

Revitalising Politics: Have We Lost the Plot or Are We Obsessed with Foisting our Obsessions on Others? A Response to Hay, Stoker and Williamson

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Introduction

Much of what is viewed as politics in the UK might be seen as sterile or superficial, disconnected from many citizens. The coverage of politics in the media often appears obsessed with the three 'ps': personalities, polls and propriety, at the expense of serious intellectual or substantive consideration of debates and issues. Such superficiality is not, of course, confined to 'analyses' of UK politics; the same three 'p's have dominated coverage of the US primary and presidential elections. Amid the froth, observers might be hard-pressed to identify a single substantial policy difference between Clinton and Obama, or even between Obama and McCain, although whether this reflects media obsession or candidate stances is unclear.

In their welcome contribution to the debate on revitalising politics, Hay et al. score some useful hits, most notably in their critique of how 'anti-politics', in which politicians are held almost universally in contempt by the public and criticise each other on issues of sleaze and propriety, has displaced genuine political debate. Moreover, the authors correctly associate this form of non-politics with the displacement of older forms based upon ideological contestation, strong political parties and greater belief in political capabilities. Modern politics is marked by two trends: single-issue campaigns in which political parties may be by-passed and 'sleaze politics', in which individuals advance according to the

impact of negative portrayals of rivals. The cogency of identification and analysis of these problems by Hay et al., alongside the importance of their diagnosis of a lack of confidence in politicians, is not always, however, accompanied by appropriate historical context or, more importantly, possible prescription.

Crisis? What crisis?

Bereft of historical contextualisation, Hay et al's analysis contains the assumption – albeit never explicitly stated, but use of the term 'revitalise' suggests something better in the past – that there was an earlier 'golden age' of citizenship involvement in politics. What may be true is that more people abstain from collective activity, a well-documented reduction evident for decades.¹ Why should political activity be exceptional? Moreover, the ideological, party-driven model of politics was not necessarily healthy. Within many western democracies (particularly, arguably, the UK) it reflected an often destructive capital versus labour contest, which, whilst episodically capable of mobilizing the masses in political activity, did not create a 'healthy democracy'. There *is* evidence of low trust in politicians, but this has been the case since the 1980s and probably since earlier times.²

The decline of parties may partially reflect a 'de-tribalisation' of politics, as a more sophisticated electorate recognises that the sophistry of politics demands more than two, possibly two-and-a-half, major parties pretending to represent the vast majority of an individual's ideological or political preferences. Most individuals recognise that it may be the achievements of architects, technicians, engineers and other individuals who will make far more material difference to their lives than politicians, or even politics academics. Cognisance of this triumph of technocracy over polity is not to be anti-politics, and important debates will continue around resource allocations, but it acknowledges realistically the limits of what modern western democratic politics concerns, amid overblown political rhetoric from politicians concerning what they can achieve.

The major quantitative indicator of disengagement – low electoral turnout – which has concerned many is described by Hay et al. (p.2) as a ‘surface expression of political engagement and political disengagement’ and the authors are mildly optimistic that it will increase in the event of a close contest. The recent audits of political engagement conducted by the Hansard Society reveal significant levels of political inactivity, but no great trends in the direction of inertia or action.³ Record numbers of students study politics in sixth forms and at university and the case that disengagement in politics has increased is, at best, not proven.

