

EVERY DAY CAN BE ED BALLS DAY IN UK POLITICS FANDOM

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Just over a week ago, Ed Balls followed me on Twitter and I **screenshotted the moment**, giddy as a kipper. We had spoken earlier about the humanisation of politicians. On the same day, I was also followed by the MP for Norwich South, Clive Lewis. He expressed a desire to **get in on the GIF action** (I make animated GIFs of UK politicians). Later that day, I taught Clive **how to thread his tweets**. I'd been trying to get Ed Balls in particular to follow me for a while, but it's hard to get noticed by the former Education Minister and Shadow Chancellor. He's always had strong Twitter game, long before **Ed Balls Day** was enshrined in **internet legend** and long before his **Strictly salsa** to Gangnam Style. Had I become a **Big Name Fan (BNF)** in politics fandom at last?

In my circle of UK politics fans on Twitter, the "two Eds" are our kings – Balls and Miliband. You may be aware of the following of Ed Miliband (or **Milibae**), who has his own alternate timeline as Prime Minister in the **Miliverse**. Ed's popularity rose as he successfully stood for leadership of the Labour party in 2010, culminating in the run-up to the 2015 General Election when teenager **Abby Tomlinson** was credited with founding the **#milifandom**. As with many other fandoms, such as **One Direction**, Milifans experienced **heavily gendered** and ageist **abuse**. Following his resignation as leader and return to the backbenches, Miliband has become better known by fans of all ages as **Sassy Ed**, as he has discovered his more human side. Although **distance** has characterised their relationship **since the 2015 election campaign**, the **bromance between the young Eds** who grew up in Gordon Brown's team remains irresistible and fandom still loves them both. There are parallels between 2010 and 2017 politics fandom, especially on Twitter, and that is what I will explore during the rest of this piece, which takes an autoethnographic slant.

Nature may abhor a vacuum, but fandom thrives. The liminal spaces where nothing is settled, and therefore fans can develop their 'canon', can result in intense bouts of creativity and innovation – such as Doctor Who's **'Wilderness Years'**. While the gap between Presidential election and inauguration gives fans in the US space to create fanworks before the reality of the new regime set in, such as the flurry of **Obama/Biden** GIFs and memes after Trump's election, British elections do not usually allow for such pause. Creativity can usually be observed during an official campaigning period, such as 2017's classic **cans4corbyn** site, but it is usually tied to a partisan cause and quickly fizzles out.

The UK General Elections of 2010 and 2017 both resulted in hung Parliaments, with no single party achieving a majority of seats. While I have been involved in other fandoms since my teens and stayed up on Election Night for many years, 2010 saw me joining the UK politics fandom community in earnest. Politics fandom combines activism, current affairs and intelligent humour with the more usual aspects of fandom. My favoured platform was Twitter, where livetweeting

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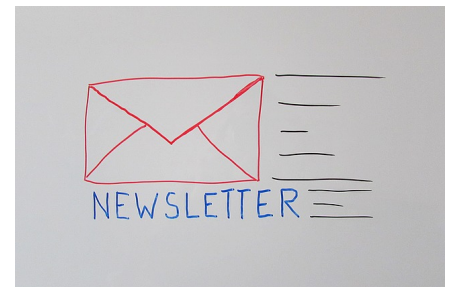


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MOST POPULAR POSTS OF THE DAY

David Dimbleby seemed to be up and on television for days in summer 2010, and so were we. Second-screening was second nature for many of us, honed on years of reality television and **Eurovision fandom**, and my “mutuals” were mostly women and LGBTQI people of all classes, cutting across the usual hierarchies of political commentary. The smaller and friendlier Twitter audience at the time meant I picked up new followers without much in the way of trolling, including political journalists and television producers. I enjoyed debating with others as we avidly consumed rolling news, Newsnight and Question Time, and was able to use the official hashtags to develop my community of interest rather than to signal to my followers to mute the tag or invite harassment from strangers as is the case now.

The state of uncertainty and enjoyable fandom continued into 2012, with a Labour leadership contest and hustings all over my city until September 2010, followed by the first Ed Balls Day, the 2011 summer of the Leveson inquiry and then into 2012 with my friend **Nat Guest’s** competitive Dimble-dancing at her monthly **Question Time watch-along event**. I began to lurk on Tumblr for reasons other than marvelling at Doctor Who GIFs – the **fans there** were **different** from my crew, and I mostly avoided the fanfiction community of uk-lolitics, then based mostly on **Livejournal** – but I considered them all my brethren.

