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“He’s snooty ‘im”: Exploring ‘white working class’ political disengagement

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Abstract

Using a small pilot qualitative study conducted in the North of England prior to the 2010 General election, we seek to understand why our respondents might feel actively disengaged from mainstream politics. It is argued that one major reason is because politicians are seen as lacking understanding of the local contexts in which these low wage workers live. The gulf between represented and representative is widened if politicians fail to communicate in a ‘down-to-earth’ way. This indicates that social inequality between represented and representative is a factor in disengagement, but that such disengagement is not the result of apathy on the part of citizens. Further research is required, but our study suggests that if politicians fail to recognise their privilege and politics fails to address economic disadvantage across ethnic groups then disengagement from mainstream politics is likely to worsen.

Keywords: political disengagement, individualisation, class, MP’s expenses scandal

‘People preoccupied by the struggle to keep body and soul together cannot be expected to have much time or psychic energy left for political involvement, especially if no party seeks to mobilise them.’ (Bennett 1991: 330)

Introduction

People don’t seem to like politics very much, but that does not mean they hate it (see Hay 2007). Our small study can help provide insights into political disengagement in wealthy democracies. The ‘white working classes’ are often judged especially negatively in discussions of the retreat from mainstream politics; supposedly turning to hate, fear (especially of the other), anger and ‘unease’. The state response is to promote social cohesion in a way that leaves little space for dealing with injustices such as racism and class disadvantage (Author reference; Fortier 2010; Sveinsson 2009). Government efforts to engender cohesion via some invented notion of British citizenship and shared values also ignore differences in identity construction between say the Scots and the English (McCrone 2002). Similar lack of attention to cultural differences has politically hampered attempts to achieve racial justice in many countries (West-Newman 2004) and this is likely to be true of other forms of social injustice. Within a climate of social inequalities, political attempts to manufacture positive feelings and disallow discomfort and dissent provide space for extremists such as the far-right British National Party (BNP) (Author reference) or the English Defence League to enter and leave real problems unaddressed. Many nations in Europe and beyond are experiencing similar problems with far-right parties having some success in racialising ‘white working class’ disadvantage (for example, Rayman 2010 and see Blee and Creasap 2010).

Understanding the political inclinations of the English 'white working classes' is therefore important, but who they are has been much debated. This category usually describes those with low levels of education who do semi-skilled and manual work, earn low wages and often experience a fundamental lack of respect from others and feel some combination of envy, shame, resentment and pride (Bottero and Prandy 2003; Reay 2005; Skeggs 2004). These debates are outside the scope of this study, but we use the term 'white working classes' to describe those often targeted by the media and politicians as racist, as breeding disaffected youth and guilty of 'bad parenting' which has recently been represented as responsible for rioting and more generally for a 'broken' or 'sick' society (see the various speeches by David Cameron and other political leaders in the wake of the recent riots in England). Our respondents are broadly 'working class' because of the work they do and their low wages (all under the UK average of £30,000 a year and most under £20,000). The one or two interviewees who have had tertiary education have not translated that into higher paying or more skilled jobs. We are not claiming that they are representative of the difficult to define 'white working classes', but that as low-wage earners in unskilled or semi-skilled work they suffer from economic disadvantage. They told us that economic struggles were their foremost concern and we explore here how that is linked to their political disengagement.

We set out to explore political disengagement via qualitative research. The small study we conducted in the North of England was designed to provide better insight into political inclinations within the 'white working classes', in the context of a period of electoral success in that region for right-wing parties like the British National Party (BNP). Here, that success is taken as one sign of disengagement from mainstream politics. The methods will be discussed elsewhere, but here we focus on the findings from this small pilot study of how our respondents felt about politics. The first section sets the scene by discussing political disengagement amongst the 'white working classes'. Then we briefly outline our study before setting out three major themes that arose from the data which relate to disengagement. Firstly we discuss how our respondents felt disengaged from politicians because they belong to a wealthy elite, distanced from everyday 'local' concerns. Secondly, they feel that politicians generally fail to communicate across this divide. Finally, they feel angry with politicians who they see abusing their privileged position and illustrating how out of touch they are with the experience of economic disadvantage. The way in which our respondents express their dissatisfaction strongly suggests that disengagement is a critical rather than apathetic response to mainstream politics.

