

## Joke Candidates: Humour in the British and Japanese Elections of 2017

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# Joke Candidates: Humour in the British and Japanese Elections of 2017

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In 2017 both Britain and Japan called snap elections, both of which were won by the Prime Minister who had called them. While there are obviously some differences, there are also some similarities between the two political systems. One of these differences appears to be in the use of humour during election campaigns, namely the manner in which some seats in British elections are contested by joke candidates in addition to serious ones, whereas this practice appears to be less common in Japan. As such, this paper looks at the candidates that contested the seats of Theresa May and Abe Shinzo, the Prime Ministers, in the 2017 elections, with particular focus on those that can be regarded as being joke candidates. While those competing for Shinzo Abe's seat tended to be serious candidates, a number of those contesting Theresa May's seat did so under the guise of costumes and assumed names.

Key words: humour, Britain, Japan, politics

## 1 Introduction

Humour can be considered to be both universal across all of humanity while also being culturally sensitive as different cultures have different concepts of what makes something funny or not. This is not a purely cultural or linguistic boundary, but one that also exists within subgroups of society as well as individuals having their own personal opinions. As such it can be a rich topic for considering, as what is funny for one group of people can be considered to be either not funny or inappropriate to another group. Humour can also be put to use in different ways but different people, which can provide hints as to the manner in which those groups of society or cultures as a whole utilise and interact with concepts of humour.

Both Japan and Britain have humour and make use of humour, though this does not necessitate that they do so in identical ways. During the elections of 2017 in both Britain and Japan, it came to my attention that one way in which Japanese and British attitudes to the acceptable spheres of humour and its potential function could be considered to be different with regards to the fielding of joke candidates that occurs in Britain but does not appear to be as common in Japan.

As such, this article focuses on a comparison of one aspect in which humour is used, rather than a comprehensive study regarding either the differences of the two political systems or the full manner in which concepts of humour differ between the two countries. Rather than focusing on the jokes themselves and what it is that makes them funny to their target audience, the focus is on the manner in which some candidates are themselves jokes that can be considered to be using humour as a political weapon or tool in Britain, whereas this appears to be a less common method in Japan.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Political Structures

Given the structural similarities that exist between the Japanese political system and the British political system, in part due to the Japanese system being based on the British one, they are in many ways ideal for comparison. This is because while they are similar there are obviously still differences, which can be considered to come about due to cultural or linguistic differences rather than through an issue of the structure of the political system.

One such difference can be taken to be the manner in which Britain regularly fields joke

candidates for seats in general elections, something which can be considered to be less common in Japan. These candidates may be independent ones, standing for example against the Prime Minister, or a part of a joke political party fielding multiple candidates. This attitude would appear to be less prominent in the Japanese consciousness, with candidates generally considered to be serious politicians, both as party members and as independents. While Britain does appear to have a greater cultural history connected towards using humour in election campaigns and as a form of political protest, Japanese candidates do also deviate from what could be considered to be the standard norms of serious political posters and candidacy on occasion. However, these deviations still appear to be primarily performed by those who are genuinely serious politicians connected to bona fide political parties rather than those providing a humorous alternative for a protest vote as is more common in Britain.

According to the British Parliament's homepage, Parliament is effectively split into two parts, the House of Commons and House of Lords. Peers become members of the House of Lords with their peerage. Members of Parliament are elected to the House of Commons in general elections. Elections can be called at any time, but the longest terms of Parliament permitted is five years. Elections are decided by the first-past-the-post system, where the party to reach a majority is able to form a government. There are 650 seats available in the House of Commons, so in theory a majority of 326 out of 650 is required. However, the Speaker and their three deputies do not vote, and for political reasons Sinn Féin MPs refuse to take their seats, which reduces the actual number required for a majority. Each seat is for a particular constituency, where the voters in that constituency are able to vote for the representatives of whatever parties chose to stand, as well as any independent candidates. Whoever wins the most votes in a constituency is deemed to have won that seat, and the tallies of how many seats each party has won contributes to the overall makeup of Parliament.

If the largest party has reached a majority then they are able to form a government, with the second largest party generally being considered to

be the Opposition. As of the 2017 British election, the largest party in terms of seats won was the Conservative Party, though without the required numbers to reach an actual majority, having only 318 seats (Syal and Travis, 2017). In such cases, coalitions are required to form a working majority. The second largest party in the House of Commons is Labour. As such the current leader of the Conservative Party (Theresa May) is Prime Minister.

