Citizenship in Britain

There are increasing concerns about changes in society and the economy which are undermining the effectiveness of democracy and weakening traditional conceptions of citizenship. What does it mean to be a British citizen in the early part of the twenty-first century? This book presents the first major empirical study of citizenship in Britain, comprising surveys of political participation and voluntary activities, and of the beliefs and values which underpin them. As well as presenting new data, the authors provide a sophisticated discussion of the concept of citizenship, and the consequences of a lack of civic engagement in a modern democracy. They examine why some people are ‘good’ citizens when others are ‘bad’ and they explore the consequences of citizenship for policy-makers and democracy. Comprehensive and accessible, this book makes a major contribution to our understanding of civic attitudes in Britain today and will appeal to students, researchers and policy-makers.

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'You gave us the finger and guess what, we want you to keep on doing it. We don’t want your money, just your finger. 40,000 of you pulled your finger out, clicked on our website and emailed Nestlé asking them to reduce their whopping $6million claim against the Ethiopian people, which they have! All it takes is one of your fingers to help us create the biggest petition in the world. Join the Big Noise. Make Fair Trade Fair.Com. Text ‘MTF7’ + your name to 81003 or call Oxfam on 08700101047.'

(Advert in Guardian, 31 May, 2003)

‘If you want to change the world put your money in fair trade chocolate and start volunteering.’

(Yann Martel, author of Life of Pi, Booker Prize winner, Guardian, 23 October 2002)

‘A public is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community . . . a public is a kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything and nothing.’

(W. H. Auden quoting Kierkegaard)
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the lobby surrounded by questionnaires and piles of paper and made repeated requests for coffee and tea. Their tolerance and service were much appreciated.

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Sheffield and Colchester
August 2003
‘We should not, must not, dare not, be complacent about the health and future of British democracy. Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure.’


Comments such as those of the Lord Chancellor, quoted above, in which he warns about British democracy and appeals for engaged citizens have not been a common feature of British political discourse until relatively recently. For much of the twentieth century British democracy was assumed to be healthy. Furthermore, the term ‘citizen’ appeared to be inappropriate in the British context. The British were more likely to be dutiful and respectful subjects rather than engaged citizens.

There are numerous reasons, both political and social, why British democracy and citizenship have become important features of contemporary political debate. These include membership of the European Union, the introduction of human rights legislation, the devolution of powers within the state, the increasingly heterogeneous nature of the population, the greater movement of populations across state boundaries, concerns about the prevalence of anti-social behaviour, and the threats to both personal safety and personal liberties arising from international terrorism.

For much of the twentieth century both elite and mass opinion was confident that the political system worked well and individual rights were effectively protected by its institutions and procedures. Respect for these traditional political institutions and procedures was reflected in the absence of any fundamental reforms immediately after the Second World War. Whereas the culmination of the war heralded an abrupt shift in domestic policies as post-war governments accepted greater responsibility for managing the economy and providing universal levels of social welfare, by contrast major reforms to political institutions and procedures did not occur. Apart from a modification to the delaying powers of the...
The participant role is highly developed. Exposure to politics, interest, involvement, and a sense of competence are relatively high. There are norms supporting political activity, as well as emotional involvement in elections and system affect. And the attachment to the system is a balanced one: there is general system pride as well as satisfaction with specific governmental performance. (1963: 455)

Such positive conclusions regarding the British political system could not be reached today. Levels of political involvement and public interest have declined, as have levels of public trust in politicians. The lack of public confidence in the current political system is shared by many within the political elite. Here we quote just two recent examples of elite concern. The first is taken from the retirement speech of the Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd (2000), in which she stated

I know from my postbag how much disillusionment about the political process there is among the general public. The level of cynicism about Parliament, and the accompanying alienation of many of the young from the democratic process, is troubling. It is an issue on which every member of the House should wish to reflect. It is our responsibility, each and every one of us, to do what we can to develop and build public trust and confidence.

The other example comes from the authoritative House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration (2001) which stated

Not since the extension of the suffrage in 1918 has there been such a low level of participation in the electoral process. The reasons for it may be debated, but not its seriousness for our democracy. We find it extraordinary that this collapse in electoral participation, put alongside other evidence on civic disengagement, has not been treated as a civic crisis demanding an appropriate response.

By the 1990s reform of political institutions had become a feature of inter-party argument. In the years preceding the 1997 general election the Labour Party sought to capitalise on public concern by portraying
the Conservatives as an ancien régime attached to old institutions, and proposed that a new modernised regime would introduce major institutional changes. After the Labour Party’s electoral success in 1997, these reforms were duly introduced. For example, the devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales, and the election of these devolved institutions by a more proportional electoral system; the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into a Human Rights Act; and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act.

Very fundamental changes to the working of the British state have recently been introduced. Critics claim, however, that these reforms are too limited and will not resolve some of Britain’s fundamental, structural problems (Beetham et al., 2002). After examining contemporary public attitudes, Bromley, Curtice and Seyd (2001: 200) argue that ‘Britain faces a crisis of confidence and participation that is far deeper than any programme of constitutional reform is capable of reversing.’

Declining public confidence in, and respect for, conventional political institutions and procedures has provided a stimulus to alternative forms of politics. Recent well-publicised exercises in protest, particularly against road and airport runway developments, fuel taxes, a ban on fox hunting, and the US-led war in Iraq suggest a greater public willingness to engage in direct action or street demonstrations. Riots in 2001 in Bradford and Oldham provided additional evidence of public disenchantment, particularly among young ethnic minorities, with traditional methods of political participation.

There is solid evidence of voter apathy and distrust of politicians, but we have little knowledge or understanding of people’s contemporary attitudes towards citizenship. Which is one reason why the Economic and Social Research Council established its Democracy and Participation programme and why, as part of that programme, it commissioned a Citizen Audit. The findings of the Citizen Audit are the subject of this book.