

I'm a politician... get me in there!

Laura-Jane Foley examines the motivation behind a politician's desire to be part of a reality TV show.

Reality TV shows - the scourge of modern day telly. Thank goodness Mrs Whitehouse went when she did. What on earth would she make of former pop stars waxing men's private bits on *Trust me I'm a Beauty Therapist?* And former Royal Butlers thrusting their hands into dark holes filled with unsavoury items on *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here?*

From the days of the 1964 life affirming *Seven-up!* films and Professor Winston's 1995 *Making Babies*, documentary television programmes following people's lives have changed dramatically. It is no longer enough to view ordinary folk leading their sometimes extraordinary lives. Programmes have to be scripted, planned to include an arc of highs and lows and a televisually fitting conclusion. Reality TV as we now know it developed in the late 1990s. Humiliation, embarrassment, bullying, personal journeys and self realization seem the order of the day.

The whole sorry affair began with the lifestyle programmes of the late 1990's. *Changing Rooms* in particular sought an extreme response from the participants whose homes were redesigned behind their backs. Designers no longer took the

owners' wishes into account but instead created shocking room changes that would elicit a good response for telly. The car crash viewing of the poor woman whose living room was turned into a whore's palace led the way for the humiliation factor of *Big Brother*, which came to our shores in 2000.

And once it had started there was no turning back. From *Big Brother* a whole host of reality TV shows sprung up and after the success of ordinary members of the public appearing on these shows some bright television exec came up with the idea of doing celebrity versions.

The first series of *Celebrity Big Brother* was done for charity. None of the celebrities received a fee and almost all the money went to *Comic Relief*. But following on from its success it became a commercial venture and a guaranteed way for D-list celebs to secure primetime TV appearances and copious column inches.

And it's all very well for ageing pop stars, former presenters and glamour models to seek their extra 15 minutes of fame, but when did politicians suddenly think it became respectable for them to appear on reality TV?



Of course there are different types of reality TV show. The worthy-ish – there are very few of these. Usually they are for charity and they are more like a documentary than a reality TV show – think Ann Widdecombe versus, Banged Up with David Blunkett and Sport Relief does the Apprentice. Then there are the ones where you learn a skill and “go on a journey” – Strictly Come Dancing, Dancing on Ice. Then there are the trashy shows – All Star Family Fortunes, All Star Talent Show – basically anything with ‘All Star’ in the title. And finally there are the gratuitous shows. The shows that teach nothing, that praise nothing and that

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are purely concerned with ridicule and loss of dignity – Big Brother and, worst of all, I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here.

Christine Hamilton appeared in the first series of I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here in 2002. She did incredibly well, finished third and came out of the whole thing with a much improved public persona. Although not a politician herself, she was married to a former Conservative minister and was a well known figure in the political world. How shocked the public were that a politician’s spouse could appear on such a programme!

But fast forward six years and every Tom, Dick and Lembit are doing it. Christine Hamilton led the way in crossing over from Westminster to prime time telly.

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But it was understandable why the Hamiltons were open to putting themselves up to national ridicule. They had left the political world. They were looking for a way to make some money. Reality TV and media appearances became their career. Between them they have appeared on The Weakest Link, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Celebrity Mastermind, and When Louis Met. Similarly former Conservative MP Edwina Currie



has appeared in several reality television programmes since she left Parliament. She and her husband swapped places with John McCririck and his wife in *Celebrity Wife Swap*. She also appeared in *Hell's Kitchen*, *Celebrity Stars in their Eyes*, *Celebrity Mastermind* and also *All Star Family Fortunes*.

What on earth made actual current politicians take part in some of the most excruciating TV seen this millennium?

It's not all just sitting around on beanbags or eating snails all day. Some reality shows show off a particular talent or teach a new skill and some politicians are desperate to show they're more than just a Member of Parliament. The *All Star Talent Show* on Channel 5 in 2006 featured a harmonica playing Lembit Opik and a piano playing

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Oona King. These respected MPs performed on a series including Jodie Marsh, *The Cheeky Girls*, Andy Scott Lee, Ben Ofoedu and Carly Hillman (who?) Doyen of reality TV Lembit Opik also appeared on *Celebrity Bargain Hunt*, *All Star Mr. and Mrs.* and *Sport Relief Does the Apprentice*. Mr. Opik seems very keen to show there's more to him than just politics.

And did you know that George Galloway is not the only MP to appear on television in a leotard? Liberal Democrat MP Julia Goldsworthy appeared on *The Games* in 2006 performing gymnastics wearing a very tight green leotard. But it paid off for Julia who was promoted to the Shadow Cabinet after appearing on the programme. She finished the show in silver medal position raising over £20,000 for charity.

Politicians showing off something they're good at isn't too surprising but what about learning something new. Err. No one - politicians don't seem that keen to actually learn anything. We've yet to see a politician learn how to cha cha on

Strictly Come Dancing, or ice skate on *Dancing on Ice*. So it seems they want maximum exposure with the least amount of work. And there are the politicians who think this exposure will allow them to broadcast their political statements and get people debating important issues. Unfortunately not taking into account the producers' view that this might not be as fun as watching them cavort around in a leotard. When George Galloway appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother* he couldn't have expected to spend a day pretending to be a cat and licking milk from actress Rula Lenska's hands. Respect MP George Galloway appeared on the fourth series of *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2006. But what would make Galloway, a member of parliament since 1987 and a very prominent political face take part in such a programme? Well firstly he seemed to think he had a right to be there as a celebrity. On the show he argued that he was the most famous housemate worldwide as he said he was known to every Muslim in the world. Galloway wanted to debate political issues and raise his profile amongst young people. He probably couldn't have been more surprised with how it turned out.