According to the Japanese Diet homepage, since 1947 both the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors of the Japanese National Diet are elected by the general population. The House of Representatives has 465 members and the House of Councillors 242 members, giving a total of 707. Of the 465 members of the House of Representatives, 176 are elected through the means of a proportional representation system and the remaining 289 are elected from constituencies for a single seat. The 242 members of the House of Councillors likewise consist of 96 elected using the system of proportional representation and 146 from prefectural constituency seats. They serve for different lengths of time, with members of the House of Representatives being elected every 4 years and members of the House of Councillors every 6 years, though this is arranged so that every three years half of the House of Councillors is up for election.

The combination of proportional representation in addition to single seat constituencies is different from the British model, which is not proportional but rather entirely based on individual constituencies. As such, in Britain there is a chance that the outcome of an election or the number of seats each party achieves is not actually proportional to the votes that were cast.

## 2.2 Humour

Historically it appears to be the case that humour in both Japan and Britain was regarded to an extent as something that is somewhat vulgar (Wells, 1997:31; Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017:7). In Britain, this was connected to the early philosophising that existed in Greek Antiquity, where humour and laughter ended up at least initially considered to be something containing a degree of malice that therefore made it potentially dangerous (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017:5). During the

Protestant Reforms, attitudes to laughter became even more negative, with the genre of comedy being associated with immorality and sin (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017:7).

Likewise, the issue of vulgarity was one that lingered in the concepts of Japanese ideas of humour from the associations of humour being unrefined in comparison with the more refined varieties of the arts (Wells, 1997:31) to the issue of when foreigners visited Japan during the Meiji Reformation there was a degree of reluctance to introduce them to kabuki when they requested to see Japanese theatre, as the Japanese were embarrassed by what they regarded as its obscenity (Wells, 1997:43).

Hay (2000) has analysed the use of humour within friendship groups in New Zealand, exploring the function of humour as being related to that of solidarity and power as well as psychological reasons such as coping or defence, focusing on the differences between men and women. Humour can be used to create a sense of solidarity within a group, by drawing on shared experiences and similarities between the participants in the conversation (Hay, 2000:719). It can also serve to help maintain boundaries of groups, and also encompasses teasing. Power is also a function of humour, where it is used to create conflict, control others, tease and enforce boundaries (Hay, 2000:721). While this may be less common in friendly conversations, it could potentially be more commonly used when in more confrontational situations where those involved are of opposing ideologies, such as the political arena where it can become a weapon of sorts to show a form of protest or dissatisfaction.

It also ranges from the verbal to the physical, being multimodal in its usage and sensitive to the cultural sensibilities of the audience, relying on a mutual understanding of both the producer of humour and the audience to find something to be funny. As such it can be considered to be something that could vary in its use across cultures due to differences in perceptions of appropriateness.

### 3 Joke Candidates in the 2017 Elections

In 2017, both Britain and Japan had snap elections. In both cases, the incumbent Prime Minister remained

the Prime Minister after the election. In the case of the Japanese election, the LDP increased their vote share (BBC), whereas in the British election the Conservative Party lost their previous majority though still had enough seats in Parliament to remain the governing party (NHK). As such, it is the candidates standing for election against the respective Prime Ministers who are considered below. While a large number of the candidates are those who are seriously trying to win the seats, there are also those who appear to be considerably less serious, though this would appear to be a method used primarily by the British in comparison with the Japanese. The reason for focusing on the Prime Ministers was because they are most likely to garner media attention and therefore it can be considered that they would be more likely targets for anyone choosing to use the process of standing for election as a means of what might be considered a humorous form of political protest. As such, these candidates can be considered to be joke candidates as their entire platform is intended to be ridiculous, which can be done through the use of names and costumes as well as their political manifestos.

#### 3.1 Britain

During the British election of 2017, twelve candidates stood against the incumbent Prime Minister, Theresa May, in her constituency of Maidenhead (BBC, 2017). These candidates included those standing as representatives of the major political parties of England, those standing as representatives of lesser known parties and those standing as independents. Within these categories, there were those who presented themselves and their candidacy seriously as well as those who presented their candidacy as a form of joke.

Theresa May won, with 64.8% of the vote, from a 76.4% turnout, with the runner-up (Pat McDonald of Labour) receiving a 19.3% share of the vote as shown in Table 1 (BBC, 2017). In amongst this list, as well as the serious politicians affiliated with prominent and well-established political parties, there are also those that are considerably less serious.