Setting the scene: Political disengagement amongst the 'white working classes'

Political disengagement is typically measured in terms of voter turnout, but the relationship between the two is not obvious. There is a wealth of material and some considerable concern over the disengagement and low levels of political knowledge and trust of young people (Author reference; Bhavnani 1991; Fieldhouse *et al.* 2007; Furlong and Cartmel 2012; Henn and Foard 2012; Mellor 1998; Park 2004; Torney-Purta *et al.* 2001; Wattenberg 2007; Vromen 1995). In contrast, somewhat less

concern is shown for adult political disengagement (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007; Norris 2002; Putnam 2000; Power Inquiry 2006; Stoker 2006). Yet, the evidence suggests that there has been a steady decline in formal participation by adults in many established democracies since the 1960s (see Hay 2007: 11-27). Research has consistently shown that voters with fewer resources (income, education, skills and time) engage in civic life less (Parry et al. 1992; Pattie et al. 2003; Verba et al. 1995). This implies that 'working class' people are more likely to be disengaged, although possibly due to lack of time or money rather than apathy or cynicism for mainstream politics. Political scientists blame disengagement on changes within the political sphere such as politics becoming too slick, too professionalised, or too complex (see for example Hay 2007; Stoker 2006). These changes have a role, but disengagement is about people's broader criticisms of whether politics addresses their needs.

The idea of disengagement as a critical stance is largely ignored in key literature. Inept communities and declining participation are blamed on citizens and their supposed failures of character. The impact of broader social processes is disregarded. This is true of arguably the most influential contribution to debates about declining participation: Robert Putnam's (2000) social capital thesis, which implies that working class communities are more disengaged. He neglects what may lie behind such disengagement and argues that declining political participation is but a symptom of the much broader decline and breakdown of social capital – the bonds which connect and bind communities together. The disintegration of community and concurrent erosion of notions of civic duty have dislocated citizens from each other and reduced active engagement in politics. Putnam's declining social capital thesis has been criticised on a number of fronts (for example, Fine 2010; Norris 1996), but we are concerned with its failure to explain how and why citizens are critical of mainstream politics. Although other work may attend to critical citizens (Norris 1999), our participants are somewhat different in that they tend to be less educated and earn less. Also, they are pre-occupied with material rather than post-material issues. In other words, economic disadvantage is most significant for those we spoke to, as evidenced by low wages and similar concerns being first mentioned when we asked what they thought were the most important problems that politicians should be addressing. There was a sense that politicians were failing to attend to these problems.

To some degree, failing to attend to socio-economic disadvantage might be seen as understandable if politicians belong to wealthy elites. Disengagement may show 'hatred against comfortable living, against the "snobbish upper class" who supposedly enjoy things one has to deny oneself' (Adorno et al. 1950: 670). It is debateable to what extent this may be part of the individualisation processes that Bauman (1999) discusses in *In Search of Politics*. He argues that people see little need of change and little hope of change, especially from politicians. They are free, although free mainly to bear the burdens of decision-making themselves and free to consume. Denying oneself is no longer tolerated within consumer society and according to Bauman politics is thus seen as insignificant. Yet we argue that for those on low wages, their opportunity to consume is limited, and they feel that their elected representatives could at least try to appreciate their situation. They may see

politicians as unlikely to bring change, but unlike Bauman we do not think that a turn to an individualised life politics or political apathy are necessarily the result.

Research on young people's relationship with politics has explored the important difference between cynicism and apathy (Author reference; Bhavnani 1991; Harris 2001). The argument is that cynicism demands a level of engagement and critique not required for apathy. Unlike apathy, cynicism contains the potential for a number of political stances. For example, cynicism may act as an impetus for engagement, alternatively, one could choose to disengage from a state and system one believes unworthy of their involvement. The distinction between apathy and cynicism was central in our attempt to hear participants' dissatisfaction with mainstream politics/politicians.

