

The Leader of the Green Party, Natalie Bennett, on fixing our broken politics

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Democratic Audit's Sean Kippin recently interviewed the leader of the Green Party **Natalie Bennett** in advance of a talk she was giving in the Palace of Westminster about the future for political reform. In part one of a two part interview, they discussed what needs to be done to modernise our political and constitutional arrangements, and what specifically can be done to improve Parliament and the quality of our governance.*



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What are the Green Party's priorities for political and constitutional reform?

There is going to be change. Just as you look at the state of our economic system and we need very significant change and reform, we also need to see very significant change and reform in our politics. There is a loss of hope – I think many people out there think that this system cannot possibly work properly and without fundamental change it isn't going to work for us.

There are many factors that have contributed to the creation of this; the expenses scandal, for example plays a role, but the influence of banks and multinational corporations, issues around lobbyists and the big six energy companies and their influence on energy policy are also very damaging.

Something which I think is less obvious but very damaging is that we have a Government who is completely ideologically wedded to outsourcing, which is a really stupid system, and it has the particular problem that it really, fundamentally removes democratic accountability. When some disaster happens or there's an enormous cost overrun, the Minister stands up in the House of Commons and says 'Wasn't me, guv! It was the contractor, what

could I do?’ and is then asked about the costs and says ‘Well that’s commercially confidential’. It’s for those reasons that outsourcing is of fundamental damage to democracy, which I think isn’t mentioned enough.

On top of that, there’s the ‘old one’ – MPs – only 22% are women for example, and though you can’t say that’s a new cause of disillusionment with politics because that’s been there a long while, equally the lack of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities all play a role. We’re also seeing the rise of the ‘political class’ and people coming from an incredibly narrow range of backgrounds increasingly representing the majority of people in Parliament, and that is doing real damage to the nature of our politics.

Does the way that we are governed come into this?

If you think about this – and there really hasn’t been enough discussion about this – the way that George Osborne pulled the end of compulsory annuities out of his hat at the end of this year’s Budget, and for the next week the whole industry and all of the analysts went scrambling around trying to work out what this actually means, what will happen when this fundamental change comes in? I contrast that with [Stein Ringen’s the Nation of Devils](#) which is an excellent book which I really recommend that everyone interested in politics should read, about how Norway changed its pensions system. Over ten years, through three successive Governments, they consulted, went away and talked to unions and employers and everyone concerned, and agreed collectively on a system.

Contrasting the way they did it, and we did it, is very interesting. How do we make good decisions, so that we don’t see for example one Labour Government setting up Sure Start centres, and then a Tory Government closing them all down again. That’s a fundamental waste of resources and efforts. Another example is the restructuring of the NHS which we were told we weren’t going to have. With this kind of approach, you end up with disasters like West Coast Mainline tendering and if you look across a whole range of policy areas, the quality of Governance is a real problem.

So there isn’t one thing you can point to and say ‘right, that is the solution to all of our problems’ because we just aren’t in that kind of political space. Where we are is a space in which there are lots of interesting political opportunities; the first obvious one is the Scottish referendum. Six months ago a yes vote seemed entirely hypothetical, but it is now looking a lot less hypothetical than it did. Somebody at a public meeting asked me ‘won’t it be chaos? What will happen to us in England and Wales if the Scots go?’, and I said ‘Yes! Wouldn’t it be great to have chaos?!’ because there is a real opportunity there. Because if we are going to be in a position where everything changes, surely we’re going to have to actually write it down. And if we get to the point of drafting a written constitution, huge numbers of things which are just taken as matter-of-fact now, like the person who happens to be heir to the throne will be able to evade planning law and stick his orr into the drawing up of lots of other laws, well you couldn’t really write that on the page, could you? And though there is a Bill in front of the House of Lords at the moment, a written constitution would fix that in one go.

Does there need to be more wholesale reform of Parliament?

I also think there is a possibility in strengthening Parliament in holding the executive to account. This began to happen with the Government’s Syria vote, where you could actually see a reshaping inside Parliaments halls. There is a core of very solid, free-thinking MPs. Not a very big core, but you just imagine a real shifting of the plates within this place.

The other thing I think is very interesting is that it’s not impossible to imagine a situation where for example in 2015 UKIP gets 15% of the vote and still doesn’t win a single seat. That’s what the Green Party had with the non-PR European Parliament elections in 1989 and I think that would create a lot of very angry people who had previously been satisfied with how things were before, who could suddenly get very angry. I have an imagine in my head of a march which is a mix of ‘Occupy’ and Ukipers, all in the same cause of political reform! Who knows what might happen if you have that kind of coalition?

I also think it's well worth campaigners talking about Single Transferable Vote for English and Welsh Local Elections because the great problem with House of Lords and Commons reform is that you have to persuade turkeys to vote for Christmas. However, if you go for reform of local authorities you're voting for everyone to have chicken dinners! The largest parties aren't really interested in councils, and I think that keeping STV on the agenda is worthwhile.

My general message is flexibility, adaptability, rather than choosing one single [constitutional and political reform] priority to campaign on for the next five years. We're going to have to be a bit more like the Avaaz's and the other petitions sites, which are around now, that leap on something and then see it gaining traction and continue to work on that. So it's a different approach to the one traditionally pursued by constitutional reformers, but I think that's what we're going to have to do, because there isn't one obvious standout issue.

One thing I do want to highlight is, and I don't say this too often now, but after the AV Referendum, lots of people would say that the cause of constitutional reform has been set back for a generation, to which I say 'let's not wish that to be true!' – lets assume that it isn't true – because I really don't think it is.

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