In their wide-ranging critique, Hay et al. criticise aspects of institutional and democratic redress of the disjuncture between citizens and political structures which have been genuine attempts to reshape political structures according to citizen preferences. Most strikingly, they are harshly sceptical of the delivery of ‘only a rather haphazard and idiosyncratic system’ of devolution (p.4). Yet surely what has been created is a rather nuanced, asymmetric reflection of the variable strengths of nationalistic sentiment and support for devolved institutions across three very different nations? A ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of devolution –in polities where support for devolution varied from 74 per cent (Scotland) to 50 per cent (Wales) would not reflect democratic preferences. To ask why (p.12) ‘if five million people in Scotland are encouraged to do their own thing to the extent of making their own legislation why can’t the five million citizens of the West Midlands enjoy similar freedoms?’ is odd, given there are two rather big clues. One is the 74 per cent figure supporting Scottish devolution quoted above; the other figure is 22 per cent, the percentage voting in favour of regional government in North-East England in 2004, on a respectable (48 per cent) turnout. Good democratic politics can also legitimise the status quo where this is desired in a democracy, rather than produce endless new innovations or institutions. Surely the real malaise of politics – and the aspects which generate the greatest contempt - are where citizens’ views are dismissed (EU second referendums to overcome inconvenient initial results perhaps?); when

citizens are misled (Iraq war or university tuition fees possibly?) or when local powers are removed (the diminution of the powers of local government surely?).

Of course, there are legitimate questions to be asked concerning the mechanisms for citizen involvement in politics, notably perhaps the validity of referenda. Along with all other electors resident in Greater Manchester I will shortly be voting on whether the region should adopt a congestion charge in return for major improvements in public transport. At one level, the opportunity for direct citizen involvement in a major decision is important. Alternatively, it is an abdication of the responsibility of elected councillors to take difficult, long-term, decisions on our behalf, given their mandate.

Citizenship, Young People and Generating Interest in Politics

Although the need for the invigoration of politics is one without demographic boundaries, the problem is often seen as being particularly acute among young people. Earlier this year, I was appointed Chair of the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC), a body first mooted in the government's Governance of Britain Green Paper.⁴ The Commission reports to the Prime Minister, the Justice Minister and the Minister for Children and Families in Spring 2009. Its terms of reference are:

1. To examine what citizenship means to young people
2. To consider how to increase young people's participation in politics; the development of citizenship among disadvantaged groups; how active citizenship can be promoted through volunteering and community engagement; and how the political system can reflect the communication preferences of young people
3. To lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16.

Disentangling the YCC's role from the plethora of other commissions and reports is difficult. The Russell Commission advocated a national framework for youth action and engagement, primarily in respect of volunteering.⁵ The Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review examined whether British social, political and cultural history should be pillars of the citizenship curriculum.⁶ The Yvote/Ynot? Project examined how to tackle voter disengagement among the young⁷ and the Electoral Commission has explored the issue of votes for 16 year olds.⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, a recent report by the Department for Constitutional Affairs made few connections between good citizenship and political participation.⁹ The YCC will *not* follow the Goldsmith Commission's approach of linking citizenship to British identity,¹⁰ a mercy given the different constructions of this according to region. In Northern Ireland the equal legitimacy of an Irish identity is explicitly recognised in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, whilst in Scotland, Britishness is a secondary identity.¹¹

In seeking to help young people make the connection between citizenship and politics, the YCC should perform a useful role, although the fear is that the votes-at-16 issue may dominate at the expense of deeper concerns. Worryingly, many young people still tend to perceive good citizenship as primarily a negative duty to not break the law; some see citizenship more positively in terms of volunteering and 'doing good', but few see good citizenship in terms of engagement with politics, even at the basic of level of voting. The YCC's demographic remit and concentration upon citizenship distinguish it from the Power Inquiry,¹² although the latter recommended a reduction in the voting age to 16, despite the Electoral Commission's earlier rejection of the idea.¹³ Indeed pressure is mounting from various sources to reduce the voting age. In 2007, the Welsh Assembly voted in favour of votes-at-16; the Isle of Man has introduced the lower age (but only a minority of 16 and 17 year olds bothered to even register). In July 2008, Labour's National Policy Forum backed a voting age reduction as party policy and there is a risk that the issue will become the subject of inter-party contest. When the UK last reduced the voting

age – to 18, in 1969 (the first country to do so) it was amid greater political consensus on the desirability of change.¹⁴

It would be premature and improper for me to offer a view on the merits of a voting age reduction at this stage; suffice to say that the YCC is undertaking extensive consultation with no pre-ordained conclusions. Few would regard reducing the voting age as a panacea for political engagement among young people; adopted in isolation without wider connections between young people and politics, the measure would merely have a marginal, symbolic effect.

