

**BRIDGING THE GAP:
REVITALISING POLITICS AND THE
POLITICS OF PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS**

WRITTEN FOR THE 'REVITALISING POLITICS' CONFERENCE

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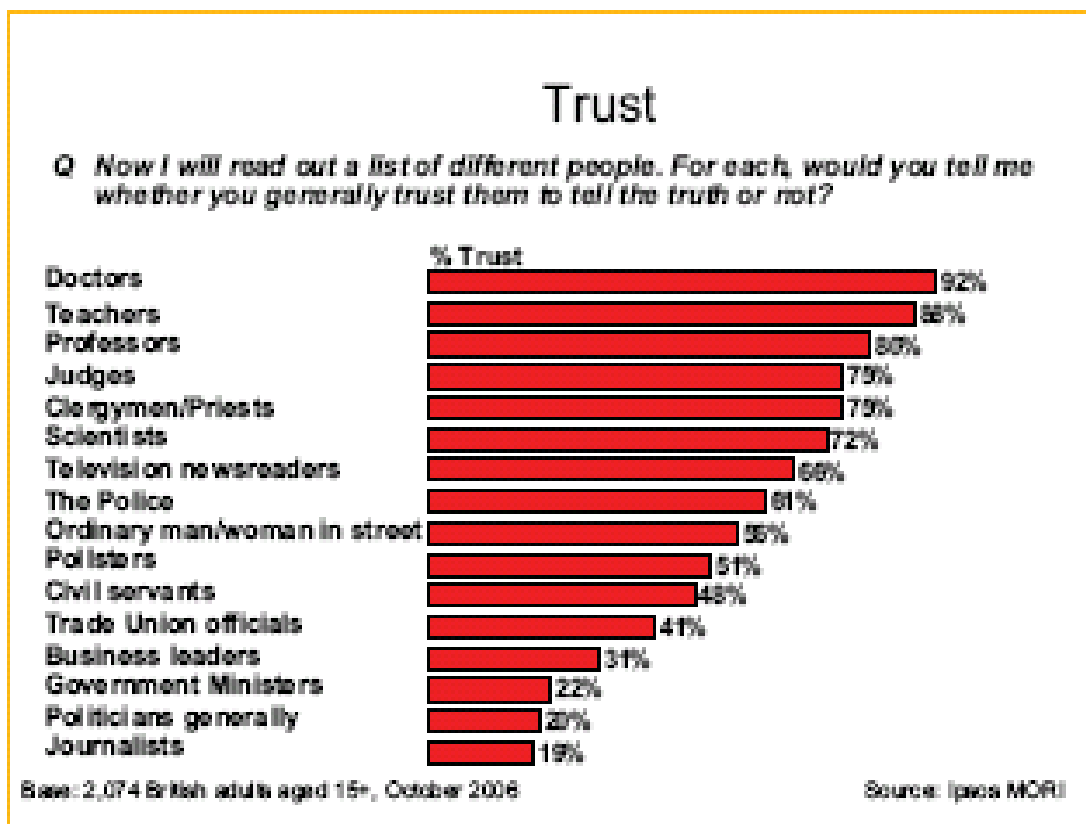
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This paper matters because it provides a distinctive account of the origins of the contemporary condition of political disengagement. It achieves this by cultivating a relatively under-nourished field of study – the politics of public expectations – and locating this analysis within the parameters of existing debates concerning public apathy with politics. This opens up a new field of analytical terrain concerning the existence of an ‘expectations gap’, a ‘performance gap’ and ‘safety-net theory’. These concepts, in turn, help us develop and sharpen the analytical traction and leverage of the notion of ‘public expectations’. This involves distinguishing between the ‘the public’s expectations of the behaviour and performance of politics’ and ‘political expectations of the behaviour and performance of the public’. Identifying this distinction, noting the iterative and dialectical relationship between these dimensions, identifying different patterns of emphasis, and locating them within the lens of economic models of democracy arguably delivers new insights about longstanding socio-political concerns. The arguments of this paper matter because they pose new questions about revitalising politics, the capacity of the state, the rationalities of political competition, and the available tools of political analysis.

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A gap has emerged, and has been emerging for some time, between the governors and the governed. Data and evidence to support this statement can be found in the Electoral Commission’s annual Audit of Political Engagement, the British Social Attitude Survey’s longitudinal research, and the results of the ESRC’s Democracy and Participation Programme. The strapline message is that generally only around a quarter of the British public trust politicians (Diagram 1) and less than one third believe that ‘the British system of democracy works well’.¹

Diagram 1. Levels of Trust by Profession



As the then Minister for Constitutional Affairs, Harriet Harman, emphasised in January 2006

[A] healthy democracy is one that has the active engagement of its citizens. Our democracy lacks legitimacy if, whatever the formal rules about universal suffrage and the right to vote, people don't make it a reality by turning out to vote.²

One might conclude from this quote and the result of the 2005 General Election that British democracy is not very healthy and that major questions exist concerning its legitimacy.

