# A Tale of Two Houses

The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home Stephen Coleman endemol u.k. You**Gov** 

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Stephen Coleman is Cisco Professor of e-democracy at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. He is also senior research associate with the Hansard Society's e-democracy programme

Director of Public Opinion Research, YouGov

Production and subediting by Virginia Gibbons Hansard Society LSE, 9 Kingsway London WC2B 6XF Telephone: +44 (020)7955 7459 Facsimile: +44 (020)7955 7492 hansard@hansard.lse.ac.uk www.hansardsociety.org.uk



### **Foreword**

Britain's version of democracy has not been substantially reformed since the 1920s when we introduced universal manhood suffrage. The interval between then and now is about the same as that between the Great Reform Act of 1832 and 1928 (when all adult women were finally enfranchised). Is it time for reform once more?

Clever *YouGov*. They have seen the lowest turnout in a general election since 1918, particularly low amongst young voters. They have also clocked that young people were voting in their millions for *Big Brother*. So they isolated a group of *Big Brother* fans (BBs) and compared their attitudes to those of some 'political junkies' (PJs). Might we learn something about a possible way forward?

'Lazy, sad, horrendous, foul-mouthed, dumbed down, foolish, inane, coarse, banal, degrading, imbecilic'...this is what we learn the PJs think about *Big Brother* and its fans. 'Incredibly boring, patronising, pompous, dull, stiff, unreal, grey, overpaid, aloof'... that's the verdict of the BBs on politics. Stephen Coleman, Professor of e-democracy at Oxford University, takes *YouGov's* revealing research and analyses it carefully in this intriguing new study. As he points out, it is a tale of two televised houses – *Big Brother* and the Houses of Parliament. Comparisons of this sort can be facile but Coleman merely uses this as a starting point. The predominantly young viewers of *Big Brother* are demonstrably less involved in organised politics than previous generations. This study explores how politics might become more responsive and attractive to them.

There are two views of the current apathy. The first is that we have a crisis developing. Membership of the main political parties has declined substantially. In the 1950s the Young Conservatives numbered its members in millions. Today the average age of the entire party membership is a decrepit 67. Twenty somethings are disengaged from politics, diverted by much higher levels of disposable income and plenty of entertainment to spend it on. The sheer choice of

television channels means that they choose not to watch television programmes about politics. The proceedings of the House of Commons are seen as so dull and unremarkable that they rarely feature in television news anymore. In short, goes the view, this apolitical generation represents a serious threat to our participatory democracy.

The second view is more sanguine. First-time voters are decent enough citizens – just as concerned by social and ethical issues as previous generations. They merely don't have a taste for organised politics. Now that Labour has become a capitalist party there is a consensus in Westminster akin to that between the Democrats and the Republicans in the US. So politics is less controversial, less interesting. Particularly as Labour has an almost unprecedented majority and the opposition is weak to the point of witlessness. The moment Tony Blair faced the prospect of defeat, in the recent vote of the Iraqi war, politics became interesting again. No party retains a huge majority forever. Uncertainty and drama will return to the Commons, goes this argument. Above all, if first time voters are richer, happier and better entertained then their lack of interest in politics is a perfectly healthy symptom. It would not matter if the turnout in a General Election fell to 25%.

The last, disturbingly Orwellian, bread-and-circuses view was expressed to me by a fellow television executive who is close to the heart of the New Labour project. Personally, I hope his is a minority opinion among those who govern us. Democracy, by definition, requires a robust level of participation. How can we maintain that, even as things are changing so dramatically?

Email and mobile telephony have transformed the tenor of our lives. We answer more emails in a day than we used to receive letters in a week. We send and accept SMS text messages as quickly. We expect and enjoy responsiveness to a level of almost instant gratification. But we still only vote for the government once every four years or so. Privately political parties are in tune with this spirit. They poll us weekly for our views. But publicly the system gives us no power nor any official route to express our opinions. Speed, on its own, is not necessarily a virtue. But our democracy is divorced from the rhythm of the age.





Along with speed we now have and exercise almost limitless choice. One of the key ways we define ourselves is through the goods and services we buy. We are now practised, daily consumers. Except in politics. We only get to choose our national government every four or five years. And that's all we get to choose. We cannot express our views on individual issues. Equally significantly, the two ministries that occupy our government more than any other – education and health – represent services where most of us exercise very little choice at all.

There is now a dissonance between politics and the people. The relationship between the electors and the elected is fracturing. Parliament is remote and unresponsive. The Government cynically dominates the agenda, backbenchers have become invertebrate lobby fodder while an unrepresentative coterie of pressure groups burrow their way into the central nervous system of the body politic. Was it always like this? Yes, and probably worse. But now, as with everything else, we expect more.

As I said, comparisons between Parliament and *Big Brother* can be facile (but also tempting). They are two televised houses in which a popularity contest takes place. And they function well when the voters are emotionally as well as intellectually engaged. In other words, involved enough to care. That attitude is encouraged and enhanced when the voters feel that their active participation may affect the outcome. Despite the problems I have listed, the PJs that *YouGov* has unearthed are possessed of rock solid confidence. Anyone who doesn't like politics must have something wrong with them. There is nothing wrong with politics. BBs, on the other hand, come over as a rather more tolerant and broadminded mob. They see the value of politics but think it could perhaps be improved. Two suggestions they make in this survey are extremely shrewd. One recommends that the secret ballot be extended to the House of Commons. A brilliant idea. At one and the same time the remorseless power of the Whips would be broken, backbenchers would rediscover their souls and all issues would have to be properly debated. Another suggests

the introduction of fairly regular electronic plebiscites. To prevent Edmund Burke turning in his grave these need not be so regular as to subvert the role of MPs using their own judgement (and I stress, *their own*) in the House of Commons, but at the moment we are not even allowed a single referendum on the Euro. Both the ideas are quintessentially in the spirit of the times.

Stephen Coleman argues in his conclusion that, one way or another, Parliament needs to broaden its accountability, allow the electorate more control via interactivity and thus earn more respect from the new generation of voters. We should now be debating how to re-invent our politics. This spring sees the 350th anniversary of Cromwell's dismissal of the Long Parliament: 'You have been sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!' Could it be that, after all this time, we are dangerously close to agreeing with the Lord Protector's words?

### Peter Bazalgette,

Chairman, Endemol UK (producers of Big Brother)



### Context

I look... at you in your suits and ties and I sit here in my Clash t-shirt. What I am saying is, if I were a Muslim woman and I looked at the body politic as represented, where would I see myself? I would not see myself there at all. That is just an example. I do not really see myself represented. In fact the majority of us do not see ourselves represented... At the moment, because of the formality of the situation, because of the reality of who becomes Members of Parliament I think there is a problem there and when people do tune in and they see the same kind of talking head and as the political debate becomes narrower, as we now live in a less ideological age, then the distinctions between the parties are blurred for a lot of people, people who are semi-engaged in politics, and it becomes much of a much. (Billy Bragg, evidence to the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, March 7, 2002)

I think they're seeing a caricature of a confrontational assembly, which is not more than the exchange of pre-selected sound bites, in which each comes with their pebbles that they toss at each other.

A load of people who are shouting at each other without any real substance or outcome.

An empty chamber. Lazy MPs not doing any work, not interested in the debate. (MPs describing what they think TV viewers witness when watching coverage of the House of Commons, in Coleman, *Electronic Media*, *Parliament and the People*, 1999)

They say apathy has gripped the country. They accuse the public of not caring They sit in comfortable chairs laughing at you. Well, now's your chance to bite back and prove to the nation that the election is important and that your vote really does matter. The newspapers may pander to the political parties, but not Big Brother. On the site today we offer you – the esteemed viewer – the chance to take part in the vital referendum. Forget the Euro, stealth taxes and spin. Today Big Brother online is asking: Is the Big Brother election more important than the General Election?

(Big Brother web site, June 1, 2001)

In our society (that is, advanced western society) we have lost even the pretence of a common culture. Persons educated with the greatest intensity we know can no longer communicate with each other on the plane of their major intellectual concern. This is serious for our creative, intellectual and, above all, our normal life. It is leading us to interpret the past wrongly, to misjudge the present, and to deny our hopes of the future. (CP Snow, The Two Cultures, 1956)

Two houses, next door to one another, yet almost on different planets. In both of them the inhabitants are locked away from the rest of the world, left to talk endlessly amongst themselves, periodically wondering if anyone is listening to them or whether there is any point in their being there. Cameras capture their every move. Paradoxically, though their dramas and routines are played out in apparent isolation from the world beyond their walls, the residents of both houses are dependent upon how they are seen and judged by those outside. The relationship between inside and outside the houses is one of performance and perception; exhibition and surveillance. Feeling misunderstood by the outside world, the inhabitants put their ears to the walls and listen for the sounds of public opinion - their lifeblood.

The first house is 'cool', 'wicked' and seriously 'real.' Its resident 'housemates' are wrapped in the transparent costumes of authenticity. They talk like us. They dress like us. They sing and hum our tunes. They have weaknesses like ours. They were once part of us. Only the monitored, mirrored walls stand between them and us. Like a Lowry painting or a Mike Leigh film, the imagery is characterised by an overwhelming ordinariness of being. The housemates live in a world of almost incessant fun. The sun shines in their garden. Their parties are wild. Outsiders peep over the fence, hoping to be invited in.

Next door, in stark, dark contrast, stands an outwardly imposing, but inwardly decaying edifice: the House. 'In need of some modernisation', the estate agents would coyly describe it. The grey-suited inhabitants are called Members and they refer to visitors as Strangers. Life here reflects the insulated cosiness of an exclusive club, the self-referential obsessiveness of a cult. The portals are grand and forbidding. Each morning the newspaper boy throws in the broadsheets from beyond the front gate, fearing abduction and introduction to the weird ways of the sect. Life inside is too buttoned-up, suited and regulated for any hint of spontaneous fun. The incessant mumble and occasional roar of domestic discord – grown men arguing all day – makes this a dull and forbidding house, appealing only to outsiders of a moody, gloomy, argumentative disposition.

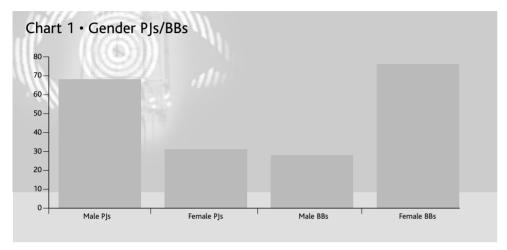
Two houses. Two cultures. Two competing realities. And then there is home. Somewhere, somehow, between home and the houses, messages are transmitted and received, representations are made, mediation takes place. We 'switch on' – and more frequently switch off – the House of Commons; we pick up messages about it from *Newsnight* and *Newsround* and *The News at Ten*. We 'visit' the *Big Brother* house. We can't stand it. We're glued to it. We want to be in there; we think we are in there; we cast votes to get people out of there. In short, we form relationships with these houses. We form impressions, attachments, antipathies and aspirations. The houses become a part of our homes, not just as flickering images inside the box, but as building blocks for our identities; for we are, at least to some extent, what we watch.