Political disengagement is arguably primarily about politicians failing to attend to citizens' key concerns. The focus should not be on some linear colonisation of the public by the private, the disappearance of public spaces and debate or the loss of civic duty (Bauman 1999; Putnam 2000). Instead we seek to explore political disengagement as a critical response to the 'white working classes' feeling that politicians fail to care about them (Sveinsson 2009).

Political disengagement amongst the 'white working classes' in England, needs to be understood within a wider context of socio-economic inequality. Sharp inequalities can motivate political action by making people angry enough to act against injustice (Author reference), but only those who have shared the experience of injustice are thought likely to act. Thus, people are not hopeful of change when politicians are members of a wealthy elite. Elites are likely to be judged as lacking understanding of what could improve the lives of 'ordinary' people. Within processes of globalisation, 'ordinary' people who are members of 'the working classes' are often 'stuck' or fixed within the local in the interests of the more powerful and more mobile (Skeggs 2004). Margaret Archer (2003) proposes a more agentic model of this localisation when she talks about communicative reflexives focused on forging a satisfying *modus vivendi* within their local context. In their deliberations they are most concerned with family and friends who share that context and avoid making decisions which might threaten those concerns. Although Archer does not think that being a communicative reflexive is solely a 'working class' way of being, it does seem to describe our participants well. In their lives they appear to privilege relationships with family and friends with whom they share a context. For some from 'the working classes', different others might be perceived as a threat to their precarious social and economic position (Napier and Jost 2008: 612-13). This is not a personal narrow mindedness but a product of their social and geographical location and how they understand it. It illustrates that disengagement is not necessarily a product of individualisation, but that relation to others and to place remains crucial. The willingness to be politically engaged can be easily disrupted if politicians are thought to lack understanding of that location as place and as a lived socio-economic position. Whether the disengagement we describe is particular to 'the white working classes' or extends to other groups would require further research, but our respondents highlight issues that could usefully be pursued.

The study

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 white participants doing semi or unskilled work for low wages in Yorkshire and the North West, prior to the 2010 general election. While the sample is relatively small, recent quantitative research echoes the importance of socio-economic exclusion voiced by our respondents (Chappell et al. 2010). Based on a YouGov poll taken at the 2009 European parliamentary election (YouGov 2009), we chose deprived areas (Office of National Statistics 2009) showing high BNP support where voter turnout was low (Barnsley, Burnley, Doncaster, Hull). These factors were taken as indicators of disengagement with mainstream politics. We were interested in people who shared most of the characteristics of BNP supporters, but who may or may not vote for the BNP. As it happened, none of the sample identified as BNP supporters. From the poll we identified occupational groups with high numbers of BNP voters and this led us to purposively recruit semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers in lower paid occupations (although not all BNP supporters are from this group). We considered including the unemployed in our sample but they were not covered by the YouGov poll, and hence we had no data on their relative support for the BNP. We also did not actively try to recruit the unemployed, because, although unemployment might not inevitably produce political disengagement, that disengagement is perhaps less likely and therefore more notable amongst working members of the working class who are otherwise quite well connected into social and collective life.

To find participants we cold canvassed appropriate businesses in the towns selected and telephoned tradespeople and secretaries. A few participants were referred to us by others. Waiters, bar workers, hairdressers, warehouse assistants, a courier, a book keeper for a trade supply firm and an administrator participated. This sample were broadly 'white working class' in background, most having no education beyond high school and those who did (including the administrator) still working in low-paid and mostly semi-skilled jobs. Only two participants (the book keeper and the courier) earned over twenty thousand pounds, but they did not earn over thirty thousand (roughly the national average) and had no higher education (Author reference).