The Minister herself lamented the contemporary existence of 'democracy deserts' where high levels of social exclusion are compounded by low levels of democratic engagement. And yet the existence of a gap or fissure between the governors and the governed should not be confused with a public decline in interest in politics *per se*. The gap exists in relation to the public's belief in the utility of those processes and mechanisms associated with traditional representative politics. The result has been an increase in the utilisation of non-traditional forms of political participation and engagement; non-traditional in the sense that instead of voting, joining a political party or contacting their MP, members of the public, and especially young people, are likely to engage in quite different activities, like consumer involvement in

buying or boycotting products or events, in order to express their opinion. They are likely to chose channels of influence that lie beyond traditional representative politics and which are more single-interest, direct and possibly reliant on new forms of technology.³

Although Britain is by no means unique amongst advanced liberal democracies in being a 'disaffected democracy'⁴ the available data does pose specific questions including:

1. How and why has the gap between the governors and the governed emerged?
2. Why have New Labour's constitutional and democratic reforms apparently not been successful in rebuilding public trust in politicians, political institutions and political processes?
3. What is the role of academics in studying and explaining political disenchantment (and political support) and what tools of political analysis do they have at their disposal;
4. Is there anything particularly distinctive about the causes and consequences of political disenchantment in the United Kingdom as opposed to any other advanced liberal democracy?

5. Should anything be done to close the gap and, if so, what?

This paper does not, indeed could not, answer all of these questions but it does seek to make a distinctive contribution to the broader debate and, through this, assist politicians, policy-makers, academics and the public in forming answers to these questions. The simple argument of this paper is that the gap between the governors and the governed is the product of a failure to successfully manage what might be termed 'the politics of public expectations' within the contours of a highly adversarial majoritarian polity. Put simply, the incentive and sanctions structure of the constitutional configuration encourage politicians to promise standards of behaviour and levels of public services that are arguably unrealistic and unattainable. Having inflated public expectations, the subsequent performance of those politicians undermines public confidence, thereby fuelling disenchantment and apathy. The focus on public expectations therefore provides a way of understanding and teasing apart a central driver of political disenchantment that has arguably been under-explored in the wider literature. This lack of research is particularly striking given the clear linkages between public expectations and issues such as: (1) depoliticised modes of governance; (2) the 'credibility crisis'; and (3) questions regarding the role and capacity of 'politics' and the state.

In order to explore the link between public expectations and political disenchantment, this paper is divided into five sections. In the first section I very briefly review the broader literature on ‘why we hate politics’ and seek to emphasise the point that the issue of public expectations transcends the *supply-side demand-side* explanations of public disenchantment that have previously been developed. This feeds into the second section’s focus on the ‘expectations gap’, the origins of this phenomenon, and its implications in terms of socio-political relationships. This focus on public expectations, however, exposes two paradoxes that are of great consequence for the evolution of politics in the twenty-first century. The first revolves around what is known as the ‘performance gap’; and the second around what I label ‘safety-net theory’ – these form the focus of the third and four sections respectively. The final section locates this paper’s focus on the management and politics of public expectations within a number of broader debates.

Section I

Why We Hate Politics

We do not hate politics. The situation is more complex and nuanced. In many advanced industrialised countries, large sections of the electorate appear to have become disillusioned with the performance of *traditional* forms and mechanisms of political engagement. In response they have disengaged from

political activity (reflected in falling voter turnout, falling levels of political party membership, etc.) but many have at the same time sought to cultivate and engage with new forms of political and civic engagement. It is also significant that attitudinal data reveals very clear support for the principle of democracy, both in terms of its underlying principles and as the most appropriate system of government. This raises an interesting puzzle – comparative research indicates a decline in public confidence with politics while at the same time indicating increasing public support for, and commitment to, democracy. Dalton captures this socio-political puzzle by stating that ‘even though contemporary publics express decreasing confidence in democratic politicians, parties and parliaments, these sentiments have not been carried over to the democratic principles of these regimes’.⁵ So the central question this conference seeks to explore is not so much why large sections of the public appear to hate politics but why they appear to hate those institutions and processes of what we might term *conventional* or *traditional* representative democracy. It is in relation to this more specific question that Hay’s (2007) *Why We Hate Politics* provides a powerful rejoinder.

Hay’s thesis is implicitly inter-twined with the politics of public expectations. ‘That politics might continue to generate expectations that it can seemingly only ever fail to realise is testimony to a certain triumph of the human will over human capabilities’.⁶ The aim of this paper is to bring the issue of public

expectations very much to the fore within the broader debate concerning political disengagement and, through this, pose new questions about the loss of trust in politicians, the development of an avowedly 'anti-political' agenda, and how we might 'revitalise' politics. In many ways this involves trying to develop or sharpen the analytical leverage of the notion of public expectations and in this context Hay's work provides a valuable reference point within the wider literature because it seeks to emphasise *both* sides of a political relationship - the *demand*-side and the *supply*-side - which is founded on the strategic creation of public expectations concerning the capacity of both the political system (i.e. behaviour) and the state (i.e. delivery). It is exactly this relationship that I want to explore in more detail in this paper.

Couched in terms of a relationship, it is noticeable that the dominant approach to understanding and explaining political disengagement during recent decades has emphasised changes to the demand-side of the relationship by focusing predominantly on societal and demographic shifts and how they may have affected politics. How have the customers (i.e. members of the public) in the political relationship changed particularly in relation to their demands? Hay rejects this over-emphasis on demand-side variables for three reasons: (1) the theories to which it has led are difficult to reconcile with the empirical evidence; (2) demand-side explanations are politically expedient because they shift the blame for disengagement from politicians to an electorate, the larger part of which is perceived as being

content; and (3) many demand-side theoretic arguments are tautological due to the manner in which they *describe* rather than *analyse* the existence of contemporary trends in public disengagement.