Every so often the inhabitants of these houses peer over the fence at one another, in mutual recognition, envy and disgust. They see each other – or, rather, they see what they can see of each other. What do they see? What do they think of one another? What might they say to each other if they possessed the common language to say it? And what do the viewers at home see and think and wish to say? Is there a dialogue, a debate or a horrible fight waiting to be had between the people who watch politics but never watch *Big Brother* and the people who watch *Big Brother* but never watch politics?

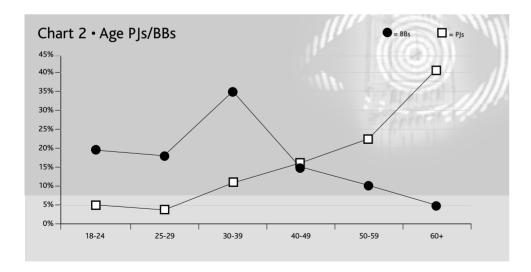
The research findings reported here are based on analysis of a series of six online opinion polls conducted by *YouGov* between August 2002 and April 2003. On the basis of initial screening polls of representative national samples of 2001 people, two groups were identified: 817 Political Junkies (PJs), who are very interested in politics (as identified by regular viewing of political coverage on TV and/or regular political discussion with friends or family) but do not watch *Big Brother*, and 716 *Big Brother* viewers (BBs), who regularly watch *Big Brother* and participate in its weekly 'eviction' votes, but have little or no interest in politics. These two groups were polled five times with a view to discovering their socio-demographic characteristics and their attitudes to politics and political engagement, reality TV and each other. In addition to the five polls, which respondents were paid to complete, they were invited to submit emails suggesting ways in which politics and politicians could learn from the success of the *Big Brother* programme.

# Meet the neighbours

The most striking demographic contrasts between the two groups are gender and age. 68% of PJs are male, 32% female, 72% of BBs are female, 28% are male.



64% of PJs are over 50 and 41% are over 60. Fewer than one in 10 (9%) of PJs are under 30. 36% of BBs are under 30 and 71% are under 40. 15% of BBs are over 50.

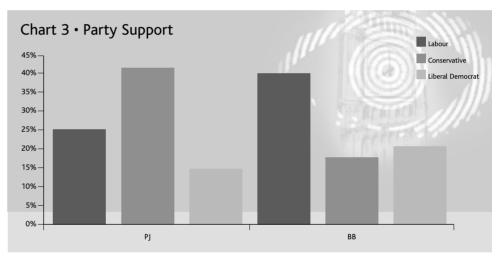


PJs are twice as likely as BBs to be professional workers or senior managers (PJ: 66%; BB: 32%) and BBs are twice as likely as PJs to be clerical workers (BB: 21%; PJ: 12%), three times more likely to work in retail sales (BB: 16%; PJ: 5%) or in semi-skilled or unskilled manual work (BB: 9%; PJ: 3%). PJs are three times more likely than BBs to be self-employed (PJs: 16%; BBs: 5%).

PJs are only slightly more formally educated than BBs. A quarter of PJs and a fifth of BBs are graduates.

Most PJs (60%) regard themselves as belonging to a particular religion. Most BBs (53%) do not.

Do PJs and BBs vote in different ways? Respondents to polls consistently over-state their voting records. Only 15% of BBs and 9% of PJs reported not voting in the 2001 General Election, in which the average national turnout was 59.6%. PJs and BBs reported voting in conspicuously different ways:

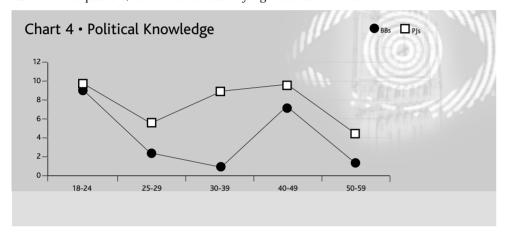


When asked their opinions about specific political issues, PJs and BBs had remarkably similar views, with BBs taking slightly more conservative positions on several issues. 74% of PJs and 79% of BBs were in favour of 'getting tougher with asylum seekers'; 78% of PJs and 92% of BBs were in favour of longer sentences for convicted criminals; 42% of PJs and 62% of BBs thought that the TV licence fee should be scrapped and the BBC should have to pay its way with advertising.

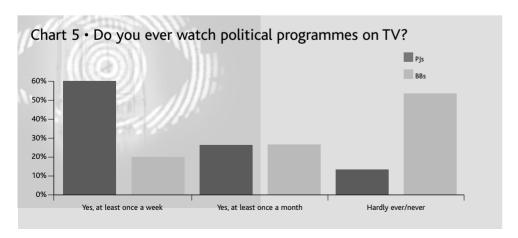
On the war in Iraq, PJs and BBs divided in an interesting way. They were first polled in August 2002, when most British citizens were opposed to a prospective war. At that time, 67% of BBs were opposed to Britain going to war in Iraq, as were 62% of PJs. In April 2003, after the war had started, they were polled again; this time 53% of PJs supported the war and 47% were against, while 70% of BBs were in favour of the war and 30% were against. This suggests that BBs tend to follow national opinion trends.

One further behavioural characteristic of BBs and PJs is of key significance. When asked how often they discussed politics with friends, workmates or families, nearly half (46%) of BBs answered 'hardly ever' or 'never', whereas this response was given by only one in 10 (11%) of PJs. 59% of PJs reported having political discussions on 'most days' or 'a few times a week', whereas only 24% of BBs reported this level of political discussion. This important finding led to the construction of two new research variables: frequent talkers (FTs) and non-talkers (NTs.) We shall return later to the intriguing question of whether the FT/NT divide is a more significant indicator of political behaviour than the BB/PJ divide.

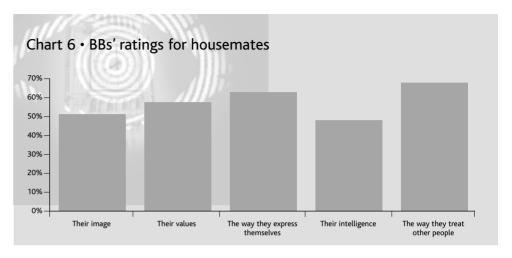
Moving from demographic characteristics to political knowledge, when tested on a series of basic current affairs questions. PJs achieved consistently higher scores than BBs.<sup>1</sup>

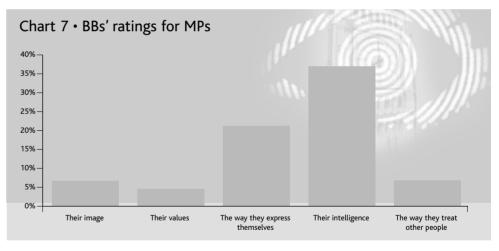


PJs watch political programmes on TV much more than BBs. 39% of BBs never or rarely watch programmes that analyse politics, compared with 8% of PJs. 24% of PJs watch political analysis programmes every day and 50% watch them a few times a week – compared with 10% and 26% of BBs. A majority of PJs (57%) think that 'people have a civic duty to follow political news'. 52% of BBs think that they do not. When asked whether coverage of politics on TV is usually boring, 68% of BBs reported finding it boring (with 33% finding it 'very boring'), while only 38% of PJs found it boring



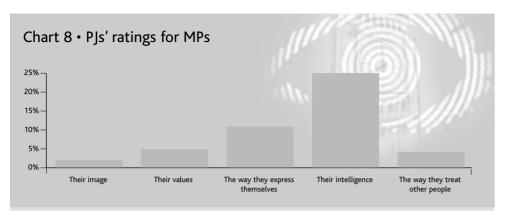
In order to find out not only who PJs and BBs related to when they saw them on television, but how they arrived at such estimations, they were asked to rate *Big Brother* housemates and MPs, according to a list of five personal qualities.





BBs were significantly less impressed by MPs than by the 'ordinary' members of the public they saw on reality TV. A majority of BBs rated the values (52%) and expression (61%) of *Big Brother* housemates within the top three deciles, whereas MPs scored only 4% and 21% respectively for those qualities. 68% of BBs admired the housemates for the way they treated other people, while 93% of BBs gave MPs low ratings for this quality.

PJs were asked to rate MPs on the basis of the same values. Surprisingly, PJs were even less impressed than BBs by MPs, in all but one category (their values). BBs regarded MPs as being more intelligent and able to express themselves well than PJs did. And even more PJs than BBs (96%) gave MPs low ratings for how they treat other people.



Both BBs and PJs were asked which of the following they would most like to have a conversation with:

4	7
	1
4	14
4	25
15	26
35	1
11	0
6	3
21	24
	4 15 35 11 6

These are widely different preferences. PJs wanted to talk to politicians; BBs wanted to talk to the *Big Brother* presenter, the most popular *Big Brother* contestant – or the Prime Minister. When asked which of the personalities listed was most like them, PJs and BBs were once again divided. BBs identified with *Big Brother* personalities and not one identified with the leader of the Conservative Party. Most PJs did not identify with any of the characters listed, but nearly a quarter (23%) thought that they were most like either Iain Duncan Smith or Charles Kennedy.

	BB	PJ	
Billy Bragg	3	4	
Charles Kennedy	3	11	
lain Duncan Smith	0	12	
Tony Blair	2	3	
Davina McCall	19	1	
Kate from Big Brother	20	0	
Des Lynam	4	3	
None of the above	40	57	

Finally, they were asked which of the personalities is most typical of the population at large. Most BBs were convinced that the *Big Brother* personalities – Kate and Davina – were typical of the population and none thought that Iain Duncan Smith or Charles Kennedy (with whom PJs most closely identified) were typical. Although only 1% of PJs wanted to have a conversation with the *Big Brother* personalities or identified with them, 22% acknowledged that these personalities were typical of the population at large.

	BB	PJ	
Billy Bragg	1	3	
Charles Kennedy	0	8	
lain Duncan Smith	0	2	
Tony Blair	2	2	
Davina McCall	9	8	
Kate from Big Brother	45	14	
Des Lynam	5	7	
None of the above	23	41	

To summarise the characteristics of the PJ and BB profiles:

#### PJs tend to be:

- male
- aged 50-plus
- · professionals or self-employed
- attached to a religion
- Conservative voters
- frequent talkers about politics
- interested in having a conversation with Tony Blair, Iain Duncan Smith or Charles Kennedy

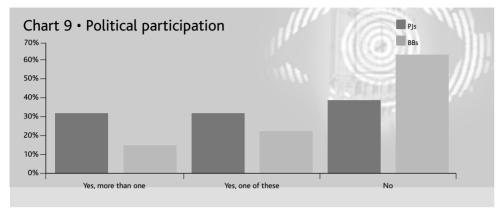
#### BBs tend to be:

- female
- aged under 40
- · semi-skilled, unskilled or students
- unattached to a religion
- Labour voters
- infrequent talkers about politics
- interested in having a conversation with Davina McCall, Kate from Big Brother or Tony Blair

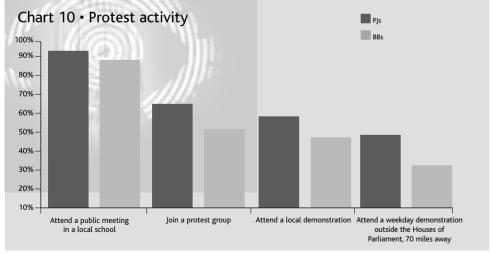
### Joining in

Given that there is widespread concern about public disengagement from the political process, and particularly the disconnection of key social strata from traditional participatory activities such as voting, reading or watching political news and joining political parties, it makes sense to ask whether there is indeed a sharp contrast between the political behaviour of PJs and BBs.

