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opening extract from

Cutting Through the Crap

written by

Bali Rai

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PART One

LET ME EXPLAIN...

There are going to be people who read this book and slag me off. It's not a possibility – it *will* happen. The reasons they'll give are that I've left things out, that I'm far too biased or I don't know enough about my subject. Well, I've got two words for them and the second one is "off"! This is NOT a textbook. This is not a balanced or fair guide to politics in the UK. It's a short, simply written, biased guide that reflects my own views as well as telling you how things work – and it really will!

I'm sick to death of the way politics is presented in this country. All we ever see on TV are lying politicians being asked easy questions by people they were at university with. It's always the same people talking about the same non-issues, in the same "political" language, and the majority of British people turn off straight away. There's no passion, no conviction. Face it – there's no fun. Political programmes and news shows like *Newsnight*, *Question Time* and the *Politics Show* mean very little to anyone apart from "those in the know". As a result, most ordinary people see politics as something that other people do. But that doesn't have to be the way things are. Present most people with a simple, easy-to-follow guide and I reckon they'll happily learn more.

So that's what I've tried to do. Yes, I've left things out, but who cares? Most of our newspapers sell thousands of copies in exactly the same way. And to be honest, if this guide makes politicians happy, I'll be very

sad. This guide isn't for them; it's for you. And once you've read what I've written, learnt something you didn't know before you started reading, and taken in my point of view on everything from terrorism to socialism to devolution, hopefully you'll decide to dig a bit deeper, challenge some of the things I've written and find that you too have a point of view...

So while I won't make any apologies for the bias, the bad jokes and all the bloody bullet points, I hope you enjoy the book.

1 INTRODUCTION

politics: "The art of governing mankind by deceiving them."

Benjamin Disraeli

So what exactly *is* the point of this book? I mean, most of the people it's aimed at (YOU) couldn't give a toss, apparently. Every day I hear so-called experts claiming that people are bored with politics. That they couldn't care less about voting or elections. So what am I – mad? I must be. After all, I'm writing a book about something that its supposed readers would rather use as toilet paper.

Only that's not true. Back in the dark mists of time, when I still had, in no particular order, good looks, teeth, flowing locks and a hair-free stomach, when I was a teenager, I *did* want to know about the world around me. I wanted to know why politicians seem to lie so much. Why there was so much conflict around the globe. What *was* it that made me want to cuss every time I saw a Conservative MP on the telly?

When I talked myself into writing this guide, I decided I would ask a load of teenagers what they thought about politics. I wouldn't pretend that I understood modern young adults. Instead, with the invaluable help of my agent, I sent out hundreds of questionnaires to schools and colleges all over the UK. I thought I might get one in every five sent back to me with something close to answers. I didn't. I got *shit*loads.

In fact, I'm still trying to get through them all. They're piled up against my office wall, with my nephew balanced on top of them, like a mini-Himalayas with baby-puke stains. Here is a selection of points I've (or should that be you've) come up with so far, again in no particular order:

1. Politicians are lying wankers with bad hair, even worse suits and a strange habit of using five words when one would be enough.

For example:

Normal: "We're going to let private companies run our public health service."

Politician: "There are factors within the health service which make it imperative that we add an element of market-led initiatives, in order to better utilize scarce resources, encourage measurable performance and create a culture in which competition is seen as beneficial, with all services being consumer oriented and led ... blah blah blah blah blah blah blah!"

2. The media like to tell us half-truths and opinion wrapped up as facts. And occasionally some of the media tell outright lies.

For example:

A few days after the Hillsborough disaster,[1] in which ninety-six Liverpool FC fans died during a football match in April 1989, the *Sun* claimed the following under a big front-page headline that read "The Truth":

[1] To read more about this, go to **www.liv.ac.uk/footballindustry/hborough.html**.

* Drunken fans started the tragedy by forcing gates open and crushing fellow supporters.
* They stole from dead people laid out on the pitch.
* They assaulted ambulance staff and urinated on policemen.
* They stole cameras from press photographers.

All of this was UNTRUE and a few months later the *Sun* admitted it, but by then the damage was already done. As they say, mud sticks. Years later certain politicians and a well-known (now dead) football manager repeated these false allegations.

Or how about asylum seekers barbecuing and eating swans?[2] That wasn't true either (see **The Media and Politricks** section for more "truths").