Instead of focusing on the customers in a political relationship via demand-side explanations, Hay seeks to (re-)emphasise the role and behaviour of politicians. This emphasis on what is actually supplied rather than what is demanded (i.e. supply-side variables) shifts the focus of attention from sociological explanations to political explanations that include: (1) the appeals of parties; (2) changes in the character of electoral competition; (3) changes in the substantive content of the 'goods' that politics offers to political 'customers'; (4) changes in relation to beliefs about the capacity of the state; and (5) the existence of endogenous and exogenous restraints. The critical element of this *demand-side - supply-side* dichotomy that I want to emphasise in this paper is that both dimensions are quite obviously inter-related: they are two sides of the same coin, rather than separate issues. The relationship is both iterative and dialectical; and it is precisely the issue of the creation, management and impact of public expectations that forms the bridge between demand-side and supply-side explanations. The next section seeks to further develop this point and drill-down into the politics of public expectations through an analysis of the 'expectations gap'.

Section II

The Expectations Gap

As Director of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit during 1997-2001, David Miliband developed the notion of an 'expectations gap'.⁷ This gap consisted of the difference between the public's expectations of what the state *should* deliver and what the state *could* realistically deliver given the resources it was provided with. The important aspect of Miliband's understanding of this dilemma stemmed from the fact that he was well aware that, although New Labour's modernisation agenda for the public services could marginally increase performance, it was never going to close the gap. The most important role for ministers, Miliband argued, was not necessarily driving forward reform but suppressing (or at least not inflating) public expectations about what the state could deliver. This notion of an 'expectations gap' is highly relevant in relation to the official review on the future of the state that was conducted between 2005 and 2007.⁸ The review was explicitly located within an acceptance that public expectations about the state were increasing rapidly, and as a result it recommended public sector reforms that were designed to achieve 'more bang for each buck' (i.e. increased efficiency levels) in order to maximise the levels of service that could be delivered within a finite resource package.⁹ Couched in David Miliband's terms, the report therefore focused its attention completely on increasing supply, rather than suppressing demand.

An awareness of the 'expectations gap', combined with an official statement of intent that focuses on pulling-up the level of performance, rather than attempting to pull down the level at which demands have been set, raises a number of questions about the capacity of politicians, and to a lesser degree their officials and advisers, to control, shape or manage the public's expectations of what a political system can or should deliver. Clearly a range of socio-economic and demographic factors shape public expectations – rising living standards, technological change, increasing societal heterogeneity, better education, rising incomes in real terms, less deference – and yet it is possible to argue that the influence of these specific variables are operationalised within a very specific socio-political context. What is more important, however, is that this socio-political context encourages and even incentivises the expansion of public expectations. This is not a novel argument.

A great deal of this paper can be located within the contours of well-known debates concerning the rationalities of political behaviour.¹⁰ Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) provides the foundation of much of this literature through: (1) modelling political behaviour alongside economic exchanges; and (2) making a number of (rational choice-theoretic) assumptions about the behaviour of actors in a supply and demand relationship. Like market actors, Down argues, political parties and politicians (as suppliers) and voters (as consumers) can be assumed to be

rational and self-interested utility-maximisers. Consequently political actors seek to maximise their chances of (re-)election by promising to deliver better services, but at a lower cost than the competitors (other political parties). This creates a bidding war whereby the process of political competition artificially increases public expectations; only for these expectations to be dashed as the elected party either seeks to renege upon certain pre-election commitments or fails to achieve them.

However, the political dynamic of fostering and sustaining unrealistic public expectations arguably goes beyond elections, and exists throughout the electoral cycle. For example the implicit logic of New Public Management as the dominant paradigm of 'good governance' brings with it a clear tendency for politicians and their officials to compare public services with those provided by the private sector. As a result the public are encouraged to expect the same standards of personalisation, choice, and control in their interactions with the public sector that they enjoy with organisations within the private sector, where the mode of exchange is purely financial. This is clear from prescriptive government reviews – like the Treasury's 2002 *Better Government Services* - but has also been a notable aspect of recent legislative reports in the UK on the relationship between citizens and the state.¹¹ The emphasis of the House of Common's Public Administration Select Committee's (PASC) series of reports during 2007 and 2008 into public services, for example, has focused predominantly on how the public's increased expectations can and should be

