

THE BIRMINGHAM POST

Battle of the ballot for our hearts and minds

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Birmingham-born DJ Emma B, best known for her appearances on Radio 1 and Top of the Pops, is taking part in an inquiry into why so few of us vote.

Next week she will be part of a panel meeting in the city to quiz Michael Howard, the Conservative leader.

The inquiry, which also includes civil liberties campaigner Helena Kennedy and journalist Ferdinand Mount, was created by the Joseph Rowntree Trust in response to concern that fewer of us than ever before are making the trip to the ballot box.

Only 59 per cent of the population voted in 2001 - the lowest figure since 1918.

And it could be even worse this time. According to one recent opinion poll, only 55 per cent of the population say they are certain to vote.

The poll, conducted by NOP, found Labour voters were less committed to voting in a General Election than either the Tories or the Liberal Democrats. Just 59 per cent of Labour supporters said they were determined to cast their ballots, compared to 64 per cent of Liberal Democrats and 69 per cent of Tories.

Political activism has not died out. Groups such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International are going strong, while huge crowds protested against the Iraq war.

But interest in conventional politics appears to be in permanent decline. Many theories have been put forward to explain why.

The role of the media is often highlighted. When Shropshire MP Peter Bradley (Lab The Wrekin) proposed new laws forcing the press to print corrections when they made a mistake, he said they would be good for democracy.

Spin and distortion in newspapers made people cynical about public life in general, he said.

Downing Street has reached a similar conclusion, and this is one of the reasons Labour is trying a new kind of election campaign.

It hopes to use text messaging, the internet, and face to face meetings with voters

to by-pass the media when possible.

And when Labour does need to talk to newspapers it hopes to focus in the regional and local press, which is deemed not to be as irresponsible as their national rivals.

But if politics has a poor image, some critics would argue that politicians must share some of the blame.

The behaviour of some MPs during the end of the Conservative Government, under John Major, and Labour's use of the media to mount personal attacks against opponents, may have changed the way politics is reported for the worst.

Tony Blair did, after all, appoint Alastair Campbell as his Director of Communications - a former political journalist who once broke the story that John Major tucked his shirt into his underpants.

Or perhaps the problem is more fundamental than the way politics is reported.

Every party will claim this next election is about issues of crucial importance to Britain.

But there will be nothing like the big debates of the past.

Once, we were asked to choose between capitalism and socialism. Now we have three brands of "nice capital-ism". Do we want a free market, or state ownership of key industries? There's no longer a choice - everyone supports a free market.

Both major parties support state-run health and education services, with an element of private-sector funding and management.

And both say we should be in Europe but not run by Europe, to coin a phrase.

It's often said that Britain as a nation does not like extremes. However, three parties all fighting for the centre ground may be more likeable, but less interesting.