We used semi-structured interviews of about one hour duration to explore participants' feelings about politics, politicians and parties. We also asked questions about why they thought people were upset by the MP expenses scandal, and what they thought were the most important problems politicians should be addressing. The latter including prompts about whether those problems were evident in their local area or what the pressing problems in their local area were. The interviews were audio recorded and took place in participants' homes, workplaces (cafes/pubs, warehouses and hairdressers) or nearby cafés. Each author conducted approximately half the interviews. Anonymised audio files were professionally transcribed and thematically analysed by each author separately in the first instance. An iterative process of immersion in the data and discussion between the

authors generated the final themes. It was noted that participants were not apathetic, as in simply disinterested, but were actively cynical about politics, expressing this in terms of doubt and scepticism. Their active rather than apathetic disengagement was also evident in expressions of frustration and resentfulness as we will see in the following sections covering the key themes.

Ordinary locals

The cynicism of our respondents was evident in them feeling that politicians who were from wealthy elites were unlikely to be interested in their concerns. When we asked Doreen¹, a retired nurse from Barnsley, what she thought of David Cameron, she said: "Oh well he's a, he's snooty 'im" and "[h]e'll not be really interested in ordinary, what I class as ordinary people." When asked how they feel about the upcoming election, similar cynicism about how elites can represent "ordinary" people is expressed by others, such as Mick, a cook in his twenties from Doncaster:

MICK ... take David Cameron for instance, you know, he weren't just born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he had the whole damn cutlery tray in his mouth, you know what I mean, how can that guy, how can that guy, you know, represent me? He can't, it's impossible, do you know what I mean, that guy will not be able to know what I, what I want from my local community ...

Josh, who is in his mid twenties and works in a bar in Doncaster, echoes this sense of disjuncture, from wealthy politicians. He says that politicians are "jumped up ponces ... [who] were all born with silver spoons in their mouth". Richard, who is in his fifties and a book keeper for a tool company in Burnley, thinks David Cameron will face significant challenges in connecting with "ordinary" people:

INT What about David Cameron? As a, as a leader of the Conservative Party what's? Do you, how do you feel about him as a leader?

RICHARD Well not too much in favour of him, he's a, well he's a, like a rich guy so, although Tony Blair's enriched himself as Britain's Prime Minister, I wouldn't say he'd be my choice as the next Prime Minister if he does become so, I'd prefer William Hague myself but and as a Yorkshire man. ... Plus he seems more down to earth, like David Cameron went to Eton, which is nothing against him personally, I'm sure he didn't choose to go to Eton but it's that sort of, that is, in its own way doesn't identify him with the ordinary working man because really it's, it's the ordinary working man sort of varying between voting for the Labour Party and voting for the Conservatives that makes a difference as to which party comes to power really...

Amy, a young hairdresser from Doncaster, is slightly more apathetic when she expresses her sense that politicians are removed from "ordinary" people's lives. When asked what she would tell politicians about that could make a positive difference to her life she says:

AMY I don't know. That's a tricky question that isn't it?
INT Yeah. Do you think they kind of know much about, you know, ordinary people's lives.
AMY Probably not, because obviously they, we're a lot alike us people aren't we?
INT Yeah.
AMY We know, I think if, if a politician come and lived in one of our lives then they'd understand, you know, stuff.

She seems to find it hard to talk about the lives of “us people”, perhaps because much of it is taken for granted if operating as a communicative reflexive (Archer 2003) and she suggests that experience of “one of our lives” is necessary for politicians to understand and perhaps make a difference.

The interviews indicate that participants are doubtful about whether politicians understand their local situation. The importance of politicians showing a connection to local conditions is often expressed, as hinted at already. The mention of the local almost always comes spontaneously when participants answers our questions on how they feel about the party leaders and other politicians. Richard and Doreen highlight local connections when they talk about politicians they like. Doreen says she likes Nick Clegg “cos he’s from Sheffield ... Oh aye, he's Yorkshire born. I like him, yeah. ... I like his, way he comes across.” While Richard says, “I'd prefer William Hague [for Prime Minister] myself, ... as a Yorkshire man.” They do not explain why they like people from their own locale; it seems it is thought obvious. Although most respondents are reflexive about the problems of their local communities, unlike Putnam (2000), they blame disengagement on politicians not citizens. It is politicians who are responsible for people’s lack of engagement because they are poor at reaching out across social boundaries.