Eventually, the community began to splinter. The Lib Dems did a little to temper the pain of a Tory government, but our hopes for them and our Labour shadow cabinet didn’t come to much. Austerity was biting hard, and BBC TV and radio shows took to putting Nigel Farage on television too often for my liking. The Question Time line-up announcements, once a source of joy, became the TV equivalent of horrible clickbait as increased participation changed the character of the tweets and it was clear the brand had **reasserted its authority over the fans**. By 2013, it was all but over for me, with just the Eds keeping my interest, and a small flurry of hope in 2015 that was partially-crushed by a terrible General Election result for Labour: Ed Balls losing his seat as an MP and Miliband’s resignation. The first **summer of Jeremy Corbyn** was fun in some ways, but the centrist wing of the party briefed against the left wing and vice versa, and the progressive unity of all parts of Labour, Lib Dem and Green friends fell apart in bickering and worse.

After a failed anti-Corbyn coup, where I had friends on both sides of the debate and neither, Jeremy was re-elected as Labour leader and the Brexit referendum came along. That result made me miserable. I could barely commiserate with politics fandom friends as I was consumed by stress and PhD work. By the autumn, I had a date for the major surgery I’d been waiting years to receive, and then **Ed Balls was the first guest announced** for the 2016 series of Strictly Come Dancing. I watched avidly, and began to GIF the show (turning short video clips into looping animations). Ed Balls as light entertainment figure and ballroom dancer was more relaxed than he had ever been as a politician, more human, with signs of an intriguing hinterland and wicked sense of humour that had only ever been hinted at before.

As I prepared for and then recovered from surgery, being an Ed Balls superfan was one of the few things that stopped me from being utterly despondent. I wasn’t capable of doing much and felt appalling, but I could make widely shared GIFs and parody song lyrics. I could cheer other people through another winter of austerity, the spectre of Brexit and the anxiety caused by a Tory government led by the robotic Theresa May. I used a photo of young Ed Balls as my Twitter avatar, as my real face was bruised and swollen. People on Twitter tried to get Ed to say hello, but it never cut through.

Then came a snap 2017 General Election. The campaigns started out nastily and the polls looked hopeless. The Conservatives were going to win a giant majority. I was walking down the street with a friend, Boar Lane in Leeds, and saw a red Labour battle bus pull up to the kerb. Jeremy Corbyn emerged. The politics fan in me bubbled up like shaken pop and I ran across the road for a selfie. He looks full of joy and laughter in the photograph. So do I. The polls began to change. The party began to unite around Corbyn and my progressive fandom friends began to unite in hope that we would do OK. Terror attacks seemed to draw us together rather than divide us, and the polls started to rise for Labour.

On Election Night, the exit poll dropped at 10pm. The Conservatives would be the biggest party, but without a majority. I stayed up all night, despite having planned to catch a couple of hours rest after polls closed, and suddenly it was like the old gang were back together – shouting at Amber Rudd over her seemingly endless recounts, watching Nick Clegg lose his seat, giggling at **Lord Buckethead’s antics** and **Clive Lewis’** victory dance. We punched the air as Labour took Canterbury and Kensington. 2010 met 2017 – a space where anything could happen and people other than older white people in traditional media could be heard. Young people had voted, as we hoped they would – but they hadn’t been believed. People of colour had voted. Diane Abbott got a massive majority, despite the **misogynoir** attacks of recent weeks. It felt like a win, even

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In the days that followed, Theresa May tried to pull together a controversial agreement with the DUP, but her impersonal leadership was found wanting in the face of terror attacks and the Grenfell Tower disaster – nobody has a selfie with Theresa. The Eds made sensitive comments online and mocked themselves on The Last Leg, Jeremy Corbyn showed compassionate leadership and was out there hugging the vulnerable, **David Lammy's humanity** on Channel 4 could not be more visible and was shared everywhere – and the fans swarmed into the liminal space between governments. Just as we had in 2010. Next time a progressive coalition might win – with the fans behind them.

Penny Andrews is currently a doctoral candidate in the Information School at the University of Sheffield. Her research explores research sharing infrastructures, digital labour and social media.

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