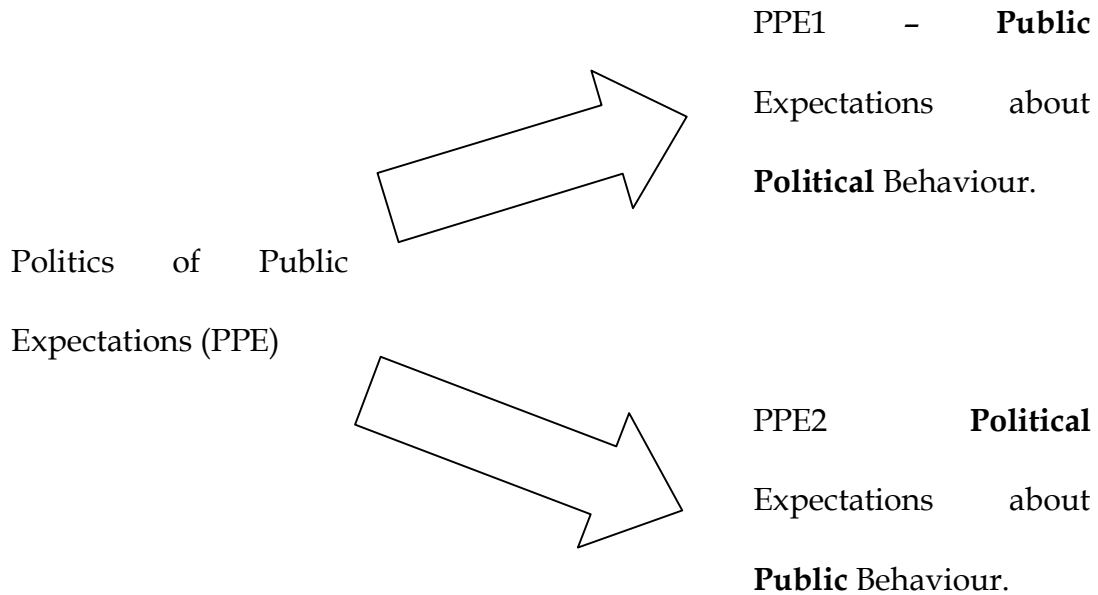
delivered rather than whether those expectations are realistic or how they might be reduced. PASC notes, 'The basic idea is clear cut. It involves putting people at the centre of public services and enabling them to claim the standards of service to which they are entitled'.¹² But the conception of citizens as consumers, reflected in PASC's recommendation in 2008 of 'Public Service Guarantees' providing an explicit statement of entitlements, risks inflaming rather than re-shaping public expectations. The emphasis is solely on fulfilling *public expectations* about what politics and the state should deliver; rather than a more balanced approach that also calls attention to *political expectations* about public behaviour and performance.

By indulging in this behaviour without massive increases in resources, politicians are arguably deluding the public about the capacity of the state and increasing the expectations gap, thereby fuelling frustration with the public sector. As Peter Riddell has argued in this context 'Something has to give. We cannot have it all, but don't bet on any party saying so'.¹³ Riddell's remark about not betting on any political party 'saying so' takes us back to Downsian arguments concerning the political marketplace. It would be extremely difficult, but not impossible, for a political party, particularly within a highly adversarial majoritarian polity, to cultivate a more balanced and reasoned debate about the capacity and limits of the state. This debate might seek to reduce, or at the very least manage or shape, public expectations about politics and the state in the manner advocated by David

Miliband. How then have politicians sought to strategically respond to the pressures of public expectations within the broader context of increasing public expectations?

In order to answer this question it is necessary reflect upon the notion of 'the politics of public expectations' in order to untangle its embedded components, particularly in light of this paper's characterisation of public expectations about politics as a two-way relationship between the governors and the governed. As such, the politics of public expectations can be divided into two distinct forms (Diagram 2). This distinction between PPE1 and PPE2 allows us to identify and understand the impetus and dynamics underlying recent debates about, not only political behaviour and performance (PPE1), but also more subtle and embryonic attempts to recalibrate expectations regarding politics and the state as they pertain to the behaviour and performance of the public (PPE2).

Diagram 2. Disaggregating the Politics of Public Expectations



Beginning with the analysis of PPE1 - how politicians have responded to (unrealistic) public expectations about politics - a shift towards depoliticised modes of governance has been well-documented in the wider literature. This shift has involved at least three inter-related tactics or forms of depoliticisation:

- (1) Through institutional frameworks that impose a significant degree of separation between politicians and those delivering public services. Although this shift in power to non-political decision-makers is rhetorically legitimated using technocratic logic and arguments, it also has benefits for politicians in terms of displacing responsibility for

difficult decisions or failed initiatives away from ministers. The creation and role of independent central banks is an example of this tactic.

(2) By adopting rule-based systems that seek to 'tie the hands' of politicians thereby seeking to remove discretion and flexibility and downgrade previously 'political' decisions to 'mechanical' questions of rules and procedure. One of the earliest examples of this tactic was Britain's membership of the Gold Standard in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; a more recent example would be New Labour's 'Golden Rule' and 'Sustainable Investment Rule'.

(3) By means of creating and promoting a body of ideas that seek to delimit the sphere of political capacity and deny, to a large extent, the existence of choice and contingency. Recourse to the power and inevitability of globalisation is one example of this tactic.

These tactics, and the inter-relationships between them, have been examined in detail elsewhere, and the aim here is not to discuss them at any length but simply to locate them within the context of the ongoing debate regarding political apathy and disengagement.¹⁴ The public no longer trusts politicians, but at the same time they have increasing expectations concerning what they expect politicians, the political system and the state to provide and deliver. In this environment politicians have increasingly adopted depoliticisation as a

strategic response to the pressures of increasing public expectations and declining public trust. Depoliticisation allows politicians to draw upon the legitimacy of other social actors (judges, scientists, specialists, etc.) while also delimiting their own personal sphere of responsibility (a point I will return to below). As the influential work of Majone has illustrated, seen through the lenses of economic models of democracy and rational choice theory, depoliticisation responds to the innate irrationalities of the political-business cycle - incentives to promise too much, opportunities to make irrational decisions that offer short-term political benefits but carry long-term public costs, technical decisions being taken by individuals with no specialist knowledge, the manner in which the efficiency of the state is undermined by its inability to make credible commitments, etc.¹⁵

However, as Hay, Ranciere, Flinders and Mouffe have all in their own way sought to demonstrate, depoliticisation is a very negative response to both: (1) the pressures of rising public expectations, and (2) the challenges of public apathy and political disengagement.¹⁶ It is a strategy which seeks to delimit the boundaries of the political market place and deny the existence of political contingency. When viewed through the conceptual lens of economic models of democracy depoliticisation can be understood as a rational response to the pressures of modern governance. And yet attempts by politicians to disavow their own capacity does little to restore public faith or interest in conventional politics. It widens rather than bridges the gap.