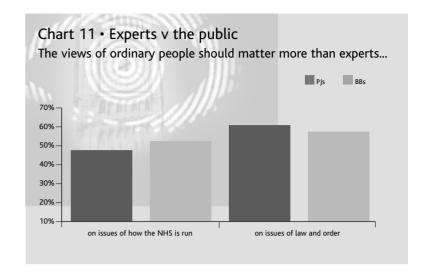
On the basis of three elementary measurements of political activism (contacting an MP, signing a petition or attending a political meeting within the last year), BBs were clearly less likely to participate than PJs. A majority (61%) of BBs had participated in none of the ways listed. PJs were more than twice as likely as BBs to have participated in more than one of the ways listed.

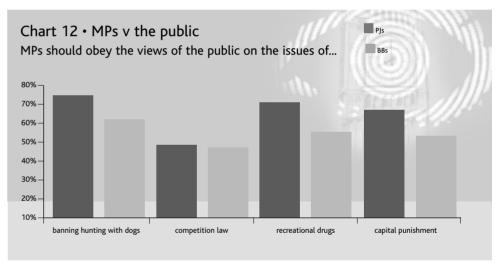


When presented with a scenario concerning a local policy decision which would affect their lives, BBs expressed less likelihood than PJs of participating in organised protest campaigns. Respondents were asked to consider how they would react if there were plans to build a new airport near to their homes. A majority of PJs (78%) and BBs (77%) responded that this would (hardly surprisingly) make them angry. 99% of PJs and 97% of BBs said that they would fill in a survey associated with a public consultation about the airport. When presented with a range of protest activities, BBs were progressively less likely than PJs to commit themselves:



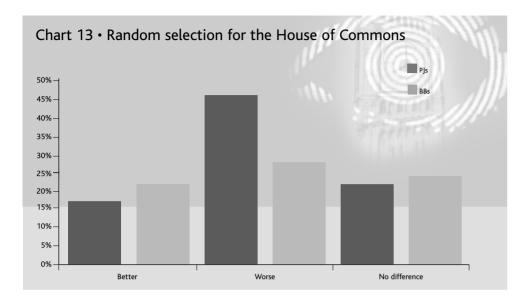
Two-thirds of both PJs (68%) and BBs (66%) believe that the Government would do its job better if it spent more time listening to people like them. When asked to choose between the judgement of MPs, experts and the public on a range of policy areas, both BBs and PJs are strongly in favour of distrusting the usual policy-makers and taking account of 'the views of ordinary people'.





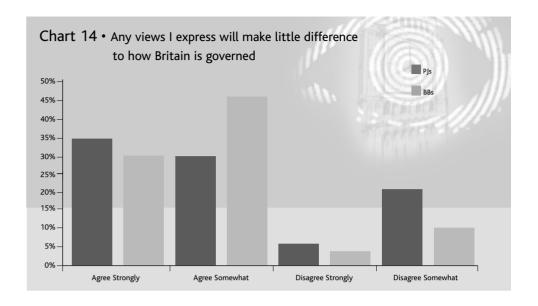
When asked to consider various plebiscitary options, such as citizens' initiatives and referendums in which the public could 'strike down' parliamentary decisions, almost identical majorities of both groups considered that they would result in better government, although there were sceptical minorities in each group.

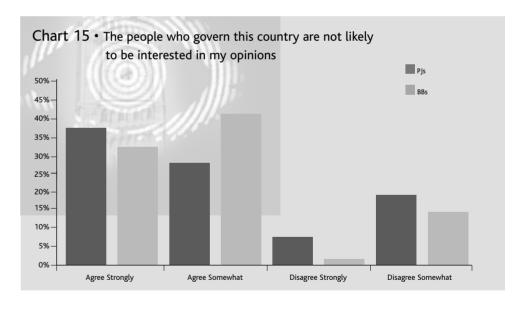
Although a majority of BBs and PJs were in favour of more 'people power', they did not reject political representation as such. When asked whether a group of people selected randomly by lottery would make better decisions than the current incumbents of the House of Commons, only 14% of PJs and 23% of BBs thought that they would. As Chart 13 shows, both PJs and BBs were divided about this.



An explanation for their uncertainty about random selection of MPs may well relate to respondents' answers to another question. When asked whether a House of Commons selected by lottery would be composed of people more like current MPs or more like *Big Brother* housemates a majority of both PJs (57%) and BBs (82%) thought the latter. This presents democratically minded PJs with a problem: more power to the people inevitably means more power for BBs.

According to most of the theoretical literature on participation, there is a close link between the extent of citizens' political participation and their sense of political efficacy, i.e. their beliefs about how influential or powerful they are as actors within the democratic polity. Curiously, although PJs are significantly more politically active than BBs, both groups have similarly low beliefs in their political efficacy. Between seven and eight out of 10 of all respondents felt that: 'The people who govern this country are not likely to be interested in my opinions' and 'Any views I express will make little difference to how Britain is governed.' PJs were almost twice as likely as BBs to disagree with these statements (whereas non-agreeing BBs opted for 'don't know'), but the most conspicuous finding from these questions was the profound inefficacy experienced by participators and non-participators alike.





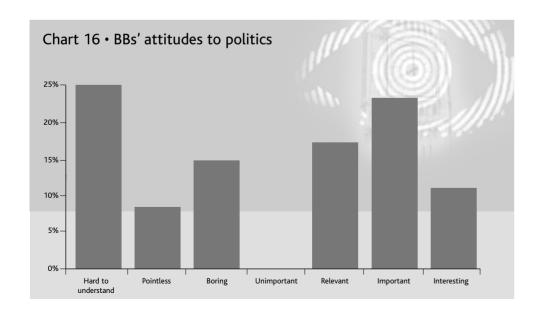
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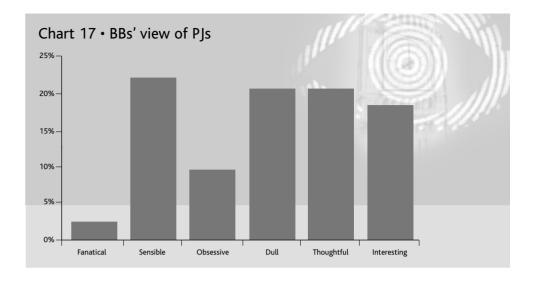
## Peeping over the fence

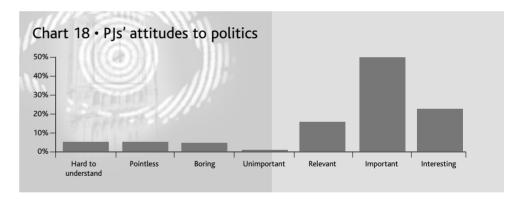
What do BBs and PJs think of each other? BBs do not disrespect PJs. They do not particularly want to be like them, but they respect their interest in politics. When asked how they would describe politics, 23% of BBs considered it to be 'important' and 17% described it as 'relevant'. But one in four (25%) BBs thought that politics is 'hard to understand' and 15% regarded politics as 'boring'. When asked their views of people who are interested in politics (i.e. of PJs), BBs opted for mainly positive terms. BBs thought that PJs are 'sensible' (22%), 'thoughtful' (21%) and 'interesting' (18%). Only one in five BBs (21%) considered PJs 'dull' and just under one in 10 (9%) found them 'obsessive'. Even when asked what they thought of people who want to become MPs, the most common response (44%) was that they are 'individualists', with 22% of BBs regarding would-be MPs as 'exhibitionists'.

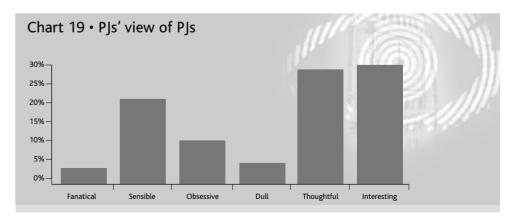
Not surprisingly, PJs also chose positive terms to describe politics and people interested in politics. PJs regarded politics as 'important' (50%), 'interesting' (23%) and 'relevant' (16%). Fewer than one in 20 (4%) PJs described politics as being 'hard to understand' compared with one in four (25%) BBs. Eight out of ten PJs described the politically interested (themselves) as being 'interesting' (30%), 'thoughtful' (29%) or 'sensible' (21%). Like BBs, PJs regarded would-be MPs as being 'individualists' (46%) and 'exhibitionists' (35%). Only 5% of PJs (and 4% of BBs) regarded would-be MPs as 'typical of the population'.

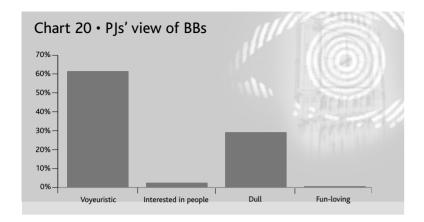
When asked to describe people who are 'very interested in *Big Brother*', the majority of BBs selected 'interested in people' (39%) or 'fun-loving' (33%). Only 2% considered BB enthusiasts to be 'dull'. When asked about the kind of people who become *Big Brother* housemates, a majority of BBs (69%) regarded them as 'exhibitionists', a view adopted even more overwhelmingly by PJs (92%).

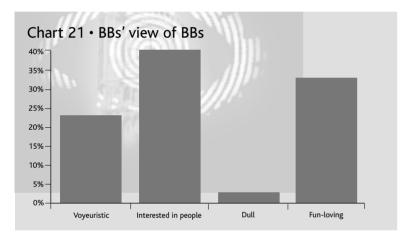












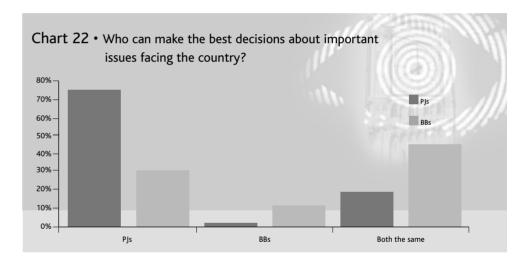
PJs' perceptions of BBs were almost entirely negative. Only 4% regarded BBs as 'interested in people' (3%) or 'fun-loving' (1%). 92% of PJs described BBs as 'voyeuristic' (63%) or 'dull' (29%).

Respondents were asked what they would think of someone who entered into casual conversation with them about politics. A majority of PJs (67%) and BBs (59%) would regard such a person as 'someone who is in touch with what's going on' or 'an interesting person'. 14% of BBs and 5% of PJs would describe such a person as 'a bore'. When asked whether they would be likely to pursue such a conversation, most PJs (69%) and almost half of the BBs (48%) claimed that they would. What about if a person entered into casual conversation about *Big Brother*? 74% of BBs would regard such a person as 'someone who is in touch with what's going on'. 82% of PJs would regard such a person as 'a bore'. 74% of BBs would pursue such a conversation, but 85% of PJs would not. These findings suggest that BBs find PJs interesting and in touch, but only about half of them would pursue a casual conversation with them. PJs find BBs boring and the vast majority would not pursue a conversation with them.