There was some indication that if a politician had ‘passion’ or seemed knowledgeable, that was helpful in engaging citizens and overcoming apathy. This again challenges Putnam’s (2000) argument, suggesting that our respondents see politicians’ lack of real interest in people as responsible for disengagement. Elizabeth thought Margaret Thatcher had something that present politicians do not, which she explains when we ask whether she thinks that the Conservatives ‘care about the concerns of people like you’?:

ELIZABETH Well they'll say they will won't they to get into power? I mean I went through the Maggie Thatcher years as a, as a lot younger than I am now obviously and not a lover or a hater, some policies you like and some you didn't, you got the feeling she cared, that she was passionate about her country, not sure I get the same feeling about people in now but that was her as a personality coming through wasn't it?

Elizabeth did not always like her policies but expressed admiration for Margaret Thatcher as someone who “cared”. Similarly, Mick indicates that even where

doubtful about a politician he may be persuaded if he thinks they are knowledgeable:

I do like some of the, Vince Cable, that's the one, Liberal Democrats, you know, they should just make him, I don't know, what kind of name's Vince Cable? Sounds like he should belong in some sort of porn, porn movie, do you know what I mean? But that guy should be, you know, make him Prime Minister because he, every time I hear him speak that guy knows what he's talking about.

This indicates that our respondents are not apathetic, they are willing to listen, but they are usually unsatisfied by politicians' attempts to talk to them.

Politicians should communicate with 'ordinary' people

Many interviewees in our study indicate that their cynicism can be overcome if politicians can talk to people in a 'down to earth' way that can help overcome social distance and might encourage engagement. I ask John, who works in a warehouse, where he gets his information about politics and politicians and he says mostly from the TV. He continues:

JOHN I mean I do like the, is it Nick, can't think of his name now, the Liberal leader.

INT Yeah, I can never remember his name, Clegg, Nick Clegg, yeah.

JOHN Clegg, yeah, yeah, Nick Clegg, I like him, I just like the way he talks, he seems very straightforward talking guy, you know, where although I was always Conservative I wouldn't trust the Conservative leader really and Brown, well I don't know. I've never liked him before he was Prime Minister, I don't know how he ever got to be Prime Minister really.

INT What don't you like about David Cameron?

JOHN I don't know, he seems smarmy, smarmy, yeah. He pretends he's one of the working class and he, he's not, you know, it doesn't come over right but Nick Clegg does, you know, he knows how to talk to people.

INT Right, right, and what do you like about the way Nick Clegg talks to, to people

JOHN He just, he seems to be on the same sort of level, he doesn't talk down to you. Where, where, you know, Conservative leader he seems to talk down to people where and Brown's another one, he talks down even though he's supposed to be Labour.

Nick Clegg's directness makes people feel that he is trying to engage with them, despite him being of a similar privileged social background to other politicians. Katie (a young waitress in Doncaster) highlights how the impenetrability of most political discourse loses her attention.

KATIE: See I'd probably pay more attention if it was just a bit more direct, a bit more to the point. But it just gets to the point when they're talking all you hear is nyah-yah-yah-yer-nyah sort of thing [laughs]. It does though, because they just blabber on – it's like talking to an old person where they veer off the point all the time. You soon lose interest in what they're saying. You're like, "yeah, grandma!" [laughs] You know what I mean!

Katie has actively decided to disengage because of politicians' lack of directness and her sense of the irrelevance of most of what they say.

Elizabeth, a Hull courier in her fifties, has similar concerns about poor communication. When asked how she feels about Gordon Brown she says:

ELIZABETH Personally I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him, I don't, he doesn't strike me as a trustworthy person, that might be very unfair to him because I don't know him but that's how I think he fudges issues and hides behind glib talk and, and he was a Chancellor and he spent all the money we had as a nation and I think it's partly down to him that we're coming into the area, although I know it's a worldwide recession, so it's not just the UK that's but I think he put us in the position where one or two countries are beginning to come out of it and they reckon we are but that's not true, if you live down in the lower reaches of the population, work's still hard to find.

