

What's happening to our democracy?

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By democraticaudit

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Stuart Wilks-Heeg, 28 February 2011

Our fourth Audit of UK democracy, due for publication later this year, deploys [International IDEA's 'State of Democracy' assessment framework](#) and is built around 77 separate 'search questions'. As we consider the huge evidence base which our Audit is generating, however, one 'overarching' question which is not part of the framework becomes increasingly dominant in our minds. Is democracy in the UK changing for the better or for the worse?

To evaluate how UK democracy is changing, our analysis must inevitably look both backwards and forwards. Much of the assessment in our 2011 Audit necessarily focuses on the impact of the political and constitutional reforms introduced by New Labour from 1997 onwards. Yet, the formation of the coalition government in May 2010, with a far-reaching constitutional reform agenda of its own, also requires us to evaluate the likely significance of an emerging set of constitutional changes.



The Palace of Westminster (Credit: Trodel, CC BY-SA 2.0)

We might plausibly claim that our last Audit, published in 2002, already dealt with the great bulk of political and constitutional reform introduced under New Labour. Certainly, much of what was to constitute Labour's legacy of reform had already been enacted by the early part of the decade.

Yet, while we documented a great range of constitutional changes in 2002, from the Human Rights Act to devolution to the 'Celtic nations', our analysis clearly needs updating. The full consequences of many of New Labour's reforms were difficult, if not impossible, to gauge at the time. It was also difficult to predict in 2002 that constitutional reform efforts would stall so significantly during Labour's second and third terms in office. The consequences of failures to achieve reforms can be just as significant as those arising from measures which did make it to the statute book.

It was already clear by the early 2000s that Labour had no intention to proceed with the referendum on electoral

reform that had been promised in their 1997 election manifesto. Over the next eight years, similarly notable non-reforms began to accumulate – the failure to introduce elections for members of the House of Lords; the retreat from the goal of addressing the ‘democratic deficit’ in the English regions by introducing directly-elected regional Assemblies; the impasse reached on reforms to the way in which political parties are funded.

Labour’s reforms had been trailed in Tony Blair’s foreword to the party’s 1997 election manifesto as necessary to ‘rebuild (the) bond of trust between government and the people’ and to ensure that ‘democracy can flourish’. Yet, by the end of Labour’s third term, virtually every indicator of public attitudes towards the democratic process, as well as formal engagement with it, pointed to clear deterioration.

Against this backdrop, it is telling that David Cameron’s and Nick Clegg’s jointly-written foreword to the coalition’s [‘Programme for Government’](#) declares: ‘we both want a Britain where our political system is looked at with admiration, not anger’. The echoes of 1997 could not be more obvious, particularly when we pick over the details of the coalition’s proposals for political and constitutional reform – a [referendum on electoral reform](#), an elected second chamber to replace the Lords, reform of party funding, directly elected mayors for cities outside of London all sound very familiar.

While the sense of déjà-vu may be profound, it could be asked whether the coalition is, quite legitimately, picking up where New Labour’s reforms began to stall a decade ago. Will constitutional change under Cameron and Clegg see the missing pieces added to the jigsaw, which Blair and Brown failed to complete? And with the missing elements of democratic reform in place, will public confidence be restored in UK democracy as a whole? Based on the evidence we have gathered, our answers to both these questions would have to be ‘no’.

The reason for our pessimism is that we also detect a number of deeper shifts in the character of UK democracy over the last decade or more. Social, economic and political inequalities have widened dramatically since the mid-1990s – a trend which is only likely to be accelerated by current and planned public expenditure cuts. At the same time, we find evidence of a reconfiguration of long-established elite networks, a development with profound implications for democracy; growing concentrations of personal wealth and corporate power have triggered an underlying shift in how we are governed.

That such concerns are not recognised, let alone addressed, by the policy agenda being pursued by the coalition should not surprise us – they were equally conspicuous by their absence in New Labour’s analysis of what was needed for ‘democracy to flourish’. Yet, as the Audit team ponders the evidence we have accumulated, it would surely be remiss of us not to ask just where political power lies in the United Kingdom today, and with what consequences for our democracy.