

**SEPTEMBER 2009**

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**CELEBRITY  
POLITICS**

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**DEBATING MATTERS  
TOPIC  
GUIDES**

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**MOTION:**

**“CELEBRITIES  
SHOULD KEEP OUT  
OF POLITICS”**

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## KEY TERMS

Celebritisation

Celebrity politics

Single-issue politics

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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Today politicians want to be celebrities and celebrities want to be politicians. On one hand, politicians associate themselves with celebrities and cultivate celebrity status, in a recent Radio 1 interview David Cameron declared his love for Girls Aloud, only to be told by band member Cheryl Cole that he should “get on with running the country” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. On the other hand, celebrities now play a key role in setting the political agenda. It is claimed that without Mia Farrow’s hunger strike, we would not be having the serious political discussions about Darfur that came subsequent to her protest [Ref: [Rave](#)]. Celebrities act as UN Goodwill Ambassadors, give high-profile support to NGOs like Amnesty and Greenpeace, and talk show hosts like Oprah Winfrey launch large scale campaigns to encourage young people to vote [Ref: [TIME](#)]. Indeed, Arnold Schwarzenegger even went from Hollywood to the post of Governor of California.

Of course, actors and musicians becoming involved in politics is nothing new. In the 60s, the Beatles and Bob Dylan provided the soundtrack for a new generation and protest songs were integral to the US Civil Rights movement. But celebrities have moved from the counter-culture to the mainstream and today politicians and pop stars often share the same stage, lending each other credibility. Does the involvement of celebrities improve or damage the quality of political debate? On becoming Prime Minister, Brown declared an end to celebrity politics [Ref: [Ekklesia](#)], but his opponents accuse him of being “as obsessed with celebrity” as his predecessor. [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. While some lament ‘celebritisation’ or ‘celebrity politics’, seeing it as putting single-issues before party programmes and elevating personality above policy, others argue that celebrities inspire young people to engage in new forms of political action and draw attention to issues that are ignored by the traditional political system.



## Can celebrities bring about real change?

When celebrities endorse a political cause, some argue it is more about cynical marketing than genuine political change, but celebrities can be important political players. After Joanna Lumley's campaigning on behalf of the Gurkhas, the government reluctantly granted the Nepalese soldiers the right to settle in the UK [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. From TV psychologist Tanya Byron to Jamie Oliver to Bob Geldolf, celebrities regularly use their prestige as a platform for furthering a political cause, and in many cases it seems to work. Some say celebrity support is important and, in the case of the large scale campaigns such as Comic Relief, can have a real impact on the world [Ref: [Comic Relief](#)]. Others disagree, saying that celebrity fronted events such as Red Nose Day actually diminish people's understanding of complex political issues like as poverty. [Ref: [Telegraph](#)].

## Do celebrities speak for the people?

Whereas politicians stand on the basis of a political programme and are elected to represent their constituents, celebrities are not directly answerable to the electorate and there is no formal process to hold them accountable. Some critics of celebrity politics suggest that the 'Jamie Oliver phenomenon' implies that some issues are 'above politics' and allow politicians to hide behind celebrities rather than take responsibility [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Others reply that it took the involvement of a celebrity to get something done about a problem that should have been addressed years ago. The focus of public debate, they argue, has moved away from Parliament, which, as David Cameron readily recognises, has succumbed to 'Punch and Judy politics'. [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. In what has been described as a widespread

crisis of trust following the MPs expenses scandal, some have also argued that a well-meaning celebrity can be better trusted than the self-interested MP. Former 'That's life' presenter, Esther Rantzen; BBC Watchdog presenter, Lynn Faulds Wood and former BBC journalist, Martin Bell have all suggested that they would be prepared to join the political fray. [Ref: [Reuters blog](#)]. Have politicians become out of touch and irrelevant and do they address the issues people care about?

## Can celebrities re-engage young people in politics?

There is widespread concern about political apathy amongst young people. Some argue that young people are interested in political issues but are turned off by politicians, and that celebrities, like former model and presenter Tyra Banks, can encourage them to re-engage with politics. With Banks having photo shoots on her popular TV show, 'America's Next Top Model', about political issues such as terrorism and bureaucracy, [Ref: [Buzz](#)] the debate rages as to whether initiatives like this over-simplify and 'dumb-down' important political issues [Ref: [Shakopee Valley News](#)] for young people or whether it's a clever and imaginative way to recapture youth interest in politics [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Further, initiatives like Rock the Vote mean that celebrity politics is even more developed, and capturing the youth vote through celebrity appeals was a big part of the 2008 Presidential campaign, with celebrities like Christina Aguilera and Madonna lending their support [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. Can celebrities convert their appeal into positive political action, or is it patronising to young people to assume that they're only interested in single issues and will only be interested in political issues if they're sold through celebrity marketing?