Josh is also cynical when he comments about the frustration of watching politicians on TV and is critical of Gordon Brown because he "never really answers a question fully." Hiding behind "glib talk" made our respondents wary that politicians failed to appreciate the tough economic realities being faced by "the lower reaches of the population".

Politicians are out of touch with economic disadvantage

Rather than being apathetic, our participants are frustrated with politics and politicians. Frustration appears greater with Labour, who John suggests above, should not "talk down" to 'ordinary' people and who appear to no longer fight to improve their socio-economic position. Mark indicates his frustration with the Labour Party's increasingly right of centre position and its courting of the finance sector:

The Tory Party are pretty much really are the same as they ever were, it's, the disappointment is the Labour Party have gone closer towards the Tory Party, you know, which is frustrating because, you know, you'd expect

Labour Party to sort of look out for working people, you know, but it seems like, like the way they treat, the way they dealt with the The City and the way they sort of liberalised The City followed on what the Tories did and sort of said we can live on the wealth of The City while the good times go and then when it all blows up in your face they're like, they were partly to, they, they did nothing to sort of regulate the banks.

This sense of frustration with there being no one in politics to “look out for working people” was evident.

For some respondents there was a strong feeling that party was still central in their political behaviour, even if they felt distanced from a party's current political direction. Mick explains:

MICK: Well I've always been a Labour man [...] I suppose Labour could put a monkey up and I'd still vote for it, do you know what I mean?

Later, when asked whether “any of those three major parties care about the concerns of people like yourself, regular people?” Mick replies:

MICK I'd like to think Labour did, yeah. However, that's my heart speaking. I think my head would tell me otherwise because like I say New Labour, New Labour now has gone so far to the centre and so has the Conservatives and I don't know, I think I'll probably stick with Labour now, again it's probably because I've been brainwashed into saying that but I do think that they probably are going to look after me more than again George Osborne or David Cameron or, you know, they're already obscenely wealthy, they don't care about people down there, do you know what I mean?

Mick was one of the few participants who felt a sense of party loyalty. He acknowledges that his attachment to Labour is not necessarily ‘rational’ by saying he would vote for a monkey if they were a Labour candidate and by indicating that his support is “his heart speaking.” He says that he has been “brainwashed” into voting Labour but also indicates that he votes that way because conservatives “don't care about people down there” where he lives. Earlier quotations given from John and Doreen express similar uncertainty about why they dislike David Cameron, saying vaguely that he's “smarmy” or “snooty”. Thus their political disengagement appears to be based partly on a similar resentment of elites to that identified by Adorno et al. (1950: 670). The respondents are vocal in their criticisms of the gulf between wealthy politicians and the people they represent, especially those who experience economic disadvantage. Yet there are also indications that class has ceased to be a firm basis for political identification.

Politics has been characterised by the decline of class and concomitant party identification as key factors which structure the political (Achterberg, 2006; cf. Bauman 1999; Brett and Moran 2006; Clark and Lipset, 1991; Nieuwbeerta 1996). However, this is not a sign of individualisation in the sense of disconnection. Citizens

search for new ways of relating to political actors and feelings of affinity or lack of affinity (Author reference) increasingly organise people's relationship with mainstream politics. Social inequalities, especially economic inequalities, problematise these connections because 'ordinary' people resent politicians who often appear oblivious to their hardships.

Some of the clearest criticisms of politics and politicians came when we asked interviewees why they thought people were upset about the MP's expenses scandal.² The answers revealed the disgust and hurt people felt when politicians failed to appreciate their privilege relative to the socio-economic deprivations of 'ordinary' working taxpayers. Working people resent the elites enjoying life, whilst they have to deny themselves (Adorno et al. 1950: 670). As Tom says: "Well, expenses is one thing, but daylight robbery is another, you know [laughs]." He goes on to say:

You know, the working man in the street who puts these people into power is – has always, but more now in the present climate – is struggling to put food on the table, struggling to make ends meet. You know, I'm one of those people ... life isn't easy, it's not fun, it's very difficult. You know, I barley have enough money to buy food, socialising has stopped completely. So, if I can't afford to do that, why should somebody who I've put in power – you know with the money that's taken from me in tax – then make their life rosier? I think that's pretty much the bottom line, isn't it.

