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978-1-107-02568-4 - Democratic Decline and Democratic Renewal: Political Change in Britain,
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Ian Marsh and Raymond Miller

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Part I

Introduction

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1 The decline and renewal of democratic governance: a theoretical framework

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, liberal democracy has apparently triumphed. In 1974, only 39 states were recognised as democracies, equal to 27 per cent of the number of countries (142). In 2000 there were 120 democracies, equal to 63 per cent of the number of countries (192). Over the whole course of the twentieth century other political forms – aristocracies and oligarchies, monarchies and empires, and fascist and communist regimes – have been defeated or discredited. Now, even in states that draw their authority primarily from nationalist sentiment or political intimidation, democratic norms receive lip service. Yet recent literatures suggest this moment of triumph is also problematic. As the form has universalised, democratic practice has contracted, notably in those western states where its provenance is longest and deepest. That includes the three covered in this study, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. In responding to this development, this study has two primary aims: first, to explore the origin and trajectory of present political discontents; and second, to suggest how they might be remedied.

Because they share broad political cultures and basic institutional forms, these three states are ideal sites in which to investigate comparatively contemporary possibilities of institutional change. In all three cases, there are no written rules covering regime change. Outcomes are determined by convention. Thus doctrines of ministerial responsibility, Cabinet solidarity and confidence can be reworked depending on changing electoral conditions and on patterns of voting in parliament. Their political culture is also shared. Independently of partisan differences about its precise role, a ‘strong’ or effective state has historically been valued (e.g. Greenleaf, 1983, Ch. 1).¹ Hence, a finding that state capacity has significantly diminished would be pertinent, the more so if the challenge is found to

¹ In both these former respects, our three states present a fundamental contrast with the United States where the structure of power is frozen by the constitution and the formation of majorities deliberately impeded.

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be systemic.² Further, if this challenge is common to all three, the case for action in each will be reinforced. Finally, the points at which their current institutional practices vary are precisely those which might illumine the repertoire of possible changes. Multi-party politics has become entrenched in New Zealand (but at present much more tentatively in Britain and Australia). Australia also possesses a ‘strong’ upper house, one whose federal composition has fostered a semblance of proportional representation. For its part, Britain has a ‘strong’ committee system which constitutes, in the words of the late Stuart Walkland, ‘a new House of Commons in waiting’. In these three states, voting reform, upper house reform and committee system development constitute the repertoire of possible systemic adaptations. These are the means by which the links between citizens and the state could be transfigured, democratic experience expanded and state effectiveness renewed.

Contrasting assessments highlight the contraction of democratic practice. Writing in the mid twentieth century, Samuel Beer documented the advance of political engagement. In his classic study, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age*, theories of representation occupy centre stage. Successive theories provided different answers to a fundamental political question: ‘How is the community as a whole to be represented? Who or what is to represent the common good or public interest, as compared with the more particular interests of the component parts?’ (1969, p. 6; for a parallel application of the theory of representation to the United States, see Beer, 1993). Referring to Britain, he identified five distinctively patterned regimes each of which answered this question in different ways: Old Tory, Old Whig, Liberal, Radical and Collectivist. Over the past three centuries, this evolution in state forms also transmitted wider processes of modernisation, which in turn reflected the political aspirations of the liberal Enlightenment. Through modernisation, rationalism and voluntarism were progressively woven into political and civic life. Reflecting the power of the point of departure in new political contexts, the settler societies of Australia and New Zealand were constructed from the same traditions and have exemplified similar dynamics, albeit with different emphases (e.g. Hartz, 1955; Tocqueville, 2000; Malouf, 2002, p. 60).

Writing in the early twenty-first century, Blyth and Katz (2005) have characterised the latest moment in democratic advance. The turn they

² The concept of state capacity has increasingly figured in analysis. It can be regarded as the state’s ability to achieve its political objectives in conjunction with civil society and/or in the face of societal resistance (e.g. Bell and Hindmoor, 2009).