**Table 1: Maidenhead results, 2017 (BBC, 2017)**

| Party                      | Candidate           | Votes  | Vote Share |
|----------------------------|---------------------|--------|------------|
| Conservative               | Theresa May         | 37,718 | 64.8       |
| Labour                     | Pat McDonald        | 11,261 | 19.3       |
| Liberal Democrat           | Tony Hill           | 6,540  | 11.2       |
| Green Party                | Derek Wall          | 907    | 1.6        |
| UKIP                       | Gerard Batten       | 871    | 1.5        |
| Animal Welfare Party       | Andrew Knight       | 282    | 0.5        |
| Independent                | Lord Buckethead     | 249    | 0.4        |
| Independent                | Grant Smith         | 152    | 0.3        |
| Monster Raving Loony Party | Howling 'Laud' Hope | 119    | 0.2        |
| Christian Peoples Alliance | Edmonds Victor      | 69     | 0.1        |
| The Just Political Party   | Julian Reid         | 52     | 0.1        |
| Independent                | Yemi Hailemariam    | 16     | 0.0        |
| Independent                | Bobby Smith         | 3      | 0.0        |

### 3.1.1 Lord Buckethead

The most successful of the candidates whose candidacies could be judged to be jokes was Lord Buckethead, whose website has the following self-introduction:

I am a space lord, and I stood to be the independent Member of Parliament for Maidenhead at the 2017 UK General Election. I secured 249 votes, which I am proud to say is a new Buckethead record. I enjoy planet-conquering, dominating inferior species, and Lovejoy. My manifesto (below) is an ambitious and progressive programme not only for the good Earthlings of a certain Berkshire conurbation but for the entirety of your nation. It is a suite of policies that have been fully costed and which marries fiscal responsibility with an interest in lasers.

( "Buckethead4Maidenhead" )

This manages to blend the common tone found across political self-introductions with ridiculous additions that can be assumed to be untrue and rather intended as

jokes. This would include the claim of being a space lord as well as the list of hobbies, such as enjoying planet-conquering. The final sentence of this paragraph begins in the manner that might be considered to be normal for a manifesto claim, by referencing the fiscal responsibilities that governments might have to consider when drawing up policies, but ends it rather with a reference to lasers, which helps to reinforce the imagery of some form of invading alien

The manifesto that then follows this continues with this theme, referencing a combination of policies discussed commonly amongst more traditional political parties and politicians as well as the mass media so that they could be considered to be recognisable to the general public. However, these references also tend to be mixed with comments that reference either the character of Lord Buckethead himself or some other element which renders it to be something that would not be considered an actual policy proposal. This can be considered to be evidenced from the start, where the slogan is presented as "strong, not entirely stable, leadership" ("Buckethead4Maidenhead"), which can be considered to be a reference to the Theresa May's Conservative Party's slogan, which stressed the need for "strong and stable leadership" ("Conservative Party", 2017).

MY 2017 MANIFESTO: Strong, not entirely stable, leadership

1. *The abolition of the Lords* (except me) .
2. *Full facial coverings to be kept legal*, especially bucket-related headgear.
3. *No third runway to be built at Heathrow*: where we're going we don't need runways.
4. *Ceefax to be brought back immediately*, with The Oracle and other Teletext services to be rolled out by the next Parliament.
5. *Regeneration of Nicholson's Shopping Centre, Maidenhead*.
6. *Buckethead on Brexit*: a referendum should be held about whether there should be a second referendum.
7. *Nuclear weapons*: A firm public commitment to build the £100bn renewal of the Trident weapons system, followed by an equally firm private commitment not to build it. They're

secret submarines, no one will ever know. It's a win win.

8. *Nationalisation of Adele*: in order to maximise the efficient use of UK resources, the time is right for great British assets to be brought into public ownership for the common good. This is to be achieved through capital spending.

9. *A moratorium until 2022* on whether Birmingham should be converted into a star base.

10. *Legalisation* of the hunting of fox-hunters.

11. *New voting age limit* of 16 to be introduced. New voting age limit of 80 to be introduced too.

12. *Katie Hopkins* to be banished to the Phantom Zone.

13. *Stop selling arms* to Saudi Arabia. Start buying lasers from Lord Buckethead.

