

The Demos/PoliticsHome Radical Political Indicator (RPI)

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Politicians use the word “radical” a good deal. Few speeches are complete without a radical new approach, departure or perspective being unveiled. Any new policy seems to be required to be a radical one by some unseen law of political physics. Sometimes the language is appropriate – but these occasions are the exception rather than the rule. ‘Radical’ is a word that now permeates British politics. But what drives radicalism, what does it really mean – and how do we know it when we see it?

On the one hand it seems that a restless public demands radicalism: ‘change’ has become a winning ingredient in elections at home and abroad. Gordon Brown mentioned ‘change’ no less than eight times in three minutes in his first statement as Prime Minister. David Miliband frames his criticism of David Cameron in this way, arguing that Margaret Thatcher was a radical, not a conservative and that Cameron’s problem is that he is the reverse¹. Similarly, Nick Clegg asserts that his party is ‘the only radical force in British politics.’²

Yet on the other, politicians remind themselves – and their parties – that elections are won on the hallowed ‘centre ground’ of politics. As David Cameron reminded his party in his first conference speech as leader, ‘Our party’s history tells us the ground on which political success is built. It is the centre ground. Not the bog of political compromise. Not the ideological wilderness, out of the fringes of debate. But the solid ground where people are.’³

The result, as ever, is that politicians seek to achieve both radicalism and centrism. Do they ever solve the dilemma? Reflecting on his premiership Tony Blair commented famously that ‘I am sometimes taken to task for being too ambitious in the radical nature of the policy changes I am seeking. I always have the opposite worry: not being radical enough.’⁴

To investigate the nature of political radicalism, Demos has generated three key attributes of a political radical and surveyed expert opinion on who the radicals are now.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/29/davidmiliband.labour>

² <http://www.libdems.org.uk/parliament/feature.html?id=13708>

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5396358.stm

⁴ <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page9937>

The Ingredients of Radicalism

Radicals offer a challenge to society and its traditions. This challenge comes in one of three forms, or a combination of the three:

1. *A challenging to the goals of a society.* Radicals look at the possibility of setting society on an entirely new path, breaking with existing trends and assumptions.
e.g. Asquith and the 'People's Budget'
e.g. Blair's promise to end child poverty in a generation
e.g. Blair and the Chicago doctrine on foreign policy
e.g. Cameron's speech on well-being, not just GDP
2. *A challenge to incremental approaches.* Radicals consider and pursue fundamental changes to existing laws, institutions or cultures.
e.g. Atlee and the creation of the welfare state
e.g. Crosland's vision of market socialism
e.g. Ted Heath taking Britain into the European Economic Community
e.g. Margaret Thatcher and privatization
e.g. Gordon Brown and the Bank of England
e.g. Devolution to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London
3. *Challenging entrenched interests and power bases*
Willingness to challenge interest groups and power bases in society
e.g. Roy Jenkins' liberal reforms of the 1960s as Home Secretary
e.g. Ken Livingstone and gay rights in the 1980s
e.g. Tony Blair and Clause 4
e.g. Thatcher and the unions
e.g. Creation of a minimum wage in 1998

Against these criteria the 100 leading political commentators of the PoliticsHome100 – who range across the political spectrum – have ranked the three main political parties and the leading politicians for their radicalism. The results of the Radical Political Indicator are shown in the graphs below.

Radical Party:

The results show that the political parties themselves are not considered to be very radical (see Fig 1). Labour scores the lowest of the RPI, with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats almost neck-and-neck. This demonstrates that radicalism is not firmly attached to any particular political party. A respondent commented: 'It is very difficult to discern how radical the Conservatives are. They could be Macmillan-style conservatives who accept the New Labour settlement; they could have a longer-term plan to significantly reduce the role of the state. They talk both ways and there is little clear evidence to decide.'

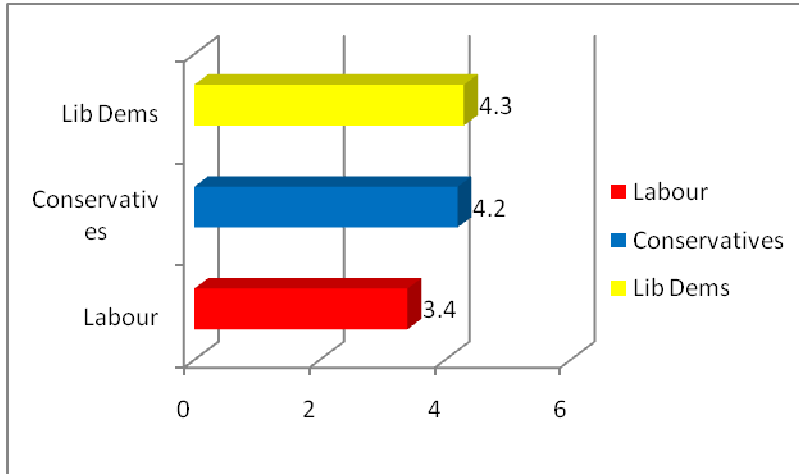


Figure 1: Radical Party Index

Comments from the political experts surveyed suggest that the Conservative ranking is based primarily on a view that they are challenging the goals of society rather than because of their radicalism on policy. One PHI100 member said: ‘The broken society agenda is both radical and interesting’, while another commented: ‘The Tories are trying to present themselves as radical by describing their philosophy of government in radical terms but the specific measures that they have advocated so far have been cautious and unadventurous.’

A pessimistic note was struck by the PHI100 panellist who said: “The main two parties are very nervous of appearing radical and even the Lib Dems (who can afford to play fantasy politics a bit more) are backing off radicalism.”