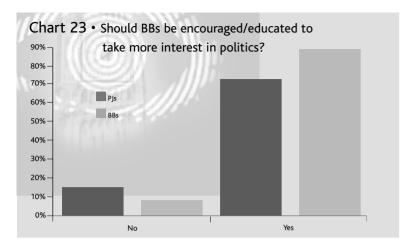
In a follow-up poll, BBs and PJs were invited to

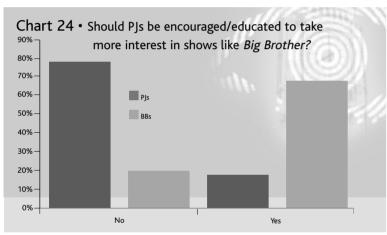
Imagine two groups of people. The first group watch and vote in programmes like *Big Brother* but don't take much interest in politics. The second group is very interested and involved in politics but take no interest in programmes like *Big Brother*.

In short, BBs and PJs were asked to think about each other. They were then asked which of the two groups would be 'most capable of making good decisions about the important issues facing the country'. Three-quarters of PJs considered their own group to be most capable; only 17% thought that both groups were equally capable of making good decisions. BBs were split on this question: 45% considered that both groups would be equally capable, 30% considered PJs most capable and only 11% thought that BBs would be most capable. When asked whether the UK would be better governed if BBs had more power, PJs were in little doubt: 84% thought that it would not. Again, BBs were uncertain: 30% thought that more power to them would lead to better government, 37% disagreed and 29% did not know.



When asked whether BBs should be encouraged to take more interest in politics, PJs were very clear: 83% thought that they should. As did 76% of BBs. When asked whether PJs should be encouraged to take more interest in shows like *Big Brother*, 67% of BBs were in favour, but 76% of PJs were against. PJs are in favour of encouraging BBs to become more like them, but not in learning to understand what makes BBs tick.





As will become clear in the next section, many PJs were offended by the idea that politics could learn anything at all from the participatory techniques of reality TV. When asked whether more BBs could be persuaded to take an interest in politics by making politics 'more like a game show', both PJs and BBs were sceptical, although a significant minority of both groups (PJ: 31%; BB: 39%) responded positively. When asked whether politics should adopt some of the characteristics of *Big Brother* in order to attract BBs, one in five BBs (19%) were in favour, but a clear majority of both BBs (63%) and PJs (89%) were opposed.

Despite their distaste for the idea of turning politics into a 'game show', when PJs and BBs were presented with a specific idea for scrutinising MPs in the same way that *Big Brother* housemates are tested, a majority of both groups were in favour. They were asked:

If a group of MPs were locked in a house and filmed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, like in *Big Brother*, do you think that would tell us more about their values than watching them making speeches, or not?

86% of BBs thought that it would and so did 56% of PJs.

**Chapter Four** 

## Reality lessons

A rather simplistic response to the *Big Brother* and reality TV phenomenon takes the following form:

- Reality TV is hugely popular, especially with the politically disengaged.
- Young people get excited about voting in TV polls for Big Brother and other reality TV contests and more of them participate in these than in most public elections.
- Conventional politics could/should try to learn from the success of reality TV about how to enthuse and activate people.

In an attempt to explore the attitudes of the two groups more qualitatively, respondents were encouraged to send emails with their ideas about how politics could learn from *Big Brother*. Over 500 emails were posted by PJs and BBs, with an average of 250 words per message.

PJs and BBs responded in markedly different ways. The responses from PJs were characterised by two main approaches:

- Several PJs could not even bring themselves to mention *Big Brother* or to address the question in any direct sense. Instead, they submitted a range of proposals for improving the political process; it was as if they were in denial about the popularity of the phenomenon they were being asked to comment upon.
- A majority expressed hostility to the reality TV phenomenon in general and its viewers (BBs) in particular.

The responses from BBs were much more likely to respond directly to the question asked, with a remarkable majority of respondents making one simple point:

The transparency of reality TV programmes like *Big Brother* enables viewers to scrutinise the authenticity and integrity of housemates; this is lacking in the public scrutiny of politicians and both politicians and citizens could learn from it.

The hostility of PJs towards BBs was quite staggering. What follows is a fairly representative sample of their comments:

I would tend to think of people who are interested in politics as intellectual and conscientious types of people, as opposed to the ones interested in Big Brother who appear lazy, with no interests and really quite sad.

The thought that the BBC is dumbing down political programming is bad enough; the suggestion of them dumbing it down to Big Brother level is horrendous. Although some MPs appear to have trouble stringing sensible sentences together, some of the Big Brother contestants have trouble stringing words together.

From the little I have seen of Big Brother I realise that they were a group of foul-mouthed exhibitionists, manipulated by the desire for fame and money to make fools of themselves on television. Therefore it is unlikely that I should feel MPs should emulate them. Indeed, as what we really need from our politicians is honesty, genuineness, and at least some manners, the less they copy Big Brother the better.

I can understand why someone would want to win £70,000, but I cannot understand why anyone is interested in watching the inane antics of coarse, badly-behaved people on TV who seem to have little of interest to contribute by way of meaningful conversation apart from the banal.

Politicians should consider that if the people of Britain have become so inane as to enjoy, or even think of watching Big Brother, that they really do need to radically overhaul education, so that people leave school with some kind of intelligence!!

The best thing an MP could do about this 'voyeurism' telly is to push through a Private Members Bill putting a stop to the whole degrading, pointless, imbecilic trend. I really don't care if that makes me undemocratic or not ... it's for the good of the nation!

How someone could seriously consider that Big Brother or any similar show would be of any use in the politics of this country, in ANY shape or form, beggars belief

Is everyone mad? Big Brother is the most boring, anal, banal, dumbed-down, cheap-to-run programme ever shown on TV. How can half a dozen exhibitionist thickos have anything to do with influencing politics in this country?

A small minority of PJs considered that the Big Brother format might have lessons for politics:

Stick a load of MPs in a Big Brother house, give them tasks which cover public issues, and let them solve some of them with all the public watching

I think all MPs should spend some time in a Big Brother style house before they become members of the Houses of Parliament. Each should spend at least six months on the poor side of the house doing tasks like filling in a book-like form to claim social security/jobseekers allowance, bringing up a child and feeding themselves on approximately £70 a week.

MPs should take note, the multi-angle cameras idea seems a winner. Get the Houses of Parliament covered by CCTV and we'll soon find out what these buggers get up to!

I think that the dynamics of Big Brother should be harnessed to produce a political programme that would have wider appeal. Following the whole process for a particular Bill, for example.

Perhaps reality TV could allow members of the public to sit in on a reality version of a 'public' Commons sub-committee and give the MPs a grilling

Perhaps what politics could learn from it is that people understand Big Brother in a way that they don't understand politics. People can relate to the rules the housemates follow yet don't know or understand the rules for politics and politicians.

People have a strong desire to influence the world in which they live, to have some degree of power, and it is this that they feel they can get from shows such as Big Brother (though this power is to a degree a fallacy).

BBs were much more likely than PJs to respond directly to the question. Several offered practical proposals for adopting aspects of the *Big Brother* format within the political system:

All politicians should be made to live in the Big Brother house including the rich side/poor side barrier! After a few weeks they are allowed to outline their policies (this may have changed during their horrendous experiences on the poor side) and then the public can vote by text, phone or email. It is bound to get a bigger turnout than the actual elections!!!

Perhaps using the 'diary room' concept for MPs to put their views across would be more interesting to people than the incredibly boring (and not often watched) party political broadcasts they currently employ. The nation would appear to want to watch seemingly ordinary people discussing things in everyday vocabulary, rather than the patronising and pompous methods frequently employed by our current crop of 'people's representatives'. If these dull, grey creatures are really a representation of the UK's population then I personally will be on the next boat out of here!

The element which should be brought into politics from Big Brother is the secret ballot. Politics, to be more democratic, should get rid of the Whip system and allow MPs to vote using the power of their own convictions.

A diary room for MPs to come to when they are particularly passionate about a subject. This would help to air their views to the public and would also help us to understand their views more.

The most persistent and overwhelming message from BBs concerned authenticity. They regarded politics and politicians as somehow 'unreal' and believed that the opaque and devious construction of political imagery could be exposed through the lens of transparent media. Surveillance was regarded as the highest form of political accountability, not only in terms of procedures and policies, but personalities, principles and integrity. The discourse of authenticity (who is a *real* person) and transparency (being *seen* to be who one says one is) may well offer significant clues to BBs' reasons for distrusting and disengaging from politics:

Politicians are 'stiff' and not like real people. When switching on (accidentally!) to live House of Commons broadcasts, the politicians put me in mind of a bunch of muppets each trying to outdo one another with words and when that fails, with jeering. In my opinion, they are boring, overpaid, self-opinionated morons who have, on the whole, only their own interests at heart. Whereas, Big Brother contestants are funny, lively, entertaining, good to watch and resemble the main bulk of the electorate. I would watch Big Brother any time, but would rather watch paint dry than watch politicians!

If there's anything to learn for MPs from Big Brother it is that the general public do not mind listening to people who act and speak like them, not necessarily university educated, attractive or articulate. The winner was a 'nice' girl who didn't bitch, tried to be generally positive and helpful and was prepared to be an outsider if she kept her values intact.

At the start of the Big Brother programme there were very few people I actually thought I'd like. However, you got to know them through their actions and it was fun to anticipate how

they would react. MPs, I feel, are generally unknowns in suits. We see them talk about uninteresting issues frequently, but we rarely get to 'know' them properly. Hence, not knowing how they react in real life we don't know whether to believe them or not. Occasionally there are ones that manage to connect and the message appears to be from the heart. I'm more likely to believe someone who I have seen in a documentary (e.g. Mo Mowlam with Louis Theroux) and felt I've 'got to know' - rather than another faceless politician. I don't even know who my MP is

We like programmes like Big Brother because they show us that we are not alone in falling over when drunk or being gay or generally being a bit human, really. Maybe it's time for politics to shed its image of dullness and show us that they too are human. Don't get me wrong, I don't want pictures of Tony Blair clubbing because frankly that's just frightening – but they should learn that it's OK to be themselves and try not to make us like them so much.

I'd love to see (or maybe I wouldn't!!!) MPs without their 'public face'. I think MPs nowadays have delusions of grandeur and quite often they perform for the public. It would be very interesting to see how they react under ordinary day-to-day pressures.

Big Brother contestants were ordinary people under the microscope, good or bad, you could relate to them. MPs are unapproachable - not in touch with ordinary people. God knows what they are doing most of the time - I do not have a clue what problems they deal with for ordinary folk or even if they do

I think the main thing that MPs can learn from Big Brother is that the public can see through spin/image. Politics at the moment is much too driven by the media image of the politicians - and that is not just the fault of the politicians since the public at least initially want to believe the images they see.

I do not want to see politics dragged down to the level of Big Brother, however I feel a lot could be learned about how people represent themselves and how they are perceived as a result. I think Tim was shocked to see how he was perceived on the outside (I am sure he was not a bad guy) but it was rather reminiscent of how the Conservatives felt after the last election. How would you turn Tim into Kate? This is a parallel question that the Conservatives should be asking themselves. In real life they are probably as close in beliefs as anyone in the house, however it is the shift in presentation and expression and exercise they seem to be struggling with at the moment.