And yet although depoliticisation represents a critical response to the challenges of PPE1 it is possible to detect a second strategic approach in relation to public expectations. This strategy focuses on the second strand of the politics of public expectations (Diagram 2) by making explicit certain political expectations about the behaviour and performance of the public (i.e. PPE2). Instead of widening the gap by denying political contingency, this approach seeks to narrow the gap by making explicit the responsibilities and duties of *the public vis-à-vis* politics and the state. Since the election of 'New' Labour in 1997, politicians have sought to emphasise both *rights* and *responsibilities* in relation to public services and this has taken many forms. It is in this context that patients have found their right to healthcare attached to obligations to lose weight or stop smoking; the unemployed have found their rights to benefits attached to explicit expectations that they must be available and looking for work; parents have found that their children's right to an education is now accompanied by an explicit agreement about the responsibilities of parents alongside those of the school. These attempts to in many ways seek to renegotiate the relationship between the governors and the governed and have been couched in a broader rhetorical turn towards 'active citizenry'.

The benefits of this approach are theoretically twofold. (1) In terms of public understanding about the complexity and challenges of modern governance

emphasising the role of the individual *alongside* that of politics and the state may re-adjust public expectations (PPE1) downwards (thereby closing the 'expectations gap'). (2) By encouraging or compelling the public to play an active and complementary role in relation to publicly delivered social goods, through their transition from 'passive recipients' to 'active participants', politics and the state may actually be able to deliver improved levels of service provision (thereby closing the 'expectations gap').

If the potential benefits of focusing on PPE2 are so great why then are politicians, in and beyond the UK, certainly basing their statecraft more upon responding to the public's expectations about politics (PPE1), often through depoliticisation strategies, instead of seeking to cultivate a more balanced relationship by emphasising with as much vigour political expectations about the behaviour of the public (PPE2)?

The answer to this question takes us back to Downsian arguments about the political marketplace and economic theories of democracy. The rationalities of electoral competition make it very difficult for any political party to emphasise PPE2 because the public are unlikely to vote for a party that seeks to emphasise more responsible public behaviour, especially when other parties are promising to deliver more with less.

So far this paper has sought to develop a number of linked arguments: (1) that our understanding of contemporary levels of political disengagement need to be located within a much sharper awareness of the politics of public expectations; (2) the politics of public expectations forms the bridge between supply-side and demand-side explanations of disengagement; (3) that public expectations about the behaviour of politicians and the capacity of the state tend to be too high; (4) this creates an 'expectations gap' between what is promised by political actors and what is subsequently developed; (5) this 'gap' fuels public apathy and political disengagement; (6) but that reducing or making public expectations more realistic is easier said than done due to the nature of competitive and adversarial political competitions (i.e. elections); (7) as a result of these pressures the politics of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century has been marked by a general shift towards depoliticised modes of governance; (8) attempts by politicians to deny and delimit their own realm of capacity and control has further eviscerated public interest in conventional political frameworks. Before examining the consequences and implications of these arguments in more detail, the next two sections seeks to drill-down still further into the notion of public expectations as they relate to politics and the state. The aim being to cultivate the analytical leverage and traction of this concept in the sphere of political disengagement while also identifying two distinct paradoxes - the 'performance gap' and what I call 'safety net theory' - that indicate a certain residual confidence or attachment to conventional political structures which

in themselves begin to undermine, or at the very least question, depoliticised modes of governance.

Section III

The Performance Gap

A lack of public faith in politicians, political institutions and political structures can produce a situation in which the public become so jaded in their view of politics that they are unwilling or unable (or both) to appreciate and believe that in some policy areas the political system, via the institutions of the state, can and does deliver high-quality services. This produces a critical distinction between the *existence* of political goods and the *perception* that political goods are being delivered. The public's perception of the degree to which the political system is 'working' is linked to this paper's earlier focus on economic theories of democracy. The context or environment of politics is one imbued with a positivity off-set and negativity-bias (i.e. an emphasis on focusing on problems and allocating blame) arising from a societal context that is often interpreted as low-trust high-blame.¹⁷ Being held to account in the political sphere rarely involves a balanced review of performance but more commonly involves an exercise in problem amplification and blame-allocation. This links-in with depoliticised modes of statecraft as they are adopted as a means of blame avoidance or reduction.¹⁸

More broadly, however, the existence of a contextual or societal positivity offset and negativity-bias can lead to a situation in which the public no longer believes that politics or the state is capable of achieving their expectations about the services and levels of provision it should deliver – irrespective of its actual performance. Even more interesting from the context of political disengagement and revitalising politics, however, is the fact that research suggests that the public frequently fails to perceive or believe that public services have improved *even when their own individual experience of services has been better than expected*. This is illustrated in a series of Populus surveys that have focused on the public services, specifically health, education and transport, and have revealed a significant disparity or ‘perception gap’ between how the public perceives services (generally negatively) as opposed to their actual experience (generally positive).¹⁹ More generally, social survey evidence suggests that nearly two-thirds of the electorate do not think that the Labour government has ‘kept its promises’ during 1997-2007 (Diagram 3).