Radical Politicians?

UK politicians are not considered radical: on a ten-point scale, only one makes it above the 5-point mark. They also show that perceived radicalism cuts across party lines. The radical triumvirate at the top of the RPI table are Michael Gove, Vince Cable and James Purnell. The results for the individual politicians are shown in the graph below.

Comments from PHI100 members were skeptical that many could be seen as radical: “The idea that any of these people are even remotely radical is hilarious. Their scores should be subterranean on this scale”, said one. “This exercise illustrated just how conventional politicians today are,” said another. “This is the Adrian Mole generation, defined by the aftermath of the miners' strike and the cold war - hesitant, stumbling and lacking in political courage.”

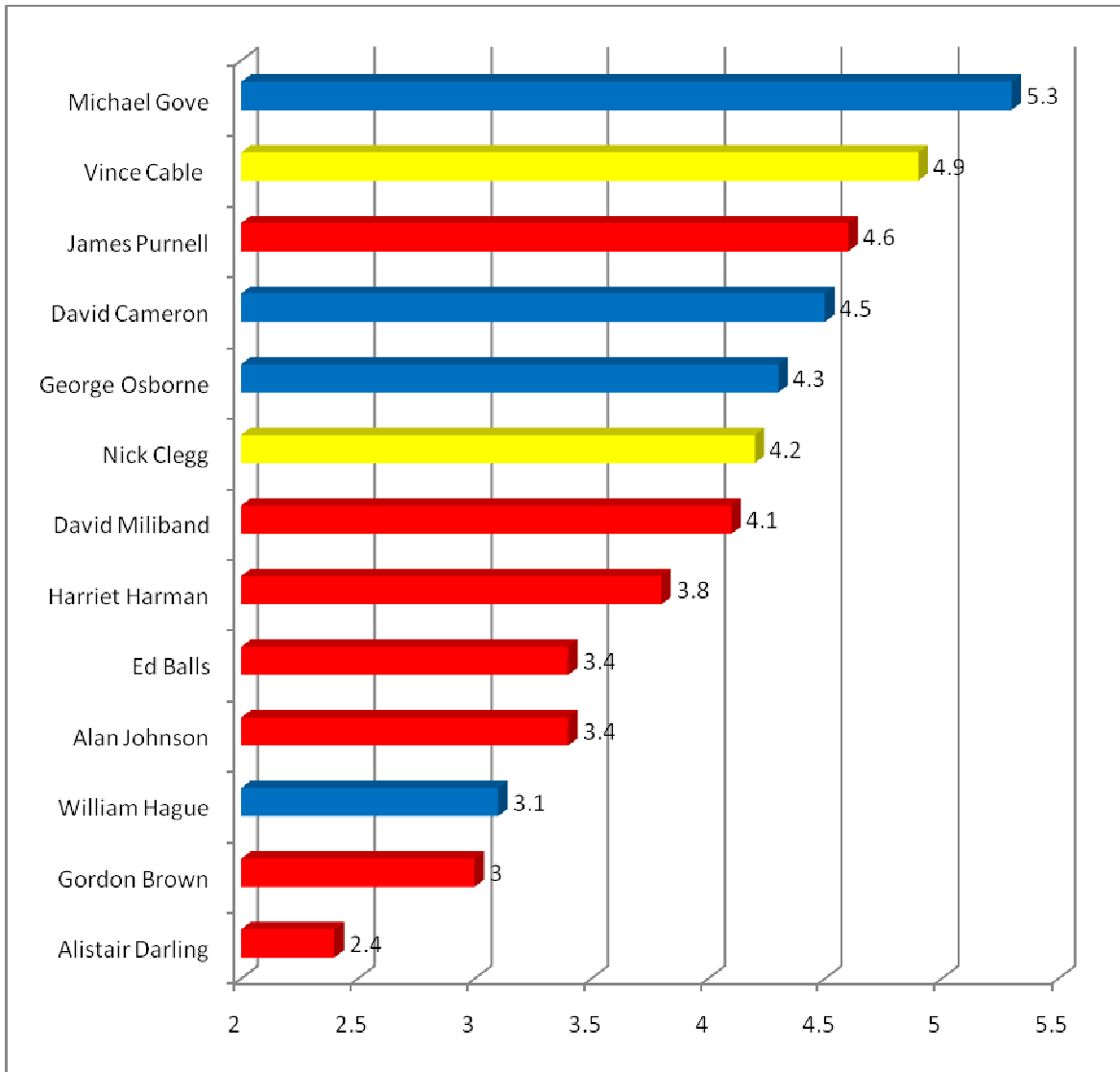


Figure 2: Radical Politician Index

Labour politicians were typically seen as less radical than the leading politicians in other parties (six out of the seven lowest-ranked politicians on the RPI are Labour). Said one PHI100 member: “Miliband has some radical instincts eg personal carbon cards (quashed by Brown), while Ed Balls equally loves a radical flourish eg Bank independence, A Johnson was a big advocate of civil partnerships, but overall its hard to say any of them meet Demos' definition.”

But there was plenty of criticism in comments of the Conservatives: “Cameron and Osborne are utterly risk averse for fear of upsetting voters and blowing their poll lead.”

One PHI100 member summarized the situation: “People and parties go through radical phases. Eleven years in government, and Labour is bound to have run out of radical steam. Government

has proven tiring and there is a near inevitable shift to becoming defensive rather than challenging of the status quo. A new radical phase requires a new impetus - either from its own political crisis or from broader national/international crisis, or drawing on shifts in social patterns, beliefs and norms.”