I think that MPs should realise we care more about what people say than the way they say it. Politicians tend to say absolutely nothing of importance or interest yet still manage to use long and important sounding words. Kate said what she said in a way that we all understand and can relate to. Politicians come across as being aloof to the younger generation and as such do not command much respect.

I think that the main lesson that politicians should learn is that we believe what we see, not what they want us to hear. They would do better to show us their values by the way they live than try to convince us by the use of spin and spin doctors that things are different to the way we know they are. The main lesson they should learn is that we make up our own minds on what we see, and if what we see bears no resemblance to what they are telling us then we lose faith in them, we do not start believing them.

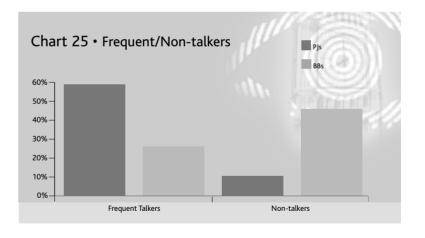
### **Chapter Five**

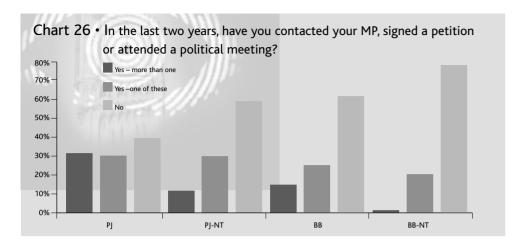
# Talking politics

The research reported so far looked at two key variables: whether people watch *Big Brother* and do not have much interest in politics, or whether they are very interested in politics, but do not watch *Big Brother*. Another variable of interest is the frequency or infrequency of talking with other people about politics. Much academic research has pointed to the links between personal conversation or discussion networks and levels of political engagement.<sup>2</sup>

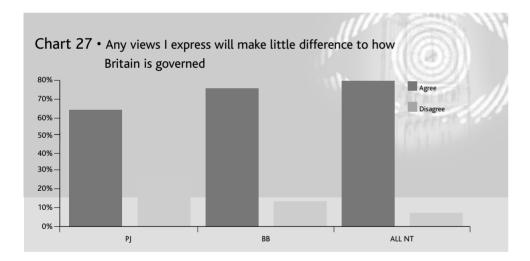
Frequent talkers (FTs) were defined as those respondents who said that they discussed politics with friends, family or workmates most days or a few times a week. Non-talkers (NTs) were defined as those respondents who reported that they rarely or never discussed politics with friends, family or workmates.

Not surprisingly, BBs talked about politics much less frequently than PJs (a difference of 13%), but some BBs were frequent talkers and some PJs, despite their interest in observing politics, did not talk about politics to other people very often. A question of theoretical interest was whether NTs were more or less politically disengaged or disenchanted than BBs. Nearly two-thirds of PJs had engaged in one or more of the forms of political activity listed in Chart 26 within the last year, but a majority of PJ-NTs engaged in none of them. BBs, as a whole, were almost just as likely as PJ-NTs to have engaged in one or more of the listed activities. BB-NTs reported the lowest level of participation, with nearly 80% engaging in none of the listed political activities. PJs, as a whole, are exactly twice as likely as BB-NTs to participate in politics.

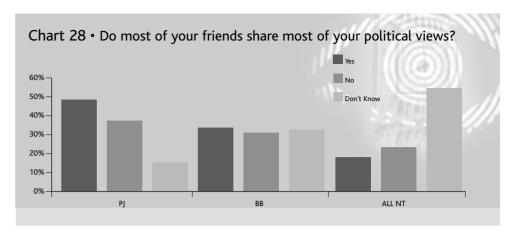


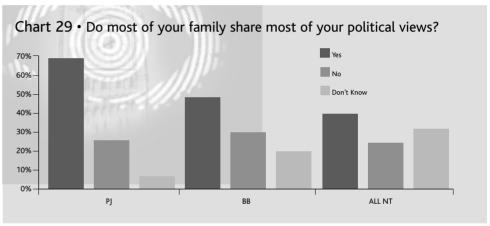


NTs had lower perceptions of political efficacy than both PJs and BBs. Eight out of 10 NTs believed that expressing their views would make no difference to how Britain is governed.

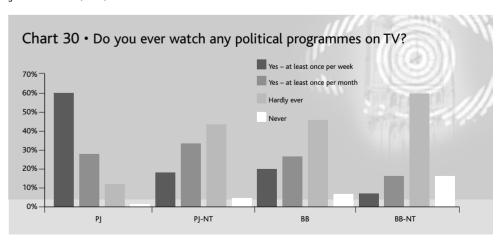


An important finding from research on how people talk about politics is that most political discussion takes place in the home. The reason for this is that people prefer to talk about politics in the safety of an environment where they share basic values with relatives or friends. This finding would seem to be supported by the current research: most PJs said that they shared the same political views as their other family members, but NTs were an uncertain group about who shared their views, with most not knowing if their friends shared them and almost a third not knowing if their family members had the same political views as them.





Most PJs watched political TV programmes at least once a week, but PJ-NTs watched such programmes less than BBs and 77% of BB-NTs rarely or never watched them, compared with just over half (53%) of BBs as a whole.



## Representing real people

In an age of infotainment, politics has become more like a game, with its races, winners, stage-setting spin doctors and war coverage that looks like a video game, and games have become more like politics, with mass voting in reality TV polls, national debates about football managers and high-court dramas about cheating in *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*?

On the face of it, the rules of both games are remarkably similar. MPs are voted by the public into Parliament, monitored and scrutinised during their time there and then voted out or back in depending on how well the public thinks they have been represented by them. *Big Brother* housemates are similarly monitored and scrutinised by the public, who are empowered to vote them out of the house if they do not like them. In both games contestants stand or fall on the basis of who or what they are deemed to represent. They are representation games.

What does it mean to be represented? There are at least two quite different perspectives:

- The public feels represented when those speaking on its behalf reflect and resemble it.
- The interests, preferences and voice of the public are represented through the agency of democratically elected politicians who are accountable for their actions.

These contrasting perspectives reflect the inherent ambivalence of representation. Do representatives speak *as* the public or *for* them? Does the public want representatives who are *like* them or who *look after* them? According to the first definition, representatives speak *as* the represented, or *as if* the represented were speaking for themselves. According to the second definition, representation is a largely procedural activity. One is represented when a representative is authorised by an election and formally accountable in between elections. Representatives need not be like those they represent; indeed, they are selected in part because they have skills that the represented lack. Between these two definitions are other, more nuanced theoretical interpretations of political representation.<sup>4</sup>

Feeling represented is a subjective condition. One could feel well represented by a politician who does not act as one would wish, but is transparently accountable. And one could feel badly represented by a politician who expresses one's views, but not one's best interests.

BBs tend to feel represented by *Big Brother*; in that it somehow reflects who they are within the world. It represents their reality, as they experience it. PJs prefer to entrust their reality to the mediating services of elected representatives. The outcome is a veritable battle for the representation of the public. Both are mediated depictions, dependent for their ontological credibility upon the public's willingness to recognise them and claim them as their own. Each has compelling arguments for being regarded as the most authentic representation of the public; the question is whether these representations are complementary or mutually exclusive.

*Big Brother*'s claim to represent the public is based upon the idea that to represent is to resemble in some way, or to be a microcosm of, that which is being represented; and that to represent is to capture and nurture that which is authentic in the represented.

At the simplest level, *Big Brother* is seen as representing the public because of the typicality and ordinariness of its housemates. As we have seen, both BBs and PJs regard *Big Brother* housemates as being more typical of the rest of the British population than are politicians. BBs celebrate this

typicality; PJs lament it, particularly what they see as its uncultivated vulgarity. But perhaps both BBs and PJs are deceiving themselves. Are *Big Brother* housemates really typical of the population or of a young, trendy, telegenic and media-friendly stratum within the population which is no more intrinsically typical than middle-aged, balding, non-telegenic men who have been elected as MPs?

Perhaps more important than the typicality of the inhabitants of the *Big Brother* house is the ordinariness of their preoccupations: what to eat; when to sleep; wanting to be liked; fancying someone and being unsure whether this is reciprocated; drinking too much and coping with hangovers; revealing one's past; body odour; snoring; joking; sunbathing; singing the lyrics of popular songs. Those are the activities which frame and give substance to most of our lives. Political ideology, high policy and current events can at best only weave their web around these mundane preoccupations. Those who denigrate such concerns as being trivial and banal fail to grasp the vitality of the routine or the intense everyday dramas inherent to emotional reflexivity.

Paddy Scannell describes programmes like *Big Brother* as 'experiments in the "merely" sociable: being with others for no other reason than the pleasure, interest, excitement, tension and laughter that this might produce' <sup>5</sup>. Such 'mere' sociability is a defining characteristic of human culture. But there is a tendency to dismiss and diminish it as being empty, meaningless and diversionary. Such diminution is less easy to effect or sustain in a post-deferential culture in which the pomposity of grand occasions has given way to the accessibility of the occasional.

Annette Hill, who has conducted extensive survey and qualitative research on the *Big Brother* audience, regards the programme as a test lab for human authenticity:

For the average TV viewer, judging authenticity in popular factual programmes such as BB is related to judging the integrity of the self. When contestants in BB are faced with emotionally difficult situations they often reveal their 'true' nature. Audience attraction to judging levels of authenticity in BB is primarily based on whether contestants stay true to themselves, rather than whether the programme is truthful in its depiction of contestants.

Hill quotes a 22-year-old unemployed female viewer of *Big Brother* who says that:

I think at the beginning they definitely weren't acting themselves, they were strange people in that programme, but as it unravelled, I don't know, I think they did become themselves more... I don't know how much they could react to the camera because there is only a certain amount that you can control your emotions.'

People make sense of themselves and their place in the world by presenting themselves to others. The philosopher, GH Mead observed that:

We realise in everyday conduct and experience that an individual does not mean a great deal of what he is doing and saying We frequently say that such an individual is not himself. We come away from an interview with a realisation that we have left out important things, that there are parts of the self that did not get into what was said. What determines the amount of the self that gets into communication is the social experience itself. Of course, a good deal of the self does not need to get expression. We carry on a whole series of different relationships to different people. We are one thing to one man and another thing to another. There are parts of the self which exist only for the self in relationship to itself. We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances. We discuss politics with one and religion with another. There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions. It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience.