Politics was perceived as for wealthy people and participants were cynical about them using it for their own advancement.

ANDREW: One of the main problems with our political system is it costs money to be in politics and that stops ordinary people from going into politics. If you look at the make-up of all the politicians we've got, they're all lawyers, bank managers, all these, you know well-off people in the first place, who go into politics. And it doesn't do their image any good when you have one of these expenses scandals happens on top of that [laughs].

Wealthy politicians are estranged from 'ordinary' people, as dramatically highlighted by the Westminster expenses scandal. John explains how it showed that politicians did not understand or acknowledge their privilege, when he was asked why people were so upset about the scandal:

JOHN Well I mean I look at that that some of them, their expenses is more than I earn in a year, a lot of them have haven't they? Somebody, was it today on the news saying that they've paid back forty five thousand pound? One woman MP, she's had to pay forty five thousand pound back. I mean that's twice what I earn in a year. ... I mean it's the amount of money that was involved, you know, when people, there's other people, I mean I'm on twenty odd thousand a year but there's other people who are struggling along on twelve thousand a year, you know, and they can't afford to do

anything and then somebody's claiming for a floating duck house and a moat to be cleaned, several thousand pound and, you know, they can't even go on holiday.

The vast gulf between someone with a moat and duck house and someone who cannot afford a holiday is clear. Moral outrage and resentment are prompted when someone with privilege has misappropriated public money for private benefit. It further reinforces a lack of affinity between 'rich' politicians and struggling working people, as Mick also argues:

so the reason that people were so annoyed at the expenses because everyone was losing their jobs and nobody had any money and then we had all this sleaze about them getting extra money on top of the, you know, ridiculous amounts that they're already getting and the, you know, people saying well it's, it's all right, it's like, no, no, hang on, it's our money, you know, I know it's not our money because we pay taxes for a reason but, you know, that's our tax payers' money, you know what I mean?

Mick and others we spoke to were doing the 'right' things: working hard, paying taxes and living 'decent' lives. They were watching their friends and family members lose their jobs while MPs were getting in comparison "ridiculous amounts" of money without showing any real understanding of the circumstances of the 'ordinary' people they are supposed to represent.

The expenses scandal provided a magnifying glass for citizens to examine and be horrified by the glaring inequalities between themselves and their political leaders. These participants are clear in their criticisms of socio-political conditions that allow such things to happen and profoundly dissatisfied with mainstream politics as a whole.

Concluding remarks

While political disengagement has been addressed by other authors, their explanations have paid scant attention to people's criticisms of politicians and the political system. Our qualitative approach has allowed us to hear people's criticisms of politics and establish that those criticisms do not suggest apathy but cynicism and frustration with politicians distanced from their local concerns and from the economic disadvantage that constrains their lives.

Individualisation has been thought central to eroding the place of collective institutions in politics. In particular, class has been expunged from the public lexicon and class-based explanations of life's struggles are no longer seen as credible. We argue that the gap left by the dissolution, real or apparent, of socio-structural categories has left 'ordinary' people on low wages feeling unrepresented by political elites.

Rather than seeing these changes in terms of an individualisation of politics, we argue that our respondents were still looking for politicians to connect with them and relate to 'ordinary' people. The evidence from our participants is that politicians overwhelmingly fall short of their expectations. They are unlikely to connect with politicians who come from elite backgrounds and are critical of a political system which embodies and fails to address the gross inequalities manifest in British society. Whether they vote for someone or not, they feel distanced from a political system that does not seem to be for 'the likes of us'.

¹ All names used are pseudonyms

² This scandal had been brewing but erupted when in May 2009 *The Telegraph Newspaper* published leaked information detailing MP's abuses of expenses claims.

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