14. *Prospective MPs* to live in the seat they wish to represent for at least five years before election, to improve local representation in Parliament.

15. *Free bikes for everyone*, to help combat obesity, traffic congestion and bike theft.

( "Buckethead4Maidenhead" )

In addition to the presentation of a manifesto that is not necessarily one that could be considered to be a realistic attempt at laying out a serious model for governance but rather a mocking or humorous version, Lord Buckethead also attended both the hustings ("Buckethead4Maidenhead") and the reading of the votes in full costume, which as might be suggested by the name involved him having a bucket on his head.

This is not the first time that someone using the name and costume of Lord Buckethead has stood against a Prime Minister, as a Lord Buckethead stood against both Margaret Thatcher in 1987 and John Major in 1992 (Saunders, 2017) .

### 3.1.2 Howling 'Laud' Hope of the Monster Raving Loony Party

Another candidate that stood against Theresa May was Howling 'Laud' Hope, the leader of the Official Monster Raving Loony Party. As the name might suggest, while it is an officially registered political party, it is not generally regarded as a serious one and as such does not field candidates with manifestos

that could actually be expected to win any seats. In a similar way to the manifesto of Lord Buckethead, the Monster Raving Loony Party also fielded a manifesto that combined the usual style of political manifestos with suggestions that appeal to the sense of the ridiculous. This includes referring to the manifesto as "manicfesto" ("The Official Monster Raving Loony Party") , which combines the word 'manic' into the word 'manifesto' to add a hint of insanity, which could be considered to be a part of their party image.

#### 2017 General Election Manifesto

We will stand on a platform of free woollen hats for all, so we can pull the wool over peoples eyes.

#### Taxation

Tax payers to receive Nectar Points from HMRC

#### Nationalisation.

The Loony Party will Nationalise all Political parties.. and if they don't keep their manifesto promises.. we will sell em off.

We will nationalise crime to make sure it doesn't pay

#### Austerity

Due to the fact that the Government have made cuts in almost everything around. the loony party proposes to cut the letters of the alphabet.. Starting with the letters N. H. and S

#### Educational funding

The Loony Party proposes that all Schools would have a Jumble sale or fete or other fundraising event at least twice per month to help raise funds for those little extras.. such as Desks, Books, paper, pens etc.

#### Electoral Change

The Loony party propose that voters will get a 30 day cooling off period during which, if you change your mind, didn't like the result, or didn't know what you were voting for, you can get your vote back.

Reduce the voting age to 16 (carried forward from our 1983 manicfesto) .. (nicked by labour) )

#### Imigration policy

One in one out (carried forward from our 2015

manicfesto (nicked by UKIP) )

Pensions or How to get the grey vote...

In keeping with the Labour Party's latest bid to get one or two pensioners to vote for them they have brought out a new policy guaranteeing the Triple lock on pensions until 2025 if they get voted in..The Loony party of course will go one better and buy a very large padlock,

Defense

We shall replace the Trident missile.. with a three pronged fork

Economy & Pensions

We will further complicate the UK tax system so that large companies can no longer find loopholes.

Environment

We will change the English symbol of three lions to 3 badgers. How often do you see lions running round the countryside?

All Food sold in fast food establishments should be clearly marked "May contain traces of real food"

Social Media

All Social Media sites to be taken down for one day a year for a "Remember when we used to talk" day.

Transport

We will only paint yellow lines where you CAN park,

We will rename the current Oyster travel cards, 'Sardine Cards' to better reflect the experience when travelling on public transport

(“The Official Monster Raving Loony Party”)

In a similar manner to Lord Buckethead, Howling 'Laud' Hope also dresses in clothing that while more normal than the Lord Buckethead costume is still eye-catching and has a hint of a caricature about it, appealing to the character that he is likewise trying to embody. Much like Lord Buckethead (or someone under the costume and name of Lord Buckethead) had stood in previous elections, Howling 'Laud' Hope has also contested multiple elections from 1983 onwards (“The Official Monster Raving Loony Party”) .

**3.1 Japan**

In the 2017 Japanese election, four candidates contested the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's seat of Yamaguchi-ku 4 (NHK) . As shown in Table 2, two of these candidates belonged to established political parties that hoped to win seats and have a chance of governing the country in some manner. The other two were independents who stood on their own individual platforms to put forward their own political beliefs.