People frequently comment that this politician or that *Big Brother* housemate is not being true to his or her self. Politicians are accused of duplicity and hypocrisy. Housemates are accused of being two-faced or false. In reality, nobody is the same person all the time. *Big Brother* provides an open laboratory for the observation and exploration of a random group of socially fluid selves. Gareth Palmer, arguing from a Foucauldian perspective, regards *Big Brother* as a controlled area of surveillance, much like the rest of the spaces of (post)modern habitation, in which the only power available to ordinary people is through self-representation:

The Big Brother environment can be understood as an experiment in governance in that it provided food and shelter; it privileged no one individual; it provided health care; it rewarded labour and punished sloth; it technologically monitored all space; it allowed freedom of expression while attempting to control conversations; it listened to all problems and offered appropriate expertise; above all, it set the rules the contestants were willing to live by. In this space, the contestants were free to make their own worlds. In return for the benevolent authority of Channel 4, the contestants surrendered all power over their image, allowing Big Brother and the media to make of them what they would. The only control they had was in fashioning the self they offered for manipulation.9

For *Big Brother* viewers, the experience of scrutinising and evaluating the authenticity of these exhibited selves – what has been called 'the public invigilation of private emotion'<sup>10</sup> – presents an opportunity to reflect upon questions relating to integrity and trust. These are extraordinarily complex and bewildering moral, psychological and political questions which are rarely addressed formally in the world of traditional politics – although informally it is commonly believed that politicians are untrustworthy or lacking in integrity.

Authenticity resides in the opaque space between performance and unconscious action. It is captured in moments and glimpses and represented as much by what is not said as by what is said. When a person exhibits more authentic than contrived behaviour they are seen to possess integrity. When a person is less likely to betray than support us, given a real choice to do either, they become entitled to our trust. In a world of risk we are constantly in danger of falling prey to fake integrity. Exercises in judging integrity and trust, as we watch them unfold before us in daily instalments and continuous, digital exposure, are hardly banal, facile or non-political. Indeed, some democratic theorists would argue that this emphasis upon values, behaviour and informal discourses contributes towards the democratisation of political life – as opposed to the institutionalisation of democracy, with which the House of Commons is associated.

The extent to which *Big Brother*'s encouragement of human recognition and empathy contributes meaningfully to the democratic representation of the public is a matter for debate. Most PJs see representation as being a procedural process, characterised and legitimised by electoral authorisation and official channels of accountability. Many BBs would regard such procedural and institutional representation as being too thin and disconnected from them to engage their interest. One is faced here with two seemingly inconsistent conceptions of what it means to be represented. But are they irreconcilable – or complementary? Is it possible to envisage a model of democratic representation based upon not only fair procedural and institutional arrangements for reflecting the public's interests, preferences and values, but also the respect for everyday life and lifestyles, human interests and relationships of unqualified sociability as represented by *Big Brother?* To so much as suggest that there are lessons to be learned and bridges to be built is to risk condemnation by those who want to protect the sanctity of politics as a privileged space. But what is at risk if the uncomfortable chasm between the engaged and the disenchanted is left unreconciled? Democracy is ultimately unsustainable when the *demos* is estranged from it.

Chapter Seven

## Disconnections and reconnections

Much current discussion about apathy, disengagement and the alleged demise of social capital has led to calls for 'reconnection' between politicians and citizens. What exactly does this mean? Firstly, *re*connection suggests a rekindling of a once robust relationship. But is this historically meaningful? Were politicians and citizens ever that politically connected? It is certainly true that more eligible electors cast votes in the 1950s than the 2000s, but that had more to do with better electoral registration and more rigid, tribal-party loyalties then than now. It would be hard to argue that politicians were ever particularly well connected to the people they represented. If anything, there are more connections now, in an age of permanent campaigning, than in previous periods of high voter turnouts.

Secondly, the verb 'connect' is used in a way that is at best ambiguous, at worst amorphous. What constitutes connection between politicians and citizens? Most politicians who call for reconnection mean that that they would like to reach more voters, without the interference of what they regard as distorting media. The last thing that citizens want is to be reached more easily by politicians. Their idea of connection, if they have one, is that politicians should be seen to live in the same world as them: not necessarily to be like them, but certainly to know what it is like to be them. Both politicians and citizens want one another to enter their realities: to see the world as the other experiences it.

At root, reconnection is a communicative concept, for without communication there can be no sophisticated social connections.<sup>11</sup> Much of the debate about political reconnection revolves around the quality and potential of existing channels of communication. There is a widespread belief that democracy currently faces a 'crisis of public communication' and that the mediation of politics is at an all-time low.<sup>12</sup> Some communication theorists regard new media, such as the internet, as offering a possible escape route from this crisis.<sup>13</sup> But communicating is always more than a reflection of technological channels for producing and disseminating messages. Even when transmitted by the most sophisticated and cutting-edge multimedia technologies, dull political messages are still dull political messages and grey politicians are still just as miserably grey.

In a mass society, connection entails mediation. Decoding mediated messages is a major aspect of life for most people as they try to make sense of their immediate environments, the news and the marketplace. Citizens work hard at translating the often abstruse and beguiling messages emanating from politicians. They become frustrated by the opacity of political speech and irritated by its complacent, incestuous rhythms. Politicians are seen as talking *at* rather than talking *to*, preaching rather than sharing. This does not feel like representation. For, like every other important relationship in life, being represented is a sensed as well as a rationally apprehended experience. Politicians spend much of their time trying to translate citizens' messages into clear preference schedules and political policies. Politicians regard this ability to aggregate mass concerns into strategic action as one of their most important skills. The problem here, again, is with the most basic level of translation. Blunt instruments, such as opinion polling, focus groups and door-knocking, tell politicians about people's contingent reactions to an external agenda rather than the experiential basis of their views and beliefs. Politicians are so busy trying to re-present that they often miss the drama of actual self-presentation. Popular culture celebrates self-presentation through such forms as music, slang, travel, gadgets or fashion. The political elite

is not only often impervious to such trends, but dismisses them with condescension or contempt. It is as if self-presentation were a trivialising distraction from representation, the latter legitimate, the former audacious in its banality.

The tale of two houses is in fact a story about the failure of translation. About mediated incomprehension. Talk of reconnection between these two estranged tribes is largely disingenuous. The call to reconnect is in reality a call to climb over the dividing fence from the wrong house into the right (and righteous) one. Like similar religious invocations to leave the house of sin and 'return' to the path of holiness, these calls are likely to fall on deaf ears.

The rhetoric of reconnection is always in danger of falling prey to three erroneous reactions. The first is that connecting citizens to the political process is an impossibility, except perhaps for the most elementary level of participation in important elections. The proponents of this claim contend that to argue for a more participatory, deliberative democracy is essentially utopian. Such a position is itself ideological, reflecting a fixed, essentialist conception of voter choices and human nature and offering little hope for the reinvigoration of contemporary democracy.

A second error is to place faith in civic education as a driver for reconnection. If there is a fundamental structural and/or cultural gulf between the political class and everyone else, teaching the language of the political class to those outside it will simply reinforce the sense of distance between them. Although PJs were very eager to teach their ways in schools, they were equally eager *not* to find out how BBs looked at life.

A third mistake is to seek technological deliverance from disconnection. Technologies, in themselves, deliver nothing. Indeed, like democracy, technology is an ongoing, unfinished project which is too often over-sold as being historically complete. The technocratic belief that 'if you put in on the internet it will become trendy' is facile; automating obsolete processes simply makes more people aware that they are obsolete.

If there are to be new democratic connections made, these must be conceptually radical, clear and honest. The final part of this study sets out a three-point basis for rethinking political connectivity.

### Broadening accountability

Apart from elections, which authorise and legitimise governments, accountability is the most important single characteristic of a functioning democracy. It is not enough for politicians to act in the best interest of those they represent; their actions must be seen to be transparent and candid.

For most people, the notion of political accountability invokes two images: on the one hand, dull, dusty, blue-covered parliamentary reports written in official jargon; on the other, the pantomime performances of noisy, 'yaboo' questions to the Prime Minister when he must account for his Government's actions on the floor of the House of Commons once a week. The first image is remote and recondite; the second comes across as being staged and pointless. A third kind of accountability occurs when the media 'catch' a politician being dishonest, hypocritical or corrupt.

The latter suggests a mean, negative, cunning notion of accountability as something necessary for transparency, but rarely edifying. These are all narrow notions of accountability.

Traditional political accountability tends to be linear and unilateral, with politicians giving their accounts, or being made to do so by journalists. This is a one-way flow of accountability: politicians tell their stories; citizens try to follow what they are being told. Citizens are rarely invited to give their own accounts, except within consultation processes that tend to attract a narrow range of witnesses ('the usual suspects') and to be conducted along formal lines which tend to constrain free expression.<sup>15</sup>

Account-giving involves much more than transparency: it calls for views, policies and actions to be explained, contextualised and related to social experience. Giving an account is to enter into a relationship with the account's recipient. Such a relationship need not be that of leader and led or expert and lay public, but can be more complex, involving heterogeneous constellations of identity, place, interest and values.

There are diverse ways of giving accounts, not all of which are strictly rationalistic or explicitly political. As Iris Young and other democratic theorists have argued, democratic testifying should be allowed to take many forms, including storytelling and outlining visions for the future. 

And, as Nina Eliasoph has shown, many people fear expressing in public settings views and values that they are happy to share in safer, less exposed environments 

Public accountability must transcend the traditional rituals of consultation with 'the usual suspects' and find ways of actively collecting accounts, even from those who might think they have no accounts to give.

Such pluralistic account-giving and account-collecting calls not just for new kinds of accounts, but new forms of mediating democratic accounting, beyond the traditional borders of political culture. The element of performance within shows like *Big Brother* can be seen within an exhibitionist-voyeur framework, but they are also manifestations of testifying and witnessing which, at least for some people, provide a more authentic sense of accountability than parliamentary debate or political interviews. Moving from *the* political speech to everyday speech is not to abandon politics, but to mediate it in a more accessible and humane way.

#### Interactivity and control

Parliamentary democracy is not intrinsically tedious; reality TV is not inherently exciting. But both are mediated to the public in significantly different ways. A large part of the success of *Big Brother* is its capacity to involve the viewer in an interactive process. The viewer becomes a player in the game, forming judgements about and determining the fate of the contestants. Interactivity is political: it shifts control towards the receivers of messages and makes all representations of reality vulnerable to public challenge and disbelief.

Media interactivity has been conceptualised in a number of helpful ways. One element of interactivity entails interaction between humans and digital technologies: the human-computer interface (HCI.) Taxonomies of human-computer interactivity have been developed, ranging from Rhodes and Azbell's three-level model (reaction, coaction and proaction) to Sims' 11 stages of

interactivity: object; linear; hierarchical; support; update; construct; reflective; simulation; hyperlinked; non-immersive contextual; and immersive virtual. Beyond HCI, the social, peer-to-peer element of interactivity is its most significant and unique feature. In a now famous definition of interactivity, Rafaeli states that it is 'an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions'. Liu and Shrum define interactivity as 'the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronised'. Definition of interactivity as 'the degree to which such influences are synchronised'.

In the case of *Big Brother*; viewers perceive themselves as having control over what they are watching. They have a range of viewing choices: packaged highlights of the day's events each evening, continuous digital coverage on E4 or streaming via the web, voting by phone or SMS, regular updates via email or SMS. There are several ways in which viewers can participate: watching, voting, discussing with friends, discussing with strangers online. Watching the show becomes a social event in which the show itself is ultimately only one component.

Watching parliamentary coverage on television is quite another matter. Coverage is governed by strict rules regarding acceptable camera angles and scenes that cannot be witnessed. These rules have been relaxed recently, but it still remains the case that Parliament is the only public institution that can lay down rules as to how it is televised. Viewers have hardly any direct ways of interacting with Parliament. When BBC Parliament puts up an address for viewers to email the channel with comments, many of them understandably think that they are being invited to comment on the proceedings in Parliament and that their comments will be passed on to MPs; in fact, the channel managers only process emails relating to the channel itself; viewers can talk about the messenger, but not the message itself. Regular viewers of the House of Commons in action are invited into the virtual world of democracy as impotent strangers whose only interactive options are to watch inertly, switch over or switch off.

