DEBATE


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This short note draws on his co-authored 2012 study Democratic Decline and Demotic Renewal: Political Change in Britain, Australia and New Zealand (Cambridge University Press).

Matthew Flinders fine survey summarises the very wide contemporary literature on democratic discontents. Whilst of course recognising there is no single remedy, he urges attention to the development of political literacy. This involves practices of listening and speaking across civic space—from socialisation during schooling to democratic participation in adult life. In this brief note I want to offer a complementary perspective on these matters: why has citizen disaffection grown; what are the implications for policy-making practice; and finally, what systemic changes might be required to make wider engagement a reality.

1. Why has citizen disaffection grown?

Why has citizen disaffection grown so spectacularly? This outcome has, I suggest, been driven by three structural changes: first, the decline of major party organisations; second, a convergence of major party (particularly economic) agendas and third, and most importantly, a pluralisation and differentiation of citizen identities. Let’s look briefly at each.

First, the story of major party organisational decline is well known. From a membership of 348,000 in 1980, Labour has shrunk to around 160,000. Roughly similar numbers are recorded for the Conservatives. As a proportion of the electorate, major party membership has shrivelled to 0.8%. Moreover, whereas
approximately 44% of citizens had very strong identification with the major parties in 1964, recent figures register about 10–12%. Collapsing turnouts are yet another indicator of the decline of major party standing.

But decline extends well beyond public support. Party organisations used to be important sites engaging activists and aggregating interests. Party conferences were important policy-making fora. Citizens could advance motions at local and regional party meetings and thus experience political efficacy. These capacities are long gone. Conferences are largely stage managed. Parliamentary elites substantially influence manifesto design. Member influence is marginal.

A second reason for citizen disaffection arises from the convergence of major party agendas. In Mrs Thatcher’s period, 80% recognised a significant difference; in 2008 only 30%. The days when they stood for significantly different directions for national social and/or economic development have long gone. Following the demise of Michael Foot, Labour has embraced economic globalisation and a market-based approach to the delivery of public services. Whether these remain universally-appropriate strategies is moot. Certainly the financial crisis has not resulted in either major party shifting its stance in any significant way. And both major parties agree the deficit is an issue—although they disagree about tolerable levels and appropriate cuts. But underlying differences in direction or orientation are hard to discern.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, as a consequence of social changes in the late 1960s and 1970s, the community has become much more pluralised and differentiated. Political identities now encompass women, gay men and women, environmental concerns, Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English nationalists, ethnic communities, animal liberationists and so forth. Proponents have stirred counteracting conservative reactions. Social class, formerly the sheet anchor of the two-party system, is hugely qualified by these developments.

The dense tissue that once connected the major parties to their publics has largely gone. Consequences include short termism, populism and often opportunistic, fabricated or manufactured difference. Moreover, responses are often framed with an eye to media impact rather than any underlying values or ideology. The media have filled the gap between citizens and the formal system, mostly with malign effects.

In sum, the two seismic developments of recent decades are economic globalisation and social pluralisation. The former has been more or less addressed by the major parties. The latter has yet to be assimilated. Indeed, the slow-burn crisis of legitimacy, which the three foregoing structural changes have occasioned, is perhaps only now fully apparent.

2. Implications for policy-making practice

At least four implications would seem to follow from the above analysis. The first concerns the need to create systemic capacities to address single issues. As
Bernard Crick observed many years ago, the present forms and processes of parliament are tantamount to a continuing election campaign. This *mise-en-scène* was designed for an era in which the major parties championed different ideologies and different medium-term agendas. It assumed that the approach to particular issues could be derived from an overarching programme. This is no longer the case. There is no party platform or canonical document from which to infer attitudes to gay marriage, euthanasia, the financial crisis, fox hunting, Europe, refugees or devolution, to nominate just a few recent matters. Each of these issues is associated with distinctive alignments, distinctive agendas, distinctive coalitions and distinctive narratives.

But the present system has only the barest capacity to create a political conversation around single issues that is at least partially separate from the struggle for office between the major parties. It lacks any capacity for what might be termed a ‘contemplative’ phase in the unfolding of contested policy issues.

Second (really a corollary of the preceding point), coalition-building needs to be made routine within the structure of the policy-making system. As a wide literature attests, where the community is fragmented and pluralised, a coalition symbolises wide support. Coalitions add important public cues to the political equation—cues that, in the majoritarian era, were largely delivered by major party brands.

Third, to the extent possible, bi(multi)partisanship opportunities need to be explored. As noted above, on many issues there is now substantial overlap between one or other of the parties. You would never know from the present political conversation. If the agenda entry phase in the policy process could be made more transparent, the opportunity to explore the scope for at least partial cross-party alliances would be greatly extended. In a strategic phase, the political conversation might focus on questions such as: why is an issue significant? What are some of the options for dealing with it? If the scope for agreement around such matters could be made at least partially transparent, the public conversation might thereafter better focus on real areas of contention.

And finally, opportunities for ad hoc public engagement need to be considerably extended. Digital media provide a variety of opportunities for ad hoc groups of citizens to come together around particular issues and to advance policy proposals. There are already examples of this occurring beyond the formal system. But the latter has no or very limited capacities to connect to this activity.

Recall the way citizens once proposed motions at a local branch and then followed its advance to regional and later national party conferences. This suggests how such processes now need to be orchestrated around single issues. Engagement needs to be serial and reciprocal, not sporadic or one-off. If groups of citizens propose something and it is rejected, the reasons need to be stated. More importantly, the proponents need the chance to return to their cause by augmenting their argument and by meeting a higher support hurdle. How these matters might be
operationalised needs much more thought. But the principle that engagement should be serial and reciprocal is fundamental.

3. What systemic changes might be required?

There are many proposals for system development. Deliberative democrats propose much wider use of citizen juries and similar choice mechanism. Others see a redefined role for major parties, with requirements for community engagement and policy activism expanded (Mulgan et al., 2006). Voting reform and Lords reform are both still on the agenda. And all parties are advocating programme devolution and community engagement. But such initiatives also need to be anchored in a formal structure within the representational system. Access and engagement, which is broadened and deepened and sited at the epicentre of the representational system, is fundamental.

In responding to this need, it is hard to see any alternative to a much-expanded and deepened role for the parliamentary committee system. This has already developed substantially. It has undertaken some contentious agenda-setting enquiries. It has used social media to extend outreach and engagement. On particular enquiries, it has mobilised a wide variety of interests and it has attracted diverse and very comprehensive policy submissions.

But the potential of the parliamentary committee system is hardly sufficiently recognised. Procedural and other changes are required to enhance its standing and influence in the broader political and policy-making system. This would be tantamount to a democratic transformation. Such institutional developments would align the formal system much more constructively with its publics. Political literacy is, in Matthew Flinders’ discussion, the keystone of democratic renewal. Through adaptation of the representational system, this practice could be dramatically advanced.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Reference