

THE EMERGING POLITICS

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"I AM LEAVING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS TO CONCENTRATE ON POLITICS", ANNOUNCED THE VETERAN TONY BENN MP UPON HIS RETIREMENT. Fifty years after he contested his first general election, it was Benn's conviction that his politics could now be better expressed by departing from the corridors of Westminster. When a politician of such calibre and experience makes such a statement, it is worth taking notice. All the more so when the sentiment seems to be shared by so many others.

Despite the insistence by most politicians that "change comes from within", the numbers of us who are actively involved in our Parliamentary democracy are dwindling. There are now just 800,000 members of political parties in the UK, and only a fraction of those are active in their constituencies. This is a stark contrast with the situation fifty years ago when the Conservative and Labour parties each claimed close to one million members.

Outside the political parties the story is the same. At the 2001 general election, Labour's massive 170-seat majority in the House of Commons resulted from the votes of just one in four adults. The proportion of the population turning out in the polls hasn't been so small since women (over the age of thirty and holding property) were given the vote in 1918. The situation is even worse in local elections where councils are frequently elected with the support of just one in ten voters.

This situation is not unique to the UK. Many established democracies are experiencing the same phenomenon. A survey of 170 countries by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA) indicated that there is a slow but steady decline in turnout around the world.

It is a strange paradox that whilst much of the political struggle of the modern era has been about extending the franchise, so few people now choose to exercise their democratic rights. As in the days of the "rotten boroughs", it is still just a handful of individuals in each constituency who determine who our political "representatives" will be.

Various explanations have been offered for why, after centuries of toil to open up the political system, so few are playing an active part in it. Some suggest complacency is to blame, but this doesn't really ring true when the lowest turnouts are often found in the most needy and deprived areas. Others have proposed that people simply don't care about "political" issues

any more, but research published by MORI after the 2001 general election showed that twenty-four per cent of those aged 18–34 who said they did not vote had been "politically active" in other ways, for example by taking part in a protest march.¹

In an age where political authority is derived by a mandate from the masses, this disengagement from the political process presents more than a small crisis for nation states. Put simply, for many people the democratic system doesn't seem to be delivering the goods. Politicians are seriously considering what they can do to reverse this trend that undermines their legitimacy. One possible solution is to use new technology to bring decision-making closer to the people it affects – new methods of voting by e-mail, on the Internet and by text message are being piloted; a trial project at the moment means that you can watch, on the Internet, the draft Communications Bill being debated in House of Commons Committee and then send in your questions by e-mail. E-democracy certainly brings with it some interesting ideas. It opens up a whole new set of possibilities with regard to how consultations might be carried out at local and national level. It also means that referendums might play an increasing role in the way we are governed.

There is still, however, a major problem: people still seem keener to text their vote for the latest eviction from the Big Brother house than cast their vote in a general election. In fact, where voting by text was trailed at the last general election, there was not a significant increase in the number of votes cast. Whilst the new technologies may change the way decisions are made, it is no solution to the lack of engagement in the political system. In fact, it is a bit like putting a sticking plaster on the body politic, when the real problem is a cancer eating away within.

It is more likely that radical changes in our political institutions will have greater effect on political participation. The British political system, without any codified constitution, has always been an evolving one with new customs and conventions, new acts of Parliament and measures that reform the way we do our politics. In the last few years we've seen more wide-ranging reforms than at any other time in history.²

These reforms show a willingness to experiment with new ways of government, and we should expect to see a great deal more of it in the years to come as modernisers attempt to inject new life into flagging

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NOTES

1 The four biggest aid agencies (Oxfam, Save the Children, Action Aid, and Christian Aid), which all have a distinctly political edge, boast 2.7 million supporters.
2 For example, devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the abolition of hereditary peers and the reform of the House of Lords, the introduction of proportional systems of voting for the European elections, regional changes in the way that local councils are run.

► institutions, but what about the content of the political system? Until a few years ago in the UK, and in most modern democracies, it seemed that you knew where you were when it came to political ideas. There was free-market capitalism and socialism, the political Right and the political Left. In the European Parliament, as at Westminster, the Socialists would sit on the other side of the hemisphere, or chamber, to the Conservatives or Christian Democrats. But, we have all known for a while that the old Left-Right paradigm no longer applies to explanations of political behaviours. Peter Mandelson's recent comment sums up the situation: "We are all Thatcherites now."

