

Politicians acting in concert

Have you ever wondered what the great and the good talk about at their trendy dinner parties?

What topics of conversation engage the movers and shakers who dine at expensive homes in exclusive English enclaves while waiting for an appetiser?

At one such recent event the guests were made to sing for their supper and asked to discuss this compelling topic, as the servants swivelled and swirled and the soufflé simmered. Rather than an edible little palate seducer, the hosts wanted cerebral fodder.

Who's more influential, asked the extremely rich businessman: Tony Blair or Mick Jagger?

My mole, a high-ranking government official, nearly choked on his Chablis. "Entertainment," he sputtered afterwards, "is almost unable to contain his contempt. As if ..."

While a bit like comparing apples and oranges, it's a halfway interesting question as it shows how the lines between popular politics and popular culture intersect, something that has become much more important over the past couple of decades.

Let's see how the odds stack up. Mick Jagger has never invaded a country; Tony

Blair recently attacked Iraq. Fighting a war is influential, as is having the most powerful man in the world in your camp. Mick Jagger has somehow maintained iconic status for almost five decades. Neck and neck in the polls.

Mick's also helped produce (relatively) attractive daughters, and had two attractive wives. Blair's wife, Cherie, on a speaking tour of Australasia, proved she has a rosy sense of geography. She thought she was in Australia when she was in New Zealand. It's a mistake anyone could make. Bianca Jagger, however, knows where Nicaragua is. Mick's ahead on this one.

Tony Blair's not even a good rock guitarist, as his Oxford band, Ugly Rumours, would attest. Perhaps if he had renamed it New Labour and come out with titles such as *Twenty Promises for Every Citizen* and *New Deal for Hoi Polloi*, or even *Committee Stage of the Devolution for Northern Ireland Bill (Lords)*, the Rolling Stones would only be a brief footnote in the annals of musical history.

If Blair wins a third Labour victory, which seems likely, it will be another one for the history books. He has just become the longest-serving Labour prime minister, overtaking Harold Wilson as he notched up

his 2 838th day in office. Lord Liverpool, Winston Churchill, Herbert Asquith and Margaret Thatcher spent longer in the job.

It's not really a serious question, hence the inability of my politician friend to digest his ox-tongue with ease. How characteristic, though, of the pretentious load of codswallop that passes for serious thought.

People such as Mick Jagger, Bono and Bob Geldof unquestionably have influence of sorts. In a move reminiscent of Princess Diana's courting of pop stars such as Elton John, Blair – more than any modern British politician – has created an overlap zone, where politicians and pop music meet.

Rock stars such as Bono influence those people who make decisions, politicians who are in the driving seat. He was always vocal about debt relief in Africa, but was pushing a door that was already open. He helped to create an atmosphere in which both Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown could get other governments to take the topic seriously.

Music crosses borders. While Bono, for example, can't make things happen, he has helped to change the atmosphere in which it is possible to move things along. Pop



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music has helped politicians feel more secure in making the changes they wish to implement.

Music stars, especially the current crop, get younger people to think about the world, and this then influences politicians, the UN, the World Bank.

Bob Geldof, with his hugely appealing and important Live Aid concert – which is about to celebrate its 20th anniversary – was not the first. Music legends such as Bob Dylan, and folk singers of his ilk, were political. The difference was that they did not court politicians, they spurned them.

Now ordinary people, pop stars and politicians are connecting with the process, not opposing it. Bob Dylan was seen as anti-political; Bono schmoozes with the best of them. At the last general election in 2001, Labour's theme song was "Things can only get better". This time round, they might take a song from Mick's book and use: "You can't always get what you want."