**Table 2: Yamaguchi-ku 4 results, 2017 (NHK)**

| Party                    | Candidate         | Votes          | Vote Share (%) |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Liberal Democratic Party | Shinzo Abe        | <b>104,825</b> | 72.6%          |
| Party of Hope            | Tokio Fujita      | <b>18,567</b>  | 12.9           |
| Japanese Communist Party | Hironobu Nishioka | <b>13,721</b>  | 9.5            |
| Independent              | Atsuhiko Kurokawa | <b>6,687</b>   | 4.6            |
| Independent              | Akihiro Koori     | <b>645</b>     | 0.4            |

However, in comparison to the candidates who had hoped to unseat Theresa May, the ones who ran against Shinzo Abe all presented themselves in a manner that would suggest seriousness, even if their chances of actually beating the Prime Minister could be considered to be low. They do not appear to be using names that are clearly fake for the purpose of providing humour, nor are there any costumes that might draw the attention of the general public, as well as appearing to lack websites declaring manifestos that could be considered to be written to amuse rather than to convince voters to vote for them.

**4 Analysis**

As can be seen by the general description of the candidates on display in the 2017 elections, those that in comparison to those that stood against Shinzo Abe, there were a number of candidates who contested Theresa May's seat who could be considered to be joke candidates who had no intention of winning but rather of using the platform that was available to them to bring a humorous element into the election campaign.

This is not to say that all Japanese candidates

for seats necessarily portray themselves in the same way, or even that this is always the expected serious portrayal, but in the cases where there are variations from what could be considered to be the norm and candidates chose to appeal to the public through the use of some kind of gimmick, it tends to be as an accessory to their political ambitions to make them stand out from other candidates rather than the entire premise of their candidacy. It does however appear that in this particular seat in this particular election there were no such examples.

One potential reason for the difference could be that when the results of the votes are read in Britain, this is done in a public hall where the candidates line up on a stage in front of the hall. As a result, in these cases a serious politician like the Prime Minister, who would be expected to win their seat easily, nevertheless still has to be shown to the general public as being one of the prospective candidates equal to ones that are in costume. In comparison it would appear that the Japanese election results are broadcast with the candidates in separate areas, meaning that there is no such visual of the various candidates standing in a line.

## 5 Conclusion

As a consequence, the fact that there appears to be different attitudes towards fielding joke candidates suggests that the root cause could potentially be social differences regarding humour, which might be different tastes or different concepts of what parts of life are considered to be available for ridicule. In addition to this, there is a chance that the manner in which the votes are read out may also play a role, as the act of having the candidates gathered together means that no matter how serious the other candidates may be, if there is one in costume then there is a high chance that the media reporting on the outcome may show pictures of them all together. As such, someone like the Prime Minister becomes embroiled in the joke. As in Japan the results are read with the candidates in separate rooms, the it could be the case that as the potential for such situational humour is therefore lessened, which makes it a less popular act.

It could also be interesting to consider the

motivations that might exist behind the use of humour in this manner in Britain in comparison to Japan. One reason that can be considered to be an underlying factor could be that of protest against either the political system as a whole or simply the specific politician (such as the Prime Minister) targeted. As such, it is worth noting that there are often independent candidates standing to draw attention to specific political issues in a serious manner without the use of humour, like Yemi Hailemariam (Morris, 2017) . It could also be connected to the mood of the people, so to speak, as it could be due to a dissatisfaction with Theresa May and her government that inspired a greater degree of humorous candidates feeling inspired to run against her, as suggested by the results of the election that saw her lose her majority. Given that this was not the case in the Japanese election, it could be that there was less of a desire for such displays and that this could be connected with the satisfaction of the public rather than cultural attitudes to humour.

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## 2017年のイギリスと日本の選挙で起こるユーモア

リーダー・ローズマリー

英国と日本は2017年に選挙を行ったが、この2国には政治構造に相違点と共通点がある。違いの1つは、選挙運動中に見られたユーモアである。日本とは異なりイギリスでは「joke candidates」と考えられる候補者がいる。本稿では、2017年の選挙で安倍晋三の選挙区と Theresa May の選挙区に出た候補者を中心に「joke candidates」について分析する。その結果、安倍晋三の選挙区の候補者は、Theresa May の選挙区と比較して、真面目な候補者が多いことがわかり、Theresa May の選挙区では、真面目な候補者もいるがコスプレなどで出る候補者もいることが分かった。

キーワード：ユーモア、イギリス、日本、政治