So, as we emerge from modernity, what is to happen now that the dominance of such ideas has passed? Political parties used to be bound together with ideological chords, but some very uneasy partnerships are revealed when these strands are removed. Within the Conservative Party, for example, there is a tension between one-nation and two-nation Tories, because of major splits over Europe. There are also divides between moral libertarians and those who believe that the state should play a more paternalistic role in social affairs, and competing views about notions of justice: how far should the state seek to regulate behaviour and pick up the pieces when the free market goes wrong?

The genius of New Labour was to recognise that the Party needed a new vision and set of values to hold it together after Clause 4 of its constitution, the commitment to the goal of common ownership of the means of production, was discredited. Those political parties that cannot come up with a new vision to replace the old may be destined to fragment and be replaced by new ones, as the Conservatives may soon discover. This is more likely now that proportional systems of voting give new groupings a decent chance of getting at least some of their members elected.

We may also see, once again, the rise of independent politics. It seems the electorate have responded quite favourably when political people have attempted to step outside the parties. One of the big secrets in British politics is the presence of independents. There are some 1,700 independent councillors in the UK, and seventeen local councils under independent control. There are 170 independent peers in the House of Lords, and in the reformed second chamber "People's Peers" will be appointed to join them. In the House of Commons, too, there are independents: Martin Bell (who stood against Neil Hamilton in Tatton) and

Richard Taylor (the doctor in Wyre Forest who won on a NHS platform) are the two independent MPs who have caught the public imagination at the last two general elections. This, of course, is in addition to Ken Livingstone's success in becoming the mayor of London.

An interesting feature of politics is that turnout at elections increases significantly where an independent stands. They seem to connect more effectively with the people they are seeking to represent than Party-affiliated candidates. The main political parties have begun to utilise focus groups because they perhaps realise that they needed to do more to connect with "ordinary" people. Politics has always been the art of the possible, but perhaps now, more than at any other time in recent history, it is driven by what the public are perceived to want at any given time.

The absence of coherent credos means that we can have Iain Duncan-Smith pushing forward "compassionate conservatism" in a speech at 11.00 am at a day centre for adults with learning disabilities, having the same day written an article in the *Daily Mail* arguing that none of the 1,300 asylum seekers fleeing persecution should be let in from the Sandgatte detention centre in France. The two approaches depend as much on how Duncan-Smith thinks his words and actions will go down with the various groups that he is trying to please, as on any philosophical framework of compassion.

Despite the absence of strong ideology, there is an underlying philosophical framework. The main political parties share common ground, especially when it comes to their values. There is, for example, a widespread acceptance of the importance of markets and free trade, and tight control of public spending. Beyond economic consideration, few now question the nuclear deterrent, the war on terrorism, restrictions upon immigration, and the primary place of prisons in criminal justice. Also, the national interest is of prime importance.

These values are not usually questioned and they, therefore, determine the boundaries within which policy is set. For example, the government may be prepared to break the tight controls on public spending to boost the financing of the NHS (as Gordon Brown plans to do with his £50 billion increase over the next five years) but still unable to find the extra £3.5 billion needed to meet the UK's long-standing commitment to raise overseas aid, spending to 0.7 per cent of Gross

National Product, because it is not in the national interest to do so.

The combination of focus-group politics with the consensus, provides a fertile breeding ground for nationalism, as we are beginning to see. It is perhaps true that nationalism abhors a vacuum and, in the absence of strong ideologies, such views have a tendency to move in. Fuelled by pressures of population movements and uncertainty over the nation state, the far Right seems to be prospering as it seeks to address fears and emphasise the national interest. This should come as little surprise when we have an emerging politics that listens first and foremost to the concerns of people inside national borders. In the end, it is such “crises” as the perceived threat from immigration that will show the emerging politics in its true colours, because politicians will be forced to respond. But when they hit, the inadequacies of the system become clear for all to see.

Enlightenment philosophers, such as Locke and Rousseau, developed theories of the state where authority no longer depended upon the divine, as it did in previous ages. Their concern, following the bloodshed of the English Civil War, which was blamed largely upon religion, was to develop a political theory where authority was based on a “contract” between the politicians and the people. But, did anyone ever ask what would happen when the people no longer wanted to keep their end of the theoretical bargain? This is central to understanding the emerging politics. Changing ideologies, values, technologies and demographics are all influential. Questions over the nation state, the war on terrorism, multi-national companies and multiculturalism will help shape the new political form. But it is the questions about political authority and the ability of the politicians to meet the needs of the people they claim to represent that are perhaps the most important of all.