

Russell Brand has a point about disillusionment with politics, but he is wrong when he says young people shouldn't vote

By Democratic Audit

*Russell Brand's recent guest editorship of the New Statesman and his accompanying interview with Jeremy Paxman – in which he made the case for not voting – have generated a great deal of debate about the reasons that lie behind political apathy. Here, **Jamie Barlett** argues that though Brand does have a point about the reasons for political disillusionment, he is wrong to advise young people to opt of voting altogether.*

Russell Brand has

called for a

revolution: an uprising, an awakening. Most people, he says, “don't give a fuck about politics”, and, like him, shouldn't vote because it only encourages the money grabbing “dicklickers”. He thinks a revolution is coming, in fact. By guest-editing the New Statesman this week and then tearing into Jeremy Paxman with facetious wit and pointed verbosity, I suppose he is trying to help it along. As it happens, perhaps he has: friends of mine who have never cared are now talking about politics.

Lots of people in Westminster don't like what Brand has said because he's a rich, attention seeking, celebrity treading on 'our' turf. Nonetheless, all ideas should be judged on their merits. Does he have a point?

First, people's attitudes to politics. Do we 'give a fuck'? He's half right. Electoral turnout in the UK has been on a downward trend since 1950, when 84 per cent of the population turned out to vote, compared to 65 per cent in the last general election in 2010 – and only 44 per cent of those aged 18-24. This year's British Attitudes Survey found that only a third of 16-24 year olds say they have an interest in politics, and only half think it's a **duty to vote**.

At least some of this is surely driven by dissatisfaction at the system. A 2008 survey found that 68 per cent of British respondents were either 'not very' or 'not at all' satisfied with democracy overall. They especially do not trust political parties. In 2012, 82 per cent of UK citizens said they 'tend not to trust' political parties. Membership of the parties has plummeted since the 1950s: the Conservative party has gone from 3 million to one hundred thousand members over the last six decades.

Brand thinks it is partly because politics is a narrow set of people and systems. There is at least some truth to his claim that we are governed by a narrow elite drawn from the same narrow cast of actors. Since 1979 there has been a large decrease in the number of MPs who were formerly manual workers, from around 16 per cent of all MPs in 1979 to 4 per cent in 2010. Over the same period **the number** of MPs with a political background grew from 3 per cent to 14 per cent. Of course there are also plenty of MPs from other backgrounds too, but the Houses of Commons is far from a cross section of society.

It probably doesn't help that Nick Clegg, David Cameron, Ed Miliband and even Nigel Farage literally look and sound the same: well spoken, well dressed, men aged 40-50, university-educated, with roughly the same haircuts, waistlines and heights. Certainly, the language of politics feels stale – an endless conveyor belt of 'hard working families', 'appropriate measures', and 'efficiency savings'. Many sound like they are just trotting out pre-agreed media lines, and people can see through it. **Work** by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggest the young people think MPs are self-serving, party automatons. Politics is too narrow. But they also think politics is important, if it can opened up a bit.

Are we, as Brand says, on the verge of a revolution? Not in the sense of the Bastille being stormed. But perhaps in the way politics is being done: especially party politics. If you look across Europe, people are certainly turning to non-mainstream parties, even if they aren't Brand's socialist utopians. Sometimes that takes the form of right wing populists (sometimes called right wing extremists). Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders from the Netherlands or Pia 'Mama' Keirsgaard of the Danish People's Party are examples. Sometimes they are of the left: witness George Galloway, or Melanchon in France. Beppe Grillo, from Italy, straddles both left and right. He is a popular comedian and blogger, and ran a vehemently anti-establishment ticket, selecting his candidates online, and refusing to give any interviews to the Italian media, communicating instead through his own blog. His political career really took off in 2009, when he held a 'fuck-off day' directed at the ruling classes. Despite going against every P.R. rule, one in four Italians voted for his Five Star Movement earlier this year.

The supporters of these parties are united with Brand in their general dissatisfaction with the institutions of political life. In my research looking at the online supporters of populist parties and movements, supporters consistently displayed significantly lower levels of trust in political parties, the justice system, parliament, the media than the typical citizen. Whether they were from the left or right was immaterial.

Brand is right that changing communication is helping to turn this disenchantment and disillusionment into real world effect. Social media in particular is helping new parties emerge, organise and mobilise. It offers a way to circumnavigate the stranglehold the main parties have on local and national media, and the might of their established local presence and organising force. The cost of entry for new upstarts is also far lower: you don't need the weighty machinery of an established party. Facebook groups and Twitter feeds can spread a message and mobilise voters for next to no cost. It was instrumental for both Grillo and Galloway's recent astounding successes. I can foresee more coming (especially where voter turnout is so low).

So far, not bad. But he lost me badly on the exhortation not to vote: he thinks there is no point, and that it merely legitimises a system that doesn't work. There is so much wrong with this, I hardly know where to start. Perhaps I'll start with the thousands of people who died to give us ordinary people the suffrage – the Peterloo Massacre, the Suffragettes. They knew that voting wasn't just about choosing the victor yourself, but creating a system where representatives knew they might be booted out the next time around, which is a powerful incentive to behave and listen. It works, not because Brand's vote decides who wins in every election, but because it's a background threat, keeping the elected relatively honest.

Of course, the choice seems remarkably limited at the moment. But Brand doesn't know – because he's never actually been in a polling station – that there is in fact a remarkable array of choice of candidates. In 2010 there were more candidates who kept their deposit than ever before. The problem is that not enough people vote for them. Like, for example, the Pirate Party, which is trying to revolutionise the way politics is being done by crowd sourcing policy decisions and bringing radical transparency and openness to Westminster. Brand would surely love them (and is sartorially suited too) but probably doesn't know they exist. But change is possible through voting if you motivate people: look what happened in Italy earlier this year. Or in Bradford West.

Brand's real argument seems to be that voting is an impediment to real change, presumably because it creates a façade, it somehow appropriates real change. He is right: if people don't vote, things will change. Almost exclusively for the worse. It is well established that low voter turnout uniquely benefits extremist parties, which is why the BNP does – at least did – so well in council elections. As turnout sinks, politicians also listen less, and apathy grows. This is why there are so many groups desperately trying to push voter turnout up. At the very least, you should spoil your ballot paper or vote for a protest party. To the politician, the 'not-apathetic-but-very-angry-at-the-system' no vote looks identical to the 'I-couldn't-care-less-I-didn't-even-know-it-was-election-day' no vote.

I'm glad Brand has got people talking about politics and he is right that it is about much more than voting, too. Increasingly your shopping decisions or social media clicks are political choices. But formal politics still matters, and we do need to radically change how it is done, especially party politics. It needs to be far more open, with more opportunities for citizens to make a difference. But if Brand's rants mean more people are put off, think democracy is a sham and believe the way to change the world is to not vote, he will have inadvertently made the problem worse. If you're as pissed off as he is – judging by my Facebook timeline many of you are – by all means rebel, try to change society, seek a revolution if you want to.

The great thing in a democracy is that you can do all of those things and still have time to spend 15 whole minutes once every couple of years exercising your precious civic right. You can even stand for election yourself, and if enough people agree with you, change the system yourself. It doesn't feel like much: but it reminds politicians that you care, that you are watching them, and when things are bad enough, present an alternative yourself.

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