The UK Parliament has in recent years experimented with the use of interactive media as a way of connecting with the public. The innovation of online parliamentary consultations and public discussions may well serve to enhance the democratic connectivity and legitimacy of an institution that is in need of a clear democratic role.<sup>21</sup> The recent report of the House of Commons Information Committee outlined an innovative set of principles for the conduct of future online parliamentary consultations with the public.<sup>22</sup>

These are steps in the right direction, but, as Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Kirsten Foot have observed in relation to the neglect of interactive aspects of digital communication technologies by candidates in the US election of 2000:

The larger political scene that is constructed... is one in which the candidate and the campaign can utilise the media-interactive components of the web to create a simulacrum of interaction with citizens... while avoiding the human-interactive components that campaigns find burdensome. The media interactive elements that candidates employ on their sites, such as audio and video, search engines – even surveys – give an appearance that users are in control of the experience and getting the information from the candidate that they want while masking the actual, relatively limited scope of user control.<sup>23</sup>

If digital television is to develop as a democratising medium, in ways that some observers hope, politicians will need to do more than embrace technology. The era of media interactivity poses a radical challenge to the traditional theory of representation. While there are good reasons to resist moves towards the uninformed populism of direct democracy, the argument for what I have called *direct representation* needs to be addressed by political actors who do not want to become marginalised and irrelevant in an age of interacting communities and citizens.

#### Respect

A key finding from this study is about respect. BBs seem to respect PJs. They regard politics as important and those who follow politics closely as interesting people. BBs do not seek to become PJs, but they do not seek to deride or eliminate them either. PJs are at best embarrassed by BBs, at worst contemptuous towards them. PJs feel quite unconstrained about expressing offensive views about BBs and wanting rid of them.

I have experienced this reaction while conducting this study. More often than not, when discussing the subject of the research with PJs, from senior politicians to regular news junkies, the very mention of BBs has resulted in derisive laughter. What is going on here? At one level, one is witnessing a form of snobbery. BBs are 'the great unwashed' whose function is to make PJs feel somehow better informed, more worthy in their interests and generally more cultured human beings. At a deeper level of analysis, one is revisiting the long-standing debate between high and popular culture, with all of the prejudices and over-simplifications traditionally associated with such a dichotomy. But this is also a reaction which says something about democracy. Perhaps it says, in the famous phraseology of Schumpeter, that: 'Democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms 'people' and 'rule.'

Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them.'<sup>24</sup> Is that, in fact, the sort of arrangement that would satisfy PJs? (If it is, they have a problem, because they also think that governments should spend more time listening to the people – which, of course, means BBs as well as PJs.)

PJs would argue that BBs need to be better informed. Citizenship education, introduced into the national curriculum for the first time ever last year, is music to the ears of PJs. But such a project is bound to fail if it is conceived as a mission to turn BBs into PJs. One should not, of course, romanticise BBs, in the manner that many Marxists once patronised and idealised the horny-handed sons of toil. BBs do need to recognise the benefits of political participation, but this will not happen by expecting them to adopt other people's terms of engagement. A democracy which respects the *demos* must be prepared to change in a number of ways.

Firstly, there is the question of rules of engagement. Politics is too closed and obscure for most people. They literally do not understand what is going on – as one in four BBs freely admitted when asked what politics meant to them. When American football was first shown on Channel 4 there was a series of programmes explaining the rules. Quite sensibly, it was recognised that people prefer to play games where the rules are explicit than where they have to be guessed. On *Big Brother* the rules are a key part of the process; they perform an almost ritualistic, framing function: voting on Tuesdays, tasks on Wednesdays, evictions on Fridays. The narrating voice in *Big Brother* is welcoming, homely and, above all, talks to the common points of experience between housemates and viewers. In Parliament, few people – including many MPs – understand

what happens when and why. Commentators on Parliament often sound more like whispering guides in a stately home than translators of the proceedings of the most important democratic institution in the land. Parliament's claim to the attention of the public (and the same applies to local councils and European bodies) needs to be spelt out clearly and regularly, in terms that are simple, attractive and engaging. Of course, politics is complex and many issues cannot be made accessible; but the process can.

Secondly, there is the matter of what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has called 'Saying and Said'. In politics much attention is paid to what is said. Quite rightly, for what is said has consequences and must be open to challenge. Another aspect of politics is 'Saying': the gestures, acknowledgements, rhetoric and narratives of everyday communication. Too often politics seems to be unmindful of diverse ways in which people prefer to express themselves. This returns us to the matter of account-giving, but to its very root: the assumptions that are formed about an account before the speaker opens his or her mouth. Politicians have become concerned – some say obsessed – by the portrayal of their own images, but peculiarly insensitive to the differentiated images, expressions and identities of those they represent. If the public reads this as a sign of disrespect, they will abandon the cause of trying to communicate with politicians. Nobody wants to participate if they are likely to be ignored, patronised or misunderstood. To avoid this, political culture needs to become less monocultural and more porous in its language, rhythms and silences.

Thirdly, there is the right not to participate. It is a basic principle of liberal democracies that participation is not required of its citizens (although in some countries voting is legally compulsory) and that those who do participate should be able to do so with varying degrees of energy or commitment. Political parties began life as secular versions of evangelical crusades and the engaged were often expected to remove themselves from many of the everyday affairs of society in order to make the world a better place. In the present post-ideological and post-deferential age, people are both too critically minded and culturally volatile to make such intense and rigid commitments. Some of the more extreme recent versions of communitarian thought appear to suggest that citizens can only earn the respect of their peers by actively exhibiting civic virtues, such as voting or joining an array of community groups. But there are many ways of being political, in the sense of interacting with relationships of power, which are not part of conventional politics. Indeed, it is sometimes the case that not participating in a futile or unfair political process is a more consequential form of activism than uncritical participation.

It would be a pity if the debate about BBs and PJs turned into an affair of mutual admonition, with BBs criticising the 'uncoolness' of PJs while PJs condemn BBs for their political apathy and civic inertia. Rather than replay this game where one group is politically connected while the other group is culturally in touch, can we not devise ways of being political that are both strategically meaningful and culturally democratising? Can we not, in the evocative phrase of Anthony Giddens, 'democratise democracy'?

The way to liberate political democracy from its current cultural ghetto requires a new conception of two-way accountability; a creative and exciting use of the new technologies of interactivity; and the nurturing of genuine respect between PJs and BBs. It can be done. It won't be easy.

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### Stephen Coleman

Oxford June. 2003

# Afterword

A response from Stephan Shakespeare, Director of Public Opinion Research, YouGov

### **Changing Their Minds**

In the last series of *Big Brother*, one of the housemates suggested they talk about politics. The others declined: they said the viewers would not approve of their views. In refusing to speak about politics, they spoke volumes about the state of politics in this country.

Our research shows that *Big Brother* viewers certainly have political views. They tend to be more small-c conservative than the views of those who do like to speak about politics. Perhaps self-censorship among this group, and their reduced likelihood to vote in general elections (though not in *Big Brother*) go hand in hand. They see the world of politics, and their own world, moving in different directions.

Public relations experts say that we have moved from an age of deference to an age of reference. We used to look up to an elite. Now we all see ourselves as equal, feel little loyalty to any establishment, and define ourselves according to an ever-changing pattern of cultural reference-points. The world of politics has different reference-points to the normal world of reality-show viewers.

Anyone wishing to get elected, stay elected, and govern well, can learn two important things from this show. Firstly, its viewers, who are more likely to vote for housemates than for members of the House of Commons, are also more likely to change their minds about things (as we show in this research). Much more likely than people who watch, for example, *Newsnight*. So, since winning elections is about changing the minds of the electorate, the BBs are a vital for politicians to engage with.

Secondly, BBs place higher value on observing behaviour – the real relationships between people – than they do on receiving political messages. Rather obvious, but usually ignored by politicians who say they want to 'engage' but call it 'dumbing down' to discuss anything other than policy, and regard as chaotic any deviation from the message on the pager.

Politicians would love you to believe that their House is very different from the *Big Brother* house — that theirs is a place of rational deliberation, conducted for the good of the nation, while the other one is for rank exhibitionists, conducted to appeal to the lowest common denominator. In reality, the two houses are very alike: in the House of Commons, there is just as much sexual tension, conspiracy, betrayal, drunkenness, ambition, loutish behaviour, secrecy, cheating, loyalty, back-scratching and nose-picking. The real difference is that in the *Big Brother* house, it's there for everyone to see. In the House of Commons, they hide it as best they can. When the newspapers get their hands on a little of it, knowing that it's the bit their readers actually enjoy reading about, they dismiss it as 'froth'.

It is this 'froth' that BBs understand. They know that William Hague claimed to be a 14-pint man and that John Prescott can throw a good punch. These brief glimpses of reality are remembered. More people will know these things than will be able to identify the main policies of the parties.

But even policy formulation is powerfully linked to the human underbelly of real life. No doubt policies are decided after proper research and deep consideration, but that is never the whole story.

As we all know (and the difference between what we know and what the politicians try to present is the source of the disaffection among the audience), the direction of the country is determined just as much by who is friends with whom, by secret deals in corridors, by short-lived alliances and long-lasting feuds, as much for the joy of control as for the benefit of the nation. One of the guiding influences on the current government is the personal tension between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. For the Conservative Party, it is the ghosts of the past and the exiled princes who play havoc in the shadows. And parties are united or divided not only by principles and ideologies, but also by whether its MPs think the leader will have jobs to dole out some time soon.

If the audience could see everything in an edited version at the end of the day, just as they can on *Big Brother*, they would love it. The problem is they don't. The cameras just show the staged version, the bit that doesn't interest most of us. Real politics is about how ideas and people interact. Staged politics — the public part — is just about the presentation of an image. PJs watch it and see through it. BBs don't bother looking at all.

As the *Big Brother* fans tell us, it's authenticity they respond to. They hate what is fake. They don't have to agree with what they hear, or approve of everything they see: they like what they think is real. The politicians they admire are the ones who say the 'wrong' things – that is, appear to say what they really think – people like Mo Mowlam, Ken Livingstone, and Ann Widdecombe.

When a policy fails, it is because people aren't behaving in the way that policy-makers predicted they would. People's behaviours are based on their relationships with each other as individuals. So on both levels - how decisions are made by politicians, and how decisions actually work out in practice – policy is determined by the complexity of personal relationships.

And yet most politicians would turn their noses up at the idea that understanding 'relationships' should be as important for the voters as rational deliberation over facts. Although they themselves tremendously enjoy Westminster gossip, and understand its importance in the greater scheme of things, they wouldn't want that to appear on television. MPs and *Big Brother* housemates are two very different species of exhibitionist. Their audiences are different too, as Stephen Coleman has described. But there is a vital similarity between them: each group questions the authenticity of MPs' behaviour.