Politicians are naïve if they think they will be able to get their political views across to viewers and they are more likely to have a negative experience if they go onto a programme with this expectation. Julia Goldsworthy however took part in *The Games* without any political motivation. She says, “I didn’t go in to make a big political statement. If I wanted to make any statement at all it was that politicians aren’t all middle-aged white men, and that sometimes they can have fun. Hopefully I came across as a normal human being”.

Goldsworthy echoes Ann Widdecombe’s intentions, “As a politician, these sorts of shows allow an audience to get to know you and to see you as more human. That means the next time you do something serious, they’re more inclined to listen to what you have to say”. And it does work argues Ann, “when I did my film about benefits abuse, 4 million people tuned in. It’s very sad to say, but if I had been speaking in the House of Commons on the same subject, I would have been lucky to get 40 people listening. This is about mass communication.” Despite appearing on several reality TV shows Widdecombe is careful about what she signs up to. She has turned down requests to

appear on *Big Brother* and *I’m A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here*. And when she participated in *Celebrity Fit Club* (incidentally renamed from *Fat Club* when the ordinary public took part!) she was keen to point out to producers that there would be some things she simply would not do on screen. She was keen to keep control of how she would be viewed.

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Of course some politicians just want to become famous – although they probably wouldn’t like us to say that so let’s engage a bit of PR speak and just say they want to “raise their personal profile”. In 2008 John Loughton a youth activist and former chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament won *Celebrity Hijack*; the replacement to *Celebrity Big Brother* which was suspended following the Shilpa Shetty bullying incident. Loughton says he did it all for the kids, “Me going to *Big Brother* was about giving the SYP a voice, making it heard and making it much more recognised. I now hope that it will encourage more young people to get involved in the Youth Parliament. I see what I did as part of my job anyway”.

Derek Laud, a political lobbyist and former Conservative parliamentary candidate appeared on the sixth series of *Big Brother* in 2005. At the time Laud claimed he went on the show for the “personal experience” though he can’t have been disappointed with the media profile he acquired and honed over the next few years. Barely out of the *Big Brother House* he appeared on BBC1’s *Question Time* programme. And for the next two years Laud enjoyed a fairly successful media career. He appeared on *The Wright Stuff*, *Test the Nation*, *Hell’s Kitchen* and even took part in a pilot for a new comedy *U Kno Wot I Mean* in which Laud played the part of a married, middle class barrister appalled by his white working class neighbours.

Following Galloway into the *Big Brother House* was Tommy Sheridan who appeared on the sixth series

of Celebrity Big Brother in January 2009. Apart from giving a political oration during a task Sheridan's politics didn't lead to too many political debates or discussions in the house. His reasons for participating seem more to raise his profile and perhaps to earn some money for his various legal battles. But Big Brother is nothing compared to the daddy of all celebrity reality TV shows; I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here.

Six years on from Christine Hamilton's stint in the jungle 2008 saw two politicians enter the fray. Brian Paddick, the Retired Police Officer and Lib Dem candidate for Mayor of London, competed in the most recent series and came 7th. Also in the series was Robert Kilroy Silk the former TV presenter, former Labour MP and a current MEP. He finished last. Both men seemed incongruous in the jungle at first but Paddick soon got into the swing of things showering naked and bitching behind others' backs.

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Paddick was hardly a household name before he went in. Only those with a very keen interest in current affairs or Londoners would have heard his name before. He clearly wanted to raise his media profile following his defeat in the mayoral elections of May 2008. Kilroy Silk's appearance however was actually quite sad. Here was a former MP a current MEP and a previously successful broadcaster drinking liquidised animals and being covered in a variety of jungle critters and slithery things. There seemed a desperation on his part to hark back to an earlier time when he could do no wrong. Sadly for the silver haired fox it wasn't to be and he was the first to be booted out – his profile, if possible, lowered from before he went in.

So what can we say about politicians who go on reality television. It's great viewing and whilst we get to know their characters better they don't usually

come off all that well. We may know them better but we like them a whole lot less. They can lose the respect of their parties, their constituents and the public and they can lose sight of who they are and what their role is.

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If you want a media career following your stint as an MP then go ahead – eat Kangaroo willies and have snakes slithering up your body but keep to more sedate genteel programmes if you still wish to work in parliament. MP's would be better off sticking to Have I got News for You, Question Time and maybe the occasional Blue Peter. Reality TV never turns out well if you're a politician and wish to remain so.

We need to have respect for our politicians, to trust them and to know that they're intelligent and capable of making the right decisions for our country. How can we believe they'll make the right choices for us if they make the ludicrous decision to appear on I'm a Celebrity? As viewers we enjoy watching their antics as much as we do watching Paul Burrell and Myleene Klass cavort around. But when the show is over the Butler and the Singer don't try and pretend they're level headed enough to run the country. Going on a 24 hour a day reality TV show simply cannot do any good to an aspiring politician. Perhaps if Christine Hamilton hadn't done so well in the first series of I'm a Celebrity all this may never have happened. Tsk, blame the Hamiltons – causing trouble again.

FYI...

Laura-Jane Foley is the editor of Politick! magazine. She appeared on Faking It in 2003 where she was transformed from choir girl to rock chick but she was very young and it shouldn't be held against her!