

Don't vilify Russell Brand – he's right to demand the impossible

I'm no fan of the comedian – but I am delighted at the way he has given the political establishment a massive kick up the behind



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The revolution will not be edited. It will not be succinct. It won't be vetted by the usual spin doctors. It won't perform well in front of the self-selected committees of the political and media elite. It will, in fact, be all over the shop.

Russell Brand's revolution has been held up and found wanting both personally and politically. But not by me. As evidenced by the ranks of the professionally sensible putting him back in his place, his ramblings have kickstarted some absolutely necessary conversations. A light entertainer has provoked unease. He has been repeatedly chided for telling people not to bother with voting. He has been described as a proto-fascist, grudgingly labelled "intelligent", though not properly educated, and, of course, derided as a womanising ex-drug addict – a fact he has never tried to hide.

He may indeed be a sexist. Or, as he put it earlier this week in these pages, in his most imitable style, may "suffer from the ol' sexism". And you would have to pay me to sit through one of his shows again; I find his endless see-sawing between braggadocio and yoga-ed up humility exhausting. So I am not what you would call a fan.

Still, I love the way Brand has wrongfooted the media with a teenage essay, a Newsnight performance and a viral YouTube presence. For all its flaws, what he said nicely highlights the narrowness of our present political discourse, the province, as we saw at Leveson, of a nexus of interlocking politicians, media and police. That discourse needs busting open.

It's no surprise that it took a comic to do this. Comedians function as our public intellectuals, wise and witty speakers of truth. Brand may lack the political sophistication of some of his colleagues but he has a wide appeal. My 12-year-old loved what he said. I told her to read his essay. "You don't get it, Mum. He is a talker not a writer." And before you say his essay is an adolescent and flowery "It's so unfair!" rant, let me agree. It doesn't make what he said untrue.

All the retorts amount to defences of parliamentary democracy, a political process that many are clearly alienated from. But Brand's idea is that there are other ways one can be politically involved without voting. He is railing against the democratic deficit in non-parliamentary language. Many of his demands are straight out of Occupy, pointing, for example, to the inequality that Cameron says is declining, and asking for an end to corporate tax avoidance.

What Brand has provoked is a defence of traditional politics: the old "Go and knock on doorsteps! Stuff envelopes! And above all vote!" model. We have been reminded too that not all politicians are venal. Yet those who accuse Brand of naivety are themselves naive about what voting achieves. Did we vote for this level of mass surveillance, for instance?

Brand hits home because politics as it is enacted is dull and conformist. Matthew D'Ancona's new book, *In It Together: The Inside Story of the Coalition* reveals the unappetising "quad" that props up the coalition: Cameron, Osborne, Clegg and Alexander. Remember Boris Johnson is alleged to have said that this government is "a triumph for the public-school system".

This system is so dead and closed that there feels little choice. Like Brand, I have often not voted. But at the last election I decided to stand as an independent. I was sick of Labour's war-mongering, I couldn't vote for them, but I wasn't sick enough to vote Lib Dem. I made this gesture because I figured democracy works on the grounds that anyone who has £500 for a deposit can stand. This is the illusion. If you test it, you will be called an idiot, a narcissist, an anarchist. Guilty, m'lud. But you soon learn no one wins without party machinery and party money.

In reality, people are falling away from political parties. Brand's idealism is in part a response to this. If such idealism is a joke, that is very sad. Brand was roundly mocked by the pundits for his talk of consciousness, but the pundits revealed only their own narrow-mindedness. As if there is not a tradition of this! Rosa Luxemburg talked of "spiritual transformation". A feminist revolution has always been understood as an individual as well as a collective awakening.

Brand is sneered at for not being humble enough, an inflated fool who should vote for socialism if he desires it. Well, no. He is right on many counts and while we are far from revolution we have a younger generation with high expectations and no means to meet them. Those in power would do well to be less smug and self-satisfied. The strength of Brand's message lies precisely in the reaction against it. Rarely have I seen such a spirited defence of the status quo. Brand's demands, like everything about him, are excessive. But should he just get back in his comedy box and leave politics to that class of people that are educated beyond their intelligence?

They say he has made the mistake of demanding the impossible – and they are right. He has demanded the impossible. But it wasn't a mistake.