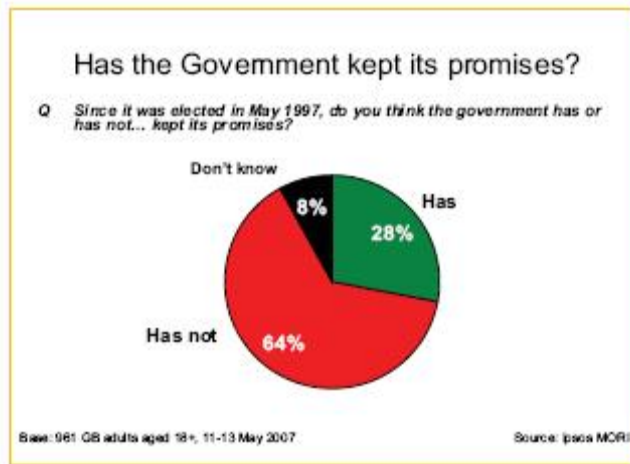


Diagram 3. Has the Government kept its promises?

In pugilistic circles it is often said that when a boxer fights in their opponent's country, dominating every round of the contest is not enough to secure a win - only a knockout will do. The paradox of the 'perception gap' can be viewed as the same dilemma in a different context - not only must the government ensure the state *delivers* improved public services but it must also *convince the public* that this is the case. Not only must the government fulfil its promises but it must also demonstrate to the public that this is the case. Framed in these terms the 'perception gap' can be understood as a mirror-image of the 'expectations gap'. In the latter the public expect too much, because the political system incentivises false or unrealistic promises, and the public are ultimately disappointed; but in the former the political system actually delivers public goods but the public fail to believe or perceive that this is the case. The 'perceptions gap' adds a new layer to our understandings of political disenchantment and raises distinctive questions about re-building

the relationship between the governors and the governed. And yet the 'perceptions gap' flows into a second critical feature of the relationship between public expectations and political disengagement – that I term 'safety-net theory' - that brings with it a certain degree of optimism about public faith in politics.

The simple basis of this theory is that no matter how little the public might trust politicians, or how little faith they might have in the capacity of politics to deliver certain social goods, the public will always look to politicians and political structures respond to issues of public concern. This might be as a provider, facilitator, information provider, regulator or guarantor-of-last-resort, but 'politics' still provides a form of social-political or social-psychological safety-blanket in times of heightened public concern.

Section IV

Safety-Net Theory

Public attitudes towards the state have shifted markedly in recent decades as the relatively positive and optimistic public attitudes about the role and capacity of the state, that had characterised much of the twentieth century, gave way from the 1970s onwards to a more sceptical public. This took the form of debates concerning state-overload, delegitimation and

ungovernability; concepts that formed central components of the trilateral commission into and which resonate with more contemporary analyses of depoliticisation and public disengagement. It was in this context that neo-liberal ideas about the role and limits of state intervention and the behaviour of political actors (politicians and officials) flourished in the form of Public Choice Theory and were implemented under the guise of New Public Management.²⁰

What is critical, however, in terms of outlining any options for revitalising politics and seeking to orchestrate a debate regarding the politics of public expectations is that, as the opening section emphasised, public attitudes towards politics and the capacity of the state remain overwhelmingly negative. In the UK, for example, a series of YouGov surveys suggest both increased public scepticism about politics and increased reluctance to paying higher taxes because the public no longer believe that more resources will be translated into better public services.²¹ And yet this is an example of the 'performance gap' because the increases in real-terms resources that New Labour have since 2001 allocated to health and education have - according to the analysis and reports of the National Audit Office - led to significant increases in levels of service provision. There is also a time-related element to arguments concerning public expectations, political promises and political disengagement. In many areas the benefits of government strategies are less tangible and will only become apparent in the long-term (twenty years plus).

The outcomes of policies like the anti-obesity strategy, targets for reducing heart disease, and flagship programmes for reducing social and educational deprivation, like SureStart, will only be identifiable in generational terms.

However in spite of the 'expectations gap' and 'performance gap' there is little evidence that the public no longer sees politics as a viable response to issues of social concern. It may not trust politicians, it may expect too much from the state, and it may be unwilling to pay higher taxes but the public clearly still expects, and indeed demands, that the political system assumes responsibility for an increasing range of social issues and concerns.

As the takeover of Network Rail or the nationalisation of Northern Rock illustrate, although ministers might seek to adopt depoliticising strategies there is no guarantee that the public will accept them. At the same time completely new issues and concerns will appear, as with the morality, safety and regulation of xeno-transplantation, human reproductive technologies or the internet, that place new expectations at the door of politics. So although we live in a period in which levels of public trust and public engagement with traditional political structures have declined markedly, we are also living through a period of intense scientific and technological advancement that is broadening the responsibilities of the state and increasing public expectations about what 'politics' should and can deliver. The result of this situation is generally not one in which the public turn away from or give up on

established political structures but very often make new demands or refuse to accept statements regarding political impotence. This creates a critical counterpoint to much of the literature on depoliticisation, and particularly to those attempts by politicians and officials to deny or downgrade their capacity for action. From the perspective of new demands on old political structures we can actually identify a continuing connection between the governors and the governed; the existence of a sense of social comfort from the capacity of collective action. Although the public may have become disaffected in many advanced liberal democracies, their increasing demands that the political system assumes responsibility in an increasing range of social areas, suggest that they are still very much aware that the state can and does play a positive role in their lives. Politics, viewed as the processes, institutions and mechanisms of representative democracy, provides a form of social safety-net.