3. You'd love to vote but aren't really interested in politics.

This one is interesting because voting and having an interest in who you vote for should go together like a Big Mac and fries. Of course, you're not alone. A lot of adults, who can vote, are the same too. The only reason I voted in the 2005 election was because my sitting MP is an arsehole and I wanted to get rid of him. The slimy, greasy git is still there, unfortunately.

[2] This was reported in the *Sun* in July 2003. To read the article, go to **www.socialistworker.co.uk** and search for the headline "Yet More Plucking Lies from the *Sun*".

4. The Iraq War is based on lies and greed, and Tony Blair is just following the USA and President George W. Bush. Er ... why?

Or to quote one fourteen-year-old lady who answered my questionnaire: "Why is Bush such a lying prick and why does Blair want to do everything the prick says?"

5. Why bother to vote? They're all the same.

Er, yes. The real choice during the last election was which of the lying, greasy, shite-suit-wearing parties you wanted to run the country. They were all promising to do the same things anyway.

* The Conservatives were going to be tough on immigration (and everything else too).
* New Labour was going to be even tougher, on MORE than everything; and it was in power, so there!
* The Liberal Democrats agreed that it was a problem and were going to deal with it fairly and with measured thought – after they'd won a landslide election victory and a (drunken) cow had jumped over the moon.

Of course, there were loads of other issues that were mentioned and I'll deal with the most popular ones later; but for now, I'm going to get on with the first part of the guide: the basics.

2 WHAT IS POLITICS ANYWAY?

I had to answer this question (without the "anyway" bit) when I was doing my politics A level. Back then mobile phones were the size of cars and had to be dragged behind you, and the Internet was a secret known only to a handful of scientists, programmers and the military. So I couldn't go online to find out. In writing this, though, I decided to see what the Web had to offer. I wish I hadn't bothered.

First of all I typed "what is politics?" into Google and clicked on a worldwide search. I got thirty-two MILLION hits. Then I thought, Hang on, I'm writing this in Britain so why do I need to know about the politics of Papua New Guinea? So I restricted my search to UK-only sites. That didn't help either. I *only* got four and half million hits the second time around. I mean, what the *hell* am I supposed to do with all those stupid pages? I would have been reading shite until I was eighty. Forget that...

Instead – and pay attention here, because I'm about to use a word that puts many people to sleep instantly – instead I turned to a BOOK. Yes, that's right, a *book*. And not just any old book. It was my own battered and scribbled-in copy of *Basic Political Concepts* by Alan Renwick and Ian Swinburn.[1] I opened it, and guess what? On the contents page was an entire chapter called "What Is Politics?" An *entire* chapter.

[1] Alan Renwick and Ian Swinburn, *Basic Political Concepts*, second edition, Hutchinson, 1987.



I turned back to my Internet search, scanning the first fifty-odd hits (UK only). There was the BBC website, another one for ITV, something by Aristotle, a closed link to a porn site called "Prime Ministers with Big Boobs" and a link to a dog called Peaches. OK, the last two are lies, but you get my point – at least, you would if I had made it. Here it is: not one of those hits told me what I wanted to know. Yet in my book I had everything I could have wished for. Feeling cheated by the Internet, I smashed my modem and set fire to the last five CDs I had bought from Amazon.

I turned to the Renwick and Swinburn book and this is part of what it said:

> **Politics, at its simplest, takes place wherever conflict exists about goals and the method of achieving those goals. The process of solving conflicts ... is a political process.**

But what does that mean exactly? Well, let's look at the bit about "conflict", "goals" and "achieving those goals" first; and then "solving conflicts".

This country is a society in which all people live together (most of the time). But we all have different views about what needs to be done for our country to work properly. For example I think we should make the rich pay more tax than the poor. But lots of *rich* people think I'm a left-wing lunatic (I'll explain later) who should be shot, and they argue that rich people are rich because they work hard (at which point I snort and talk about the Queen). Whatever. The point is that we argue about things. Politics IS that arguing process.

So, at its basic level, politics is, well, argument. This is because we, as individuals, have our own *goals* that we want to achieve. But occasionally our ideas are different. We don't always want the same things. Or we *do* want the same things but we want to achieve them in different ways. This means *conflict*, which has to be sorted out. Sorting it out is what politics is all about.

