

X Factor politics will only hit home if Brown tackles what holds people back

Our talent show loving leader's big new theme, unlocking potential, will fall flat until he addresses poverty and inequality

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It's an unlikely image, I know: Gordon Brown in his socks, a bottle of beer in hand, watching Leon and Rhydian square off on The X Factor. It could be a Rory Bremner sketch, the great leader as Jim Royle, putting the world to rights from his favourite Downing Street armchair.

Brown says it's his kids who got him into what is fast becoming a national tradition for Saturday teatime, watching wannabes take a shot at fame on any one of several TV shows. When the children are hooked, "you tend to watch", Brown says. Given their ages, four and not yet two, this sounds a tad suspicious. More likely is the version that says the TV was on after the football and the PM caught it once and then again and again. Whatever the explanation, he's hooked. This being Gordon Brown, though, he didn't just veg out and dumbly soak up the weekly rounds of Any Dream Will Do. Those BBC searches for a new Joseph or Maria got him thinking, convincing him that what has long been a cherished political theme is, in fact, in tune with the spirit of the age.

The theme, one that predates Pop Idol, is that the core objective of progressive politics should be the unlocking of previously untapped talent. Labour's mission should be to enable everyone, no matter their background, to realise their potential. He reckons this is a cause for which the British people have an instinctive sympathy; the success of TV shows committed to discovering buried talent, even in those who come from nowhere, proves it.

There will be some mockery of this, no doubt. It doesn't help that Labour's record on social mobility is woeful. And there's a genuine question as to whether, after 11 years in power and Brown's dreadful autumn, anyone will listen to the government at all. Nevertheless there are good reasons for him to pursue it.

First, this is ground on which he is immediately comfortable. Partly that's because it fits with his biography: Brown has spoken of his anger at the way some of his school contemporaries were cast aside simply because they failed to make the cut early in life. Some of the best passages in Brown's speeches rail against the discarding of countless millions whose misfortune was not to be born into the right family or the right class. In 2005 he urged the Labour conference to

"reflect for a moment on the talent wasted, the loss of what might have been, the great music never composed, the great art never created, the great science never invented, the great books never written".

In his article for the Observer last Sunday, Brown quoted the 18th-century poet Thomas Gray, whose *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* gazes at the tombstones of those whose lives were thwarted, wondering if deep in the ground lies buried a "mute inglorious Milton". This is powerful material for a Labour leader, and Brown has the advantage of actually believing it.

But he goes further, adding to this traditional, moral argument a modern, economic one. Brown warns that unskilled labour is about to become extinct in this country: only half a million such jobs will be needed in the Britain of 2020. Unskilled work, he assumes, will be done by China and others who can do it for a fraction of the cost. Therefore if Britons are to earn a living it will have to be in skilled jobs. In other words, realising the British workforce's potential is not just a matter of being nice to those who are hard done by - it is a matter of economic survival.

This is prime New Labour terrain, the place where social justice - the moral imperative to release people's talent - meets economic efficiency, the need to stay afloat in a fierce, globalised world. Brown will try to cast it in more positive terms than that, suggesting that globalisation offers an opportunity, to Britain at any rate. In the past, there was only a limited amount of room at the top: there could only be so many doctors or lawyers or film-makers. Now that we're in a global economy, the top is much bigger: there's no reason why the entire British population - just 1% of the world's people - could not be in the top tier.

As a theme, potential offers Brown another advantage: it is not abstract. He will make it concrete by using it to explain his approach to education, which is increasingly central to Brown's programme (no wonder he gave the job to his most trusted ally, Ed Balls). Plans to raise the school leaving age to 18, to double the number of apprenticeships and to introduce diplomas, awarding as much status to non-academic learning as is currently attached to A-levels - all those plans will be bound together by the connective tissue of "unlocking potential". These changes to education will be sold as awakening talents that would otherwise lie dormant.

As such, Brown hopes he will draw a sharp dividing line with the Conservatives. So far, and to his great pleasure, the Tories have played along, opposing the changes to education, even calling the increase to 18 a "stunt". That delights Brown, who privately notes that the Tories, in earlier eras, opposed the increase in the school-leaving age from 14 to 15, and from 15 to 16. To his mind, it's the same vested interest at work that in the 19th century allowed children to work up chimneys.

What's more, he can use this theme to make the larger case for government itself. As he told Policy Network last week, this is work that charities or individuals cannot do alone: "It often

takes government to bridge the gap between what people are and what they have it in themselves to be."

These, then, are the advantages of what Downing Street will not be calling the X Factor strategy. But there are risks too. Brown lays himself open to at least two attacks from the left. First, if releasing potential is the goal, what has the Labour government been doing for the last 11 years? If anybody has had their potential released in recent times, it's been the 2 million foreigners who have joined the workforce, their numbers increasing by 75% in six years, while stubborn pools of British unemployment remain. These critics would say globalisation has certainly proved an opportunity for those eastern European newcomers, and for companies hiring them on the cheap - but it hasn't unlocked the talent of many Britons.

Second, if the government is committed to removing the barriers in people's way then surely the most screamingly obvious are poverty and inequality. It's these, above all, that hold people back. And yet here Labour's record is depressing: the gap between rich and poor has widened, thanks to the runaway rich, and today's under-40s are less socially mobile than their parents.

Brown answers by citing Labour's action on child poverty and by insisting that the long-term solution is precisely the care and education for under-fives that, he believes, will give even the poorest child a decent shot at life. Privately he goes further, conceding that there are "old hierarchies" that hold people back and "hidden injuries" that scar those who have for generations lived with diminished aspirations.

But he is reluctant to wade publicly into these choppy waters: he has unhappy memories of the Laura Spence affair, when he took up the case of a talented state-school girl denied a place at Oxford. It's a pity because this is precisely the stuff that could give his theme of "unlocking potential" political bite. After all, for any contest to be really interesting there has to be a genuine clash. Just look at The X Factor.

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