Let us develop this line of reasoning in two ways, both of which deepen the link between public expectations and revitalising politics by: (1) considering the implications of 'safety-net theory' for the concept of depoliticisation; and (2) looking more broadly about the main challenges facing politics in the twenty-first century and what they suggest about the link between public expectations and political disengagement.

'Safety-net theory' exposes the fact that depoliticisation is a myth. An issue, policy area, or decision becomes no less political simply because a politician is no longer *directly* involved. The social consequences of decisions regarding interest rates, the availability of medicines, or the decommissioning of nuclear power stations, for example, are not affected by the fact that those decisions have been shifted to a *different* political arena; different in the sense that an elected politician is no longer involved rather than that the decision is any less political. Furthermore the empirical manifestation of 'safety-net theory' is relatively easy to identify as social pressure builds to the point at which elected politicians are forced to intervene, assume emergency powers, or even bring the responsibility back within the contours of 'politicised' modes of governance. In many ways the basic theory and structures of representative democracy make it very difficult, if not impossible, for elected politicians to disclaim their responsibility for issues of social concern – they fulfil a lightning-rod function that links back with the idea of the political system acting as a safety-net, safety-blanket or even safety-valve.

But in terms of highlighting the relationship between the politics of public expectations and political disengagement it is too reductionist, simplistic and pessimistic to understand the role of politics as little more than a fallback option for societal concerns. A more expansive and future-orientated awareness of the most pressing contemporary social and political challenges - migration, terrorism, obesity, global warming, terrorism and security, illegal

drug use, embryology and xenotransplantation, fiscal security, globalisation, AIDS-HIV, childhood obesity, mental health, social demographics, pension provision, social exclusion, etc. – suggest that the role of conventional political structures are likely to increase rather than diminish. In this context arguments concerning the ‘end of politics’ appear ill-founded and premature, and discussions regarding the ‘politics of public expectations’ take on added emphasis.

SECTION V

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

This paper matters because it has sought to provide a distinctive account of the origins of the contemporary condition of political disengagement. It has achieved this by cultivating a relatively under-nourished field of study – the politics of public expectations – and locating this analysis within the parameters of existing debates concerning public apathy with politics. The arguments of this paper matter because they pose new questions about revitalising politics, the capacity of the state, the rationalities of political competition, and the available tools of political analysis. In order to set out the implications of this paper and why it matters in more detail it might be useful to sketch-out the core arguments and structure of this paper in ten very simple steps.

(1) Competitive political systems incentivise the dissemination by political actors of unrealistic public expectations in a buy-now, pay-later form of resource-exchange.



(2) This creates an 'expectations gap' between what is promised and what is delivered and it is this 'gap' which forms to roots of public apathy and political disengagement.



(3) Closing the 'expectations gap' is made complicated by the existence of a 'performance gap' whereby even if the level of public services increase the public do not believe that this is actually happening, even when their individual experience as a service-user is positive.



(4) Politicians and state managers have primarily focused on delivering increased levels of service provision, rather than attempting to reduce public expectations, as a way of narrowing the 'expectations gap'.



(5) This reflects the dynamics of political competition - particularly within majoritarian polities - which make orchestrating a debate designed to achieve more realistic public expectations difficult.



(6) As a result governments around the world have increasingly sought to utilise 'depoliticised' modes of governance in an attempt to limit the sphere of issues for which they are held directly responsible.



(7) And yet although levels of public disengagement may have increased, the public still expects politicians and the political system more generally to intervene and assume control in areas of social concern - 'safety-net theory'.



(8) 'Safety-net theory' forms a critical challenge to conceptual and empirical notions of depoliticisation;



(9) The fact that the public still turn to politics as the primary form of collective action reflects a continuing role and commitment to the state that brings with it grounds for optimism.



(10) Even the most cursory review of the main social and political challenges of the twenty-first century suggest that arguments regarding the 'end of politics' are premature, but that also the range and extent of those challenges may underline this paper's focus on the management and politics of public expectations.

This has been a wide-ranging paper and, like painting on a large canvas, this has required the use of a fairly broad brush, in analytical and conceptual terms. Indeed by emphasising the role and power of public expectations within the parameters of debates concerning political disengagement, I hope to have encouraged more scholars to focus their attention on this topic, thereby filling-in the detail and achieving a more fine-grained understanding

than has been possible in this paper. I also hope to encourage politicians and policy makers to reflect more closely on the relationship between public expectations and the current *Governance of Britain* reform agenda.²² This agenda recognises that something is seriously wrong with the relationship between the governors and the governed at the beginning of the twenty-first century – it recognises the extent of the gap – but it fails to understand the underlying fault lines. The proposals therefore focus on the symptoms rather than the cause of public disengagement and political apathy. In this context Bogdanor is probably correct to suggest that the implementation of the measures contained in the draft Constitutional Renewal Bill ‘will not have much effect on popular grievances.’²³ Hay and Stoker echo this sentiment by concluding, ‘If we are to restore trust to the political process we need a far more wide-ranging debate’.²⁴ The political dimensions and drivers of public expectations should be at the core of this debate.²⁵ Reducing everything down to its simplest form, however, illustrates that both public expectations and the revitalisation of politics hinge upon the existence of confidence. Confidence (1) amongst the public that they can trust politicians and political processes to make a positive difference; (2) amongst politicians in their own capacity to make a difference; and also (3) in terms of a societal capacity to engage in a mature debate about the capacity of the state and through this more realistic expectations about what can and should be achieved.