I have no doubt that if a group of MPs subjected themselves to a few weeks of scrutiny in the *Big Brother* house, and were set a simple task (say, agreeing when citizens should be allowed to vote in a euro-referendum), it would be enjoyed by PJs and BBs alike; and crucially, we would all learn something. If MPs could not withdraw to their offices, or the lobbies, or the bars, but were forced to carry on the whole process in the open, we could see how they change. For, interacting with each other under the constant view of the voter, they would appear mad if they did not change each other.

But for the typical MP, it is the ultimate nightmare to be seen to change. Huge efforts are expended by political parties to show that their positions have been consistent all along. To be seen to change, in real-time, would be an unacceptable act of normal humanity. This is ironic, when it is one of the main objectives of a politician to change the minds of the voters.

Our research contained an experiment which suggests that BBs are more likely to change their minds than PJs (see appendix). When asked to consider an issue from two different points of view in two surveys, both the nature of the survey and the order in which they were completed had a substantially greater influence on the BBs than the PJs. It also seemed that BBs were more concerned with the *process* than the substance of the argument. It seems that BBs are more likely to refer judgement to other, third-party groups: if they feel that someone they trust and respect has judged something to be acceptable, then they too are more likely to accept it.

BBs, even more than PJs, appear to need reassurance that there is nothing suspect about the way a decision is reached. In principle they still see a vital role for Parliament. But if the parliamentary process is to continue to command respect, then MPs cannot be seen as mere stooges of their party. They must be 'authentic' – and that includes doing their jobs with an independent, critical and open state of mind.

Our experiment shows that people who want to win elections – which involves changing people's minds – should be especially interested in the BBs, and try to understand what are their trusted reference-points. There are no rich pickings among the PJs: the PJs will not readily change their minds. They know who they are voting for – and if the politicians try to persuade them, the PJs are more likely to move in the opposite direction (like the ones in our experiment who became less sympathetic to residents when they got a one-sided consideration of their position). A total absence from PJ programmes like *Newsnight* is therefore likely to *improve* a party's electoral chances, while continuing with the typical political performance on this and other similar programmes is likely to hurt them.

Political parties which want to win elections should therefore be less concerned with impressing fellow PJs, and more concerned with engaging the BBs. Of course, politicians are continuously using the 'engagement' word, but for PJs it seems from this research to have a special meaning: 'become like us – focus on what we think is relevant'.

'Engagement' surely means a two-way process. And since people don't feel they need politicians, but politicians know they need people, it might be best for the politicians to make the first move — a move beyond 'explaining', beyond even 'listening'. Conversations are more than listening and explaining. They involve revealing things about yourself, and being interested in understanding what the other person is really like, and letting yourself be changed by other people (not just trying to change them).

That is what *Big Brother* is about. Exploring each other's characters, developing relationships. The content may seem trivial. At one level it is certainly artificial. But within the walls of the *Big Brother* house, it is authentic. The audience gets the whole story. And the audience is in charge. Very different from the other House.

Can we look at any of our current problems of government and see them as problems of relationships? And if so, can we learn from the contrast between the 'two houses'?

People say they are dissatisfied with the government's handling of the NHS (both this government's, and the previous government's). It is usually at or near the top of any list of 'major concerns'. People say they are willing to spend more on the health service, if it would improve it, but now suspect that

spending more would not actually make much difference – at least not without there first being radical reform. They say they approve of the idea of 'radical reform' of the NHS, yet when specific radical propositions are put to them, they tend to reject them.

This contradiction or ambiguity derives directly from political relationships. Citizens simply do not trust politicians to do the job properly.

This mutually mistrusting relationship between voters and politicians not only undermines the public's willingness to accept proposals for reform; it also hampers the implementation of the reforms when they are attempted. The stakeholders of the NHS don't interact with each other in a direct decision-making process; they only interact with the government. The politicians place themselves at the controlling head of every complex of relationships, so they are bound to fail. The fundamental conflicts are always, of course, between stakeholders. It is the job of government to mediate between them. When mediating becomes controlling, the problems cannot be solved, because the wrong people are talking to each other.

As our deference to politicians has declined, the range of activity of politicians has vastly increased, as have their sheer numbers. Things that once seemed to be relatively simple (the school system, the health system) have become hugely complex and full of tensions. Politicians become (or perhaps just appear) bossy, defensive, deceitful, manipulative and aggressive, by virtue of their dysfunctional relationships with stakeholders. Bossy, because they have come into politics to impose their idea of how things should be. Defensive, because in this role they will be unpopular, blamed for every problem. Deceitful, because they are trying to keep competing stakeholders happy with them. Manipulative and aggressive, because they must try to win support even from people who don't like them and don't trust them – and the best way to do that is show that the other lot are even worse. These are the qualities which, when displayed by Big Brother housemates, get them evicted.

It is said that oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them. Indeed, when voting in *Big Brother*, one votes to evict. But when voting in parliamentary elections, one puts people in. What if the electors are more interested in getting rid of their candidates than in giving them a job? If we no longer live in an age of deference, and we don't trust any party to deliver a real difference to our lives, then there is no duty to vote, nor any practical purpose to it. Voting merely becomes endorsing politicians who patronise us. Very useful for the politicians, but of no value to ourselves. In those circumstances, it would become an act of self-assertion not to vote.

Could TV provide a format that increases involvement in the political process? I believe it could if TV could show the whole reality of politics, and not just the staged part, and if people could participate in some way which influences outcomes. Since politicians are there for the people, why should anything they do be hidden from the people? (I exclude of course a limited number of discussions which have national security implications.) And why should not all the people be able to contribute to the decision-making process? The argument that elections serve that purpose no longer works, when the process creates limited choices that people don't respect or trust.

The time will come when there is a political party which conducts all its affairs in front of the camera, and in whose proceedings the viewers can take part – in a complex and deliberative way through the internet, and in a simpler way through telephone voting. It will exploit the potential of increasing proportional representation – in the Euro elections, in regional elections, where 5% will ensure

representation — and will build itself into a party that can win first-past-the-post too. When people can vote on how their money is used, right down to the way their hospitals, schools and police forces operate, they will be interested. This will not be some dumbed-down direct democracy, because in the end there will still be representatives who will vote in parliaments. But those representatives will be different, relating directly to the people.

### **Appendix**

We split both the BBs and PJs into two (creating four samples altogether: BB1: 341; BB2: 375; PJ1: 418; PJ2: 399).

We asked the first split to complete a survey which, in its questions, made them consider issues around controversial airport extensions, in a fairly abstract way. Eleven questions briefly suggested various aspects of the issue, from economic advantages, the need for more runways in an age of increasing travel, to the disturbance to local residents. At the end, respondents were asked: 'When planning experts have made recommendations where to build new runways, should those recommendations generally be accepted even if locals protest?'

The second split were put through a second survey, in which they were asked to consider the issue directly from the point of view of local residents forced to move. How would they feel? Would they sign a petition? Attend a local meeting? Join a demonstration, locally and then in Westminster? What if, after an appeal, the building of the runway went ahead? Would that be an affront to democracy, or should it be done for the greater good even if it hurt some local people?

TABLE 1
Survey A: 'Neutral'

Final question: 'When planning experts have made recommendations where to build new runways, should those recommendations generally be accepted even if locals protest?'

	BB1	PJ1
Should go ahead	46	49
Should not go ahead	24	37
Don't know	30	14

Survey B: 'Personal'

Final question: 'Imagine you were living on a housing estate... An appeal is lodged against the Government's decision. Experts say that this place is the best place for the new airport, as new runways at other airports would be impractical. The appeal is lost and the new airport goes ahead. Which comes closer to your view: going ahead may hurt some local people, but is for the greater good? Or: going ahead is an affront to democracy?'

	BB2	PI2
Greater good	44	57
Affront to democracy	37	37
Don't know	19	6

We see that BBs' support for the building of a controversial runway decreases, and support of local protesters increases, when answering the question in a more personal and partial context in which they imagine themselves involved (an effect of –15 on the 'greater good'). One might well expect this. However, the effect is (perhaps surprisingly) reversed among the PJs. Their support for local protesters remains exactly the same, but the argument for the 'greater good' is actually stronger when only local protests have been considered within the survey (+8). In whichever direction, the effect of context is twice as strong for the BBs as for the PJs. For both surveys, there are at least twice as many 'don't knows' among the BBs, although fewer when the issue is considered in a less abstract way.

We then asked each split to complete the other survey.

TABLE 2

	BB1	PJ1		BB1	PJ1
1st - Survey A			2nd - Survey B		
Should go ahead	46	49	Greater good	67	61
Should not	24	37	Affront	21	30
Don't know	30	14	Don't know	11	8
	BB2	PJ2		BB2	PJ2
1st - Survey B	BB2	PJ2	2nd – Survey A	BB2	PJ2
1st - Survey B Greater good	<b>BB2</b>	<b>PJ2</b>	2nd – Survey A Should go ahead	<b>BB2</b>	<b>PJ2</b> 49
•		-	•		

Among BBs who answered the neutral and more abstract survey first and the personal survey second, we see a shift of +24 to the 'greater good' option (21% more for the 'greater good' option, mainly from the 'don't knows', and 3% fewer for the 'affront' option). If doing Survey A first were to have no effect, we would expect (from Table 1) a difference of -15.

Among PJs who answered Survey A first and Survey B second, we see a shift of +19 to the 'greater good' option. If order were to have no effect, we would expect (from Table 1) a difference of +8.

In other words, the order effect when answering A then B made a difference of 39% to the BBs, but only 11% to the PJs. The effect was to counteract the influence within the survey to side with protesters.

Among BBs who answered the personal survey first, we see a shift of +4 to the 'greater good' option. If order were to have no effect, we would expect (from Table 1) a difference of +15.

Among PJs who answered Survey B first, we see a shift of - 8 from the 'greater good' option. If order were to have no effect, we would expect (from Table 1) a difference of 0%.

In other words, the effect of answering B then A made a difference of 11% to the BBs, but 0% to the PJs. The effect was to increase sympathy with the protesters.

Summary: BBs are influenced by the context in which they consider an issue more than PJs are. When asked to consider a controversial extension of an airport runway, BBs were more likely to side with the local protesters if they had been asked questions which only focused on the position of the protesters, than they did when answering questions in a balanced consideration of the issues. PJs were affected less, and in the opposite direction: they were slightly more likely to side with planners, perhaps in reaction to what might have seemed to them a one-sided survey.

The effect of taking one survey after the other is much larger for BBs than for PJs. When respondents complete survey B in isolation, 37% of BBs and 37% of PJs say that continuing with building the runway over the protests of local residents (in which position they had imagined themselves) is an 'affront to democracy'. But when the survey is taken after a more balanced consideration, only 30% of PJs, and even fewer, BBs (21%), still consider it an affront. In other words, a more balanced consideration will diminish the effects of a one-sided consideration later.

When respondents complete Survey A in isolation, 24% of BBs and 37% of PJs side with the protesting residents. When the survey is taken after a partial consideration from the point of view of the protesters, there is no effect on the PJs; but the BBs are less likely to support the planners, and many switch to 'don't know'.

Conclusion: This experiment suggests that BBs are more influenced by context, and change their views more readily as a result of the order in which different types of surveys are presented, than PJs. There was a considerable degree of change for the 10 minutes or so it took to complete the surveys.