

## **Brian Eno on “PR: why should we care?”**

*Text of contribution to Make Votes Count fringe event at Liberal Democrats Conference, 14 September 2008.*

Democracy is a daring concept - a hope that we'll be best governed if all of us participate in the act of government. It is meant to be a conversation, a place where the intelligence and local knowledge of the electorate sums together to arrive at actions that reflect the participation of the largest possible number of people. The first way in which we express our participation is by voting - by making our choices between various programmes and styles of government on offer. If that very first step is flawed - that's to say, if it fails to produce credible results - then everything that follows will be flawed.

First-past-the-post electoral systems, when coupled with scientific polling and focus-grouping, are destined to end up as battles between competing propaganda machines for the minds of a small number of swing voters. The PR agencies, the manipulators and the simplifiers, the Karl Rove's and the Alistair Campbell's - are the winners. Good government is always the loser.

We all sense that there is something intrinsically wrong when a party which only managed to secure a small proportion of the vote ends up with exclusive power. Our sense of injustice translates into disillusionment and apathy, which in turn us away from active political participation. To young people, the next generation of voters, the game is transparently corrupt. If the distribution of power is so capricious, and so immune from any influence which they as individuals might be able to exert, there is little encouragement to take part at all.

This apathy leaves a vacuum which becomes filled by professional persuaders - paid propagandists. They crowd out accuracy, rationality and altruism.

When governments rely increasingly on sophisticated public relations agencies, public debate disappears and is replaced by competing propaganda campaigns, with all the accompanying deceptions. Advertising isn't about truth or fairness or rationality, but about mobilising deeper and more primitive layers of the human mind. The emotions stirred up - such as envy and self-interest - don't fit well with the mission of democracy. Do we want to be governed by those layers of ourselves? Wasn't the hope of democracy that we would move beyond that?

The more our voting choices are directed at an all-or-nothing first-past-the-post result, the more this sequence becomes instantiated.

As people lose their confidence in the system, they become less willing to participate. The vacuum in participation will be filled by money. The more politics comes to reflect the influence of money, the more it reverts to that process which democracy was supposed to replace - might is right. If sheer financial power becomes the primary factor in the electoral process, then we are back to the law of the jungle, to 'might is right'.

The electoral process is the foundation of good and fair government. If that isn't right and solid, everything else is skewed.