## ESSENTIAL READING

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NOTES

Why the lovely Joanna Lumley is not the answer to Britain's political crisis

John McMillian *The Scotsman* 23 May 2009

Should celebrities decide what's a good cause?

Tim Weber *BBC News* 27 January 2006

### For

Celebrity: How entertainers took over the world and why we need an exit strategy

Marina Hyde *The Times* 5 April 2009

If you think Politicians are mad, wait until celebrities are running the country

Hugo Rifkind *The Spectator* 27 May 2009

Some young voters annoyed by celebrity political endorsements

Ramon Galiana *The Miami Hurricane* 24 September 2009

Jamie Oliver's recipe for an unappetising election

Mick Hume *spiked* 23 March 2005

### Against

I'm a celebrity... get me in there!

Esther Rantzen *The Times* 21 May 2009

Angelina Jolie and Darfur

Nicolas Kristol *The New York Times* 20 October 2008

Celebrities fill the void of confidence in British politics

Nick Vinocur *Reuters UK* 22 May 2009

Africa's flash moment Madeleine Bunting

*Guardian* 20 June 2005

### Further reading:

Arnold Schwarzenegger and Celebrity Politics

How to study Africa: from victimhood to agency

John Lonsdale *openDemocracy*

Celebrity, media and history

Jessica Evans

When pop stars get political

*Ollie Stone-Lee BBC News* 01 June 2005



## BACKGROUNDEERS

Teenage girls want celebrity minister for young people to spark interest in politics

Martin Beckford *Telegraph* 30 November 2008

Food is the new fur for the celebrity with a conscience

Jay Rayner *The Guardian* 14 June 2009

He comments on Boyle and Goody but not a major national issue

Anne Mc Elvoy *This Is London* 24 August 2009

Girls Aloud: Get lost Cameron

Sophie Headwood *New Statesman* 18 December 2006

Do Celebrities have a place in politics?

*Guardian* 07 August 2006

Celebrity advocacy for the new millennium: meeting of

Messengers of Peace and Goodwill Ambassadors

*UN Conference* 18–19 June 2002

Jamie Oliver and the politics of an overpaid cook

*openDemocracy* 08 April 2005

Bono fide: it takes an outsider to speak the language of the new world-trade order

Hamish McRae *Independent on Sunday* 29 January 2006

The constant charmer

Josh Tyrangiel *Time Magazine* 19 December 2005

Where Brad Pitt meets George W Bush

Jody Pollock *Silver Chips Online* 13 April 2005

What do pop stars know about the world?

Brendan O'Neill *BBC News* 28 June 2005

Rocky political horror show

Libby Purves *The Times* 05 July 2005

Better red than...

Larry Elliott *Guardian* 26 January 2006

They owe it all to their fans

Oscar Reyes *Red Pepper* July 2005

## ORGANISATIONS

DATA

Feed me better

Live 8

Rock the vote

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## IN THE NEWS

Esther Rantzen to take on MP who claimed £22,500 to treat dry rot at her partner's home

*Daily Mail* 18 May 2009

Sir Alan Sugar takes House of Lords seat and becomes Baron Sugar of Clapton

*Telegraph* 20 July 2009

Bruno Movie Exposes Celebrity PR Charity

*Ecorazzi* 09 July 2009

Musicians and the US Presidential Race

*MSN News*

Ten days into Mia Farrow's Darfur hunger strike

*Guardian* 06 May 2009

Celebrities join the trident battle

*BBC News* 14 March 2009

Bono bets on Red to battle Aids

*BBC News* 27 January 2006

Galloway loses respect of his young voters

*Life Style Extra* 25 January 2006

Jamie Oliver is 'most influential celebrity'

*The Scotsman* 04 January 2006

Trade and aid: stars are aligned

*Washington Post* 21 November 2005

Coldplay frontman Chris Martin has snubbed British prime minister

*Monster and Critics.com* 14 August 2005

Celebrities' messages for world leaders

*The Scotsman* 07 July 2005

Stars fighting poverty spark controversy

*BBC News* 26 June 2005

Jamie Oliver can show Tories the way, says Lansley

*Independent* 22 June 2005

Naked victory for an apolitical activist

*Guardian* 31 March 2005

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NOTES



## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS  
THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