Are solutions to political disengagement possible?

Hay et al. register some very valid concerns of the hiving off of decision-making to unelected commissions (p.6) with a consequent lack of accountability. A first step in re-connecting public and politics would be to place decision-making powers primarily in the domain of those we elect, whilst our elected representatives ought to be fully cognisant of pressure group and public opinion. There are other possible remedies, none in themselves panaceas but potentially useful contributors, which may assist:

Enhanced citizenship education, if properly taught and delivered, may assist political engagement. As a statutory part of the secondary school curriculum since 2002, citizenship education has been successful in terms of take-up, with 75,000 schoolchildren undertaking a GCSE in the module in 2007. Citizenship is thus the fastest-growing GCSE and an A level in the subject is being introduced this year, whilst the Goldsmith Commission advocating the extension of Citizenship classes to primary schools. Whilst citizenship classes have the potential to de-mystify political institutions, greater awareness of the flaws of those institutions may accentuate youth disengagement. Moreover, delivery of citizenship classes varies hugely in terms of commitment and quality, with 'perhaps fifteen or twenty per cent [of

deliverers]...doing little, perhaps hoping that Citizenship is a passing initiative that will go the way of others'.¹⁵ Worryingly, a recent study suggests that 'dedicated citizenship lessons appear to undermine future electoral participation'.¹⁶

Another prescription would be to improve citizen input into parliamentary procedures. Standing and select committees mean little to many people and enjoy scant input, as distinct from pressure group representations. Greater public contributions to their deliberations would produce a closer linkage of parliament to people.

A further positive contribution might be reform of the voting system for UK general elections and local elections in England and Wales. Whilst electoral volatility means that the concept of safe parliamentary seats is dubious, it is the case that many votes are wasted; that electoral outcomes do not closely reflect voter preferences and that the voting system is a relic of an era of two-party dominance of the electorate which has long passed.

A fifth prescription might be the creation of citizen juries, chosen in the same random way as legal juries and with the same expectations of citizen service. Such juries could act in a consultative role, conveying directly citizen views on a subject to national or local representative bodies.

Conclusion

In prescribing treatment for the apparent malaise of political disengagement, it is important that we do not treat the patients with too many remedies or force 'treatment' upon the non-afflicted. Citizen engagement in politics is not in acute crisis, its current level being comparable with that of previous generations, although regrettably political parties, as conduits of engagement, may be in irreversible decline. What is of concern, however, is the apparent disengagement, even from the basic act of voting,

of many young people, who may become serial abstainers. Non-voting cannot be dismissed; it symbolises political disengagement and its absence is unlikely to be compensated by other forms of political activity. The solution lies not in creating new sets of institutions and more, ever less meaningful elections, but in bolstering existing representative political institutions, particularly at the local level, by giving them more powers, creating greater accountability, easing access and offering transparent scrutiny. It is disturbing that, despite the onset of citizenship education within schools, only a minority of young people connect citizenship with political engagement. By encouraging a variety of modes of meaningful political activity, via conventional and less conventional mechanisms, a proper connection is possible.

References

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- ¹² Power Inquiry, *Power to the People: the report of Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*, London: Joseph Rowntree, 2006.
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- ¹⁴ Fielding, S. *The Labour Governments 1964-70: Labour and Cultural Change*, Vol. 1, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

¹⁵ Breslin, T., Rowe, D. and Thornton, A. (Citizenship Foundation) *Citizenship Education: current state of play and recommendations: Memorandum of Submission to the Education Selection Committee*, London: Citizenship Foundation, 2006: 3.

¹⁶ Whiteley, P. 'Can Voting be Taught? Citizenship Education and the Electoral Participation of Students', Unpublished paper, 2008: 26.