

# Asians disillusioned with party politics seek independent route to Parliament

By: Alok Mitra - Chairman of the Ethnic Minority Business Group (EMBG)  
8 May 2009

In recent years it would seem that the global opinion of politics has shifted, with growing doubt regarding MPs that prioritise 'party politics' over beneficial actions toward their electorate. This has led to the disillusionment of large numbers of people from politics, and despite the efforts of politicians to stimulate the masses of potential voters, this zeitgeist of political cynicism has resulted in a vast reduction in the number of willing voters.

There is now a growing global outcry for change, but one has to ask; are the politicians listening? In the UK, one could be forgiven for believing otherwise. The shirking their responsibility regarding our economic climate, attempting to cover up routinely publicised mistakes with cloak-and-dagger spin, avoiding giving straight answers to legitimate questions, an eagerness to claim undeserved credit when things go well and the furore over expense claims all undermines our confidence in politics. It convinces much of the general public that MPs are only in it for themselves.

There is now a growing movement to promote more independent MPs and put an end to party politics by organisations such as the Jury Team. This organisation, according to their website, was launched in March 2009 and "founded for those people who believe in democracy, but who have observed how the current party political system has turned the United Kingdom's Parliament and Government into the creatures of a small and increasingly distant group of oligarchical politicians."

Our current party system has provided effective stable governments, but for democracy to function properly, the electorate needs to engage in the political process in an informed way. A prerequisite for this is trustworthy information, open government, politicians acting for the benefit of their electorate and elected MPs reflecting the diversity of their constituencies.

Until this self-indulgent 'party politics' system changes and becomes appealing to the electorate, more people are likely to take the independent route, vote for fringe parties or disengage entirely. There is a growing movement amongst South Asians to stand as independents, as they feel that they are unlikely to be selected by the major parties as a Prospective Parliamentary Candidate. This view was recently encapsulated by Anant Vyas (Independent Candidate for the European Parliament for SE England representing the Jury Team) who explained to EMBG that he is standing as an independent candidate because in his personal experience the successive Governments have failed the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) electorate by not addressing the gross under-representation of BAME MPs in the House of Commons.

The problem of under-representation of ethnic minorities is well recognised by all the major parties. Harriet Harman, Leader of the House of Commons and Minister for Women and Equality, opened a debate in parliament in November 2008 to establish a Speaker's Conference that would consider and make recommendations for improving the representation of minority groups in the

House of Commons. At this debate Ms. Harman said "This country is ethnically diverse now — indeed, it has been for many decades — but of (the) 646 (Parliamentary) Members, only 15 are Black or Asian. To be representative of our population, we should have more than four times that number." However, while politicians debate the under-representation continues. In this area the Conservatives especially have some work to do to convince the electorate that they are serious about embracing change. Their current party structure and selection process for candidates tends to work against the selection of ethnic minorities. This needs to be reviewed and modernised so that the party can more reflect today's diverse society. Labour on the other hand, whilst giving the impression of doing better, also need to do more if they wish to justify their claim as being the natural party of the ethnic people.

Obama being elected as the first Black president of the United States has inspired ethnic groups to engage in politics. Obama's campaign helped spread awareness of how 'new media' such as the internet can be harnessed to help individuals stand as independent candidates; raising funds and reaching the masses. Obama's campaign model proved that the ethnic electorate has the power to change the rules of the game with the right technology and organisation. The challenge now is for the independent candidates to demonstrate that they can win seats and be an effective force in the UK. If they achieve this then we may see our future politics change effectively beyond all recognition. At that point the established parties should start to listen and accelerate the rate of their party's change to once again reconnect with the electorate. To ignore this may well otherwise result in their facing a longer than intended term in the political wilderness.