Individuals argue about all kinds of things too. Money, property, tax, education... But if all we did was argue and not sort those arguments out, we'd still be living in caves. There would be no change – no progress. The fact that we have a political process to sort out our differences helps us to get on.

Imagine a year head at Politics High School trying to make peace between two lads who are fighting over the same girl. The year head is the political process, "solving conflicts" – like our MPs in Parliament. The two lads arguing over the girl are you and me, engaged in *politics*.

So just to recap:

POLITICS = CONFLICT OVER DIFFERING IDEAS AND GOALS AND HOW TO ACHIEVE THEM. THE POLITICAL PROCESS SOLVES THAT CONFLICT TO MAKE SURE SOCIETY RUNS SMOOTHLY.

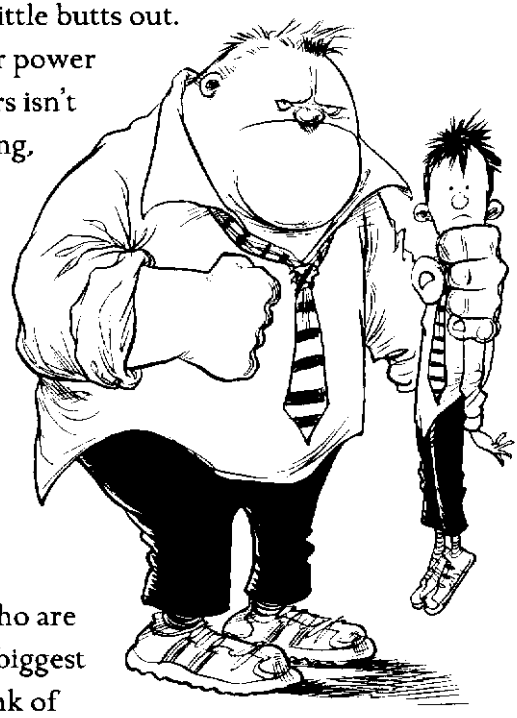
This leads us to another issue. Let's go back to Politics High. Why does the year head have power? I mean, what is it that makes him/her so special? And why should the two lads doing the fighting listen? Well, this is where it all starts to get a bit more complicated...

Power and Authority

Leaders have power and authority. In the UK we vote for our leaders in a general election. By voting for them we give them the authority to make decisions for us. The politicians we elect do all the "conflict solving" for

us; this means we can get on with our day-to-day lives and let the big decisions be taken for us. Politics doesn't work unless certain people have power over others. This is called the social contract, and is the term used to describe the way in which we, the people, give up some of our rights to other people (politicians) so that they can run our country. In return for that power, politicians agree to be bound by certain rules and have to face elections in which we can either vote them back in or kick their little butts out.

Now, giving up our power and authority to others isn't necessarily a good thing, but at least we get to vote. Some of the other things on which politicians can base their power and authority aren't that good either, in my opinion anyway. Such as:



* *Strength*: those who are the hardest and biggest take power. Think of Attila the Hun, Hitler or Genghis Khan. Or the school bully.
* *Wealth*: rich people get all the power. Great if you're rich too; not so good if you're poor.

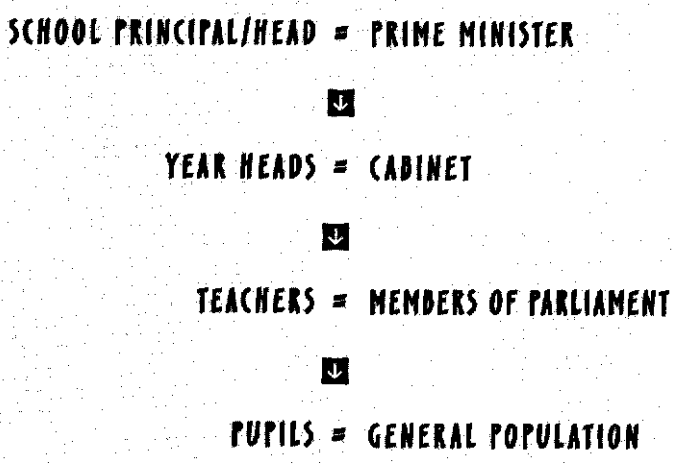
Examples include the United States, where you have to be a millionaire to win an election, even though according to the great American dream "any US citizen can be president". Yeah, right. Not that Britain is very different. More on that later.

