the chamber of Deputies (up from 11) and 21 Senators in the Upper House (up from 3). They are now the second largest party in the lower house. All this, though, is small comfort in an election that ended up far too close for comfort.

Amidst all the bickering, Italian voters could almost be forgiven for losing sight of the bigger issues at stake. The danger of being drawn into this sort of exchange was that a man you wouldn't want to buy a second hand TV station from, who should be in prison rather than in parliament, almost ended up running the country again. For the disciples of negative campaigning it was almost a good day's work. Back in the UK, the local government elections are heading in a similar direction, with the thrust of Labour's opening campaign being directed at the Tory leader himself. Whether changing your position on issues should count as duplicity or openness is another matter. The central issue is in the personalised nature of the political attacks.

None of this is confined to a single party. The Tories tried it previously in their 'Evil Eyes' election posters, targeting Blair himself. The Lib Dems have a habit of going for 'evil everything' in their local campaigns. The consequences, however, foster a mood of public cynicism and contempt that ultimately damages the democratic process itself.

Of course it is legitimate to challenge Cameron on his attempts to dress the Tory Party up in 'Green' clothing. But you challenge him on an issue by issue basis. When push comes to shove, will he cave in to the fraudulent claims of the nuclear lobby? Will he back the introduction of aviation fuel duty? Would he support making oil companies supply bio-fuels at a cost to the motorist that was 30% below the cost of

conventional fuels? Will he back the dramatic de-intensification of agro-chemical use needed to reduce nitrate levels in our water, so that it is safe to drink by 2012? Cameron's practical answers to these questions will determine whether he too ranks amongst the 'coglioni' or not.

Of course you can have dynamic and vibrant election campaigns that challenge the personal credentials of leaders, but to do so you have to have substantive issues to base them around. And beyond the issues you have to offer hope and inspiration.

In the mess of today's politics it is important to remind ourselves that Labour's origins were founded not just in the anger against exploitation and inequality, but in the visions of what a better society might look like. From the Diggers to the Levellers, from the Syndicalists to the Suffragettes, driving inspirational ideas came out of how a better society could be built on universal rights and collective entitlements rather than out of individual greed. All of the biggest challenges of the 21st Century will have to be met by a return to these same starting points.

At the moment, the Labour Party can barely move without tripping over corruption allegations in the 'cash for honours' or 'cash for contracts' saga. The press will continue to make a meal out of this and Labour's opponents will doubtless cash in on it in the local elections. It is, however, a crisis that could also take us out of the mess we have been digging ourselves into.

Ever since the film 'Indecent Proposal' everyone has understood that no one offers you a million pounds (or Dollars) without there being a catch. Whether it is your partner, the honours system or the economy, they want to screw something in exchange for their cash.

Labour's dash for private partners to finance public services takes you inextricably into the politics of patronage. It also transfers the political process into the hands of the rich and powerful. Those who have made fortunes out of government contracts, out of tax concession to the rich, and out of highly rewarding the PFI contracts, may well want to put some of their windfall gains back into society. They can make £2 million donations to the education system if they like, but the state is an idiot if it then gives away £25 million worth of school assets back to the donor, and lets them run the school themselves.

I've always taken the view that people who have a spare £2 million to buy a school, simply aren't paying enough tax. If we merely removed some of today's subsidies to the rich we would not have a schools funding crisis or a pensions crisis. Take the cost of PFI schemes and private 'operations factories' off the back of the NHS and you don't have a hospital funding crisis either. It is the burden of supporting the rich that we can no longer afford, not the cost of providing for the poor.

The bonus that should also appeal to Labour is that tackle this and you also close the door on patronage politics that always ends up in.