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Scared or just pusillanimous? Labour, the Liberal Democrats and 42 days

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Rosemary Bechler (London, [openDemocracy \[0\]](#)): responds to [Anthony Barnett's coverage \[0\]](#) of the campaign against 42 days:

Thanks for the cogent reading of this important moment in the decline of the Westminster hall of mirrors. Doesn't one need to include in a third episode in this drama? – the refusal of the two main political parties challenged in this bye-election to participate in debating the issues. For all the commenting and blogging, as in the case of the Iraq war and an ever-lengthening list of crucial decisions for the UK, we still have not been told why 42 days is deemed to be necessary to our national interest. All the talk simply obscures this ominous silence.

In the case of Labour – we are left to choose between two unsavoury options. Firstly, our Prime Minister has pinned his fluctuating reputation to this mast, and will stick to it through thick and thin, regardless of the absence of merits and glaring demerits of the case. Stubborn politicking at its most parochial. Or, Britain is under some urgent pressure either from within or from without to turn itself into a war-time polity, and this is just an early instance of many further draconian measures we can expect – moreover we are being told that anyone who seeks an explanation will simply have to do without one for the foreseeable future (this may be an endless war after all). This second explanation is at the opposite end of explanations. It is not personal. Nothing could be more germane to our democratic rights, responsibilities, freedoms and possibly our peace.

In either case, to refuse to debate these issues in the H&H bye-election is evidence of the deepest disregard for the British people, and further confirmation, were any needed, that we are trapped at the end of a very long tradition of Machiavellian management with no sight of breaking through into the era of adult democratic governance that we so badly need. The Liberal Democrats, I'm afraid to say, come off no better in this testing and revealing test case. Of course it is terribly embarrassing for a political party to agree with someone in a rival political party on a very substantial matter! Party politics is not at all designed for such a regrettable eventuality. Anyway, I'm told that many leading Lib Dems have expended such efforts in fighting David Davis on all sorts of other counts that they could never bring themselves to put their democracy above their historical animosities (however important in other circumstances). Whatever the reason, in refusing to help David Davis take this key debate to this part of the country, and hopefully to the country beyond, they too have chosen to place party politics over the needs of our democracy.

And that is surely the essence of David Davis' case – that our democracy is being silently and without significant comment stifled to death. As for the British people, the political system and its vast commentariat machinery devoutly hopes that we won't trouble our little heads about any of it.'

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