* *Age and wisdom*: the old are wiser and therefore know better. (Apart from my gran, who dribbles all the time and can't remember her own name.) In Indian and Chinese traditions, to name but two, old people are highly thought of and head clans and villages, and hold power. But why should your age make you a better leader? And what happens when Alzheimer's sets in?
* *Hereditary principle*: power passed on from parent to child. Sometimes those in power claim God gives them this right (the nutters). Think of medieval and Tudor England. Nowadays there are hereditary leaders in Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, as well as elsewhere (Bhutan, Nepal and so on). Imagine Prince Charles running the country and you'll see my point. Fox-hunting and taking your plants for a walk, anyone?

If you relate this to Politics High, you have layers of power and authority. These are based on the political system of the present day – they call it democracy (see **Democracy**). The school is run by the local government,

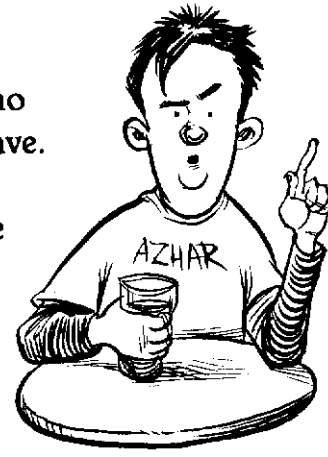
which is in turn responsible to the national government. There are rules by which a school has to be run (what it teaches, spends and so forth), and teachers enforce these rules. The year heads are employed to *run* the school and that means they have more power than the pupils because the pupils only *attend* the school. The head or principal has the most power because he or she is in charge of everyone. And it's the people in charge that make the decisions. Just like in the real world.

Or look at it this way, as a school in comparison to the political system in the UK:



If it's all too boring to think about, then try this:

> Most of us ain't got no power. Some of us have. The "some" decide what the "most" have to do. End of...[2]



Without power and authority, politics doesn't mean anything. It's just a load of meaningless drivel, like *Big Brother* contestants having a discussion. Politics means something when someone decides *what* we should do, *how* we should do it and then actually *does* something.

The Political Spectrum

You know that thing where people and politicians (yes, there IS a distinction) call themselves left-wing or right-wing? Well, that's all about the political spectrum – the range of ideas and beliefs about politics. Later I'll go through the main parties and some of the smaller ones, explaining what they believe in and so on; for now, here's a quick breakdown of the political spectrum in the UK.

[2] My mate Azhar down the pub, August 2005.

The Parties

LEFT WING ⟷ CENTRE ⟷ RIGHT WING

COMMUNIST PARTIES SOCIALISTS/RESPECT OLD LABOUR/GREENS NEW LABOUR/LIBERAL DEMOCRATS CONSERVATIVES UKIP BNP

Political Ideologies

FAR LEFT ⟷ LEFT ⟷ CENTRE ⟷ RIGHT ⟷ FAR RIGHT

STALINISM COMMUNISM SOCIALISM DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM LIBERALISM CONSERVATISM FASCISM/NAZISM

TOTALITARIANISM ANARCHISM CAPITALISM TOTALITARIANISM

Some of the traditional divisions in British politics have changed in the last twenty years and, while the diagram is as accurate as it can be, you have to bear those in mind. For example, Labour and *New* Labour, despite seeming to be the same party, are not. The original Labour Party would be seen as left-wing and centre-left. New Labour is centre going towards centre-right. There are TWO separate factions in the Labour Party, therefore: the old left and the new, Blairite[3] right. I explain all this later but it's still worth pointing out here.

You'll also see that on the ideological spectrum, totalitarianism appears on both the far left and the far right. That's because at both extremes, this type of ideology has often appeared. There is very little to choose between totalitarian regimes whether they are on the left or the right. In fact, you could turn the straight line into a circle if you wanted to, as the two extremes can be so close.

Anyway, there's more about all of this in Chapters 5 and 6.

[3] The term Blairite is used to describe the policies of New Labour under Tony Blair. Blairism, like Thatcherism in the 1980s, has been a drastic new direction in British politics, turning Britain's only mainstream left-wing party into a centre-right party – the bastards.