The issue of confidence provides a direct link with the banking crisis of 2008, which has already provided a new context and impetus to debates regarding the link between the management of public expectations and the revitalisation of politics. For decades public expectations and demands were dampened to some extent by a dominant discourse and ideology that was founded on the need for financial prudence and tight economic management, and a normative commitment to a very limited role for the state within economic management. The multi-billion pound financial packages that have been put in place by governments around the world to support the banking sector, not to mention the part-nationalisation of several banks, may increase public expectations and thereby exacerbate the expectations gap and attenuate political disengagement and apathy in the future. It was in this vein that Freedland noted, 'Now that they [the public] have seen their governments spending eye-watering sums of money to get out of a crisis, won't voters demand similar largesse to solve other pressing social problems?'²⁶

Alternatively the impact of the banking crisis – economic recession, increasing unemployment, rising borrowing – may in fact open-up the political space into which a more honest and considered debate about the limits of the state and public perceptions could be conducted. In actual fact (and in line with the emphasis of this paper on 'gaps') it is already clear that the banking crisis is very likely to compel any future government in the UK to reconsider their taxation and spending plans due to a 'financial gap' of at least three billion

pounds as a result of the crisis. We are entering a global period, as Riddell has noted, of 'tight constraints and reduced ambitions' that may well paradoxically aid the revitalisation of politics by reducing social and political expectations.²⁷ This point brings this paper back full circle to its initial focus on Colin Hay's *Why We Hate Politics* in which he states, 'We would... be better placed to set for ourselves political ambitions that we had some chance of achieving.'

Phrased in the terms of this paper such a development would be interpreted as seeking to close the 'expectations gap', which in turn may rebuild public trust and confidence, thereby destabilising the 'performance gap'. The danger of this strategy, viewed as an attempt to more carefully manage and control the politics of public expectations, is that it may limit or reduce the degree of animation, energy and vivacity that is in itself a driver of high public expectations about the capacity of politics - 'such a rational recalibration of our expectations might also lead us to lose our sense of political ambition, animation and engagement.'²⁸ It is in relation to this last point that this paper disagrees with Hay. Political ambitions, animation and engagement are likely to be stimulated, rather than suppressed, by the achievement of realistic public expectations. And in this sense managing the politics of public expectations - in all its forms - provides a (but not *the* way) way of bridging the gap and revitalising politics.

NOTES

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- ⁴ Pharr, S. and Putnam, R. (2000) *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- ⁵ Dalton, R. (2004) *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.47.
- ⁶ Hay, C. (2007) *We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 6.
- ⁷ See Rawnsley, A. (2001) *Servants of the People*. London: Penguin, p. 330.
- ⁸ Cabinet Office (2007) *Building on Progress: The Role of the State. Policy Review*. London: Cabinet Office.
- ⁹ Osborne, D and Gaebler, T. (1992) *Reinventing Government*, New York: Addison Wesley.
- ¹⁰ See Brittan, S. (1975) 'The Economic Contradictions of Democracy', *British Journal of Political Science*, 5 (2), pp. 129-59.
- ¹¹ HM Treasury (2002) *Better Government Services*, London: HM Treasury.
- ¹² HC 411 *From Citizen's Charter to Public Service Guarantee's*, Twelfth Report of Session 2007-2008, p.3
- ¹³ Riddell, P. 'Parties let us believe we can have it all', *The Times* 8 May 2008.
- ¹⁴ Blinder, A. (1997) 'Is Government too political?', *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. pp. 115-126; Buller, J. and Flinders, M. (2005) 'The Domestic Origins of Depoliticisation in the area of British Economic Policy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7 (4), pp. 526-544; Burnham, P. (2001). 'New Labour and the politics of depoliticisation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3 (2), pp. 127-149; Flinders, M and Buller, J. (2006) 'Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics and Tools', *British Politics*, 1 (3), pp. 1-26; Flinders, M. and Buller, J. (2006) 'Depoliticisation: A Response to Peter Burnham', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8 (2), pp. 307-311.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Majone, G. (2001) 'Non-majoritarian Institutions and the Limits of Democratic Governance', *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, 157, pp. 57-78.
- ¹⁶ Flinders, M. (2008) *Delegated Governance and the British State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Mouffe, C. (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso; Ranciere, J. (1995) *On the Shores of Politics*. London: Verso; Hay, C. (2007) *Why We Hate Politics*. London: Polity Press.
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- ¹⁸ See Hood, C. (2002) 'The Risk Game and the Blame Game', *Government and Opposition*, 37 (1), pp. 15-37
- ¹⁹ See www.populus.co.uk notably 'Public Services: Experience V. Perception', March 2006.
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- ²¹ See www.yougov.co.uk
- ²² <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/governanceofbritain.htm>
- ²³ Bogdanor, V. *The significance of the government's draft Constitutional Reform Bill*, transcript of a workshop held at the British Academy, 16 June 2008, p.45.
- ²⁴ Hay and Stoker, 'Who's Failing Whom?', p. 8.
- ²⁵ Ministry of Justice (2008) *A National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement*, London: Ministry of Justice.
- ²⁶ Freedland, J. *The Guardian* 15 October 2008, p.27.
- ²⁷ See Riddell, P. 'Real pain to come with higher taxes and less spending', *The Times* 16 October 2008, p.8.
- ²⁸ Hay *Why We Hate Politics*, p.7.