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describe marks a significant shift from the historic pattern. The political system has become disconnected from the public that it nominally serves. Representation has shifted to a political elite, composed broadly of those who share a neo-liberal worldview.³ In their cartel theory of politics, political elites are able to impose their agendas on an often disaffected citizenry because the dominant parties eliminate competition by tacitly espousing the same approach to representation. Populism and manufactured difference trump real debate. Blyth and Katz specifically illustrate their thesis by reference to developments in the United States, Britain and Sweden.⁴

Neo-liberalism – as theory, rhetoric and policy – will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter as well as in subsequent chapters. To be noted at the outset however are the different ways this approach has been embraced by policy-makers, political leaders and other protagonists. For many policy-makers and politicians, theory offered an expedient solution to immediate issues. The wider political implications did not figure in their calculations. Their embrace was pragmatic. Others – fewer in number – have adopted neo-liberalism as the canonical theory of liberty and of the economy. For both pragmatists and adherents, if they are acknowledged at all, the broader political implications are discounted – or perhaps accepted as the essential costs (or perhaps as necessary ‘externalities’) of a particular vision of liberty. This study invites a reappraisal of such judgments.

³ In this conception, neo-liberalism involves a programme with three core elements: a populist discourse that seeks to downsize expectations; a programme that moves policy commitments away from democratic determination to technocratic or market-based choice processes; and, via the cartel theory, a conception of voters as agents not principals (also Evans, 1997).

⁴ ‘There is another kind of loss of freedom, which has been widely discussed, most memorably by Alexis de Tocqueville. A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are “enclosed in their own hearts” is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely. This opens the danger of a new, specifically modern form of despotism, which Tocqueville calls soft despotism. It will not be a tyranny of terror and oppression as in the old days. The government will be mild and paternalistic. It may even keep democratic forms with periodic elections. But in fact everything will be run by an “immense tutelary power”, over which people will have little control. The only defence against this Tocqueville thinks is a vigorous political culture in which participation is valued at several levels of government and in voluntary associations as well. But the atomism of the self-absorbed individual militates against this. Once participation declines, once the lateral associations that were its vehicles wither away, the individual citizen is left alone in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels, correctly, powerless. This demotivates the citizen even further, and the vicious cycle of soft despotism is joined’ (Taylor, 1991, pp. 9–10).

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Meantime, Blyth and Katz are not alone in their assessment of democratic decline. Similar sentiments are expressed in other work, albeit in different terms. For example, David Marquand's elegant commentary, *Decline of the Public* (2004), laments the pervasive marketisation and commercialisation of civic life. He defends a conception of politics as the domain 'in which the pursuit of the public interest is the main concern, and participation is the highest good' (Gamble, 1997, p. 367). Through the linkages it facilitates and the conversations that it fosters, politics can enrich individual lives. Through its capacities for tolerant integration, politics can nourish differentiated patterns of life. But recent developments, which include a largely populist political rhetoric, a personalisation of political authority, and a disdain on the part of elites for participation and engagement, turn from such civic conceptions (for another account in a US context see Heclo, 2009). Colin Crouch (2004) picks up analogous themes from another angle in his book, *Post Democracy*. He also argues that citizens are disconnected from politics. Political elites have foreshortened public choices by collaborating in a shift of power towards international capital.⁵ Political parties remain as critical actors. But social democratic parties have generally failed to build broadly-based constituencies around new patterns of work life (also Esping-Andersen, 2002).

These varied interpretations, all of which pre-date the global financial crisis, tell a single story of pervasive democratic decline. Democratic engagement was once the touchstone of modernity. Now citizen participation has contracted. Blyth and Katz do point to the new and critical role of emergent parties, which are potential agents of regime change. But this framing does not specify how new parties might repair the representation gap or how this might trigger the construction of a more effective structure of governance. It is also possible that contraction of the representational role of the parties has been matched by new modes of representation elsewhere in the political system (e.g. Rhodes, 1997). However, none of the above approaches provides a framework that allows such claims to be assessed comprehensively.

To bridge this gap, this study uses a conceptual framework that is derived from March and Olsen's (1995) study of democratic governance. This offers a perspective that is both comprehensive and remedial. Their model consists of two broad dimensions: one covering the

⁵ For a darker account of this shift and its still unfolding consequences see Streeck (2011).

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representational (input) face of politics and the other the outcome (output) face. The normative premise concerns the linkage between these elements. Broadly, the more closely aligned these ‘faces’ of politics are, the more completely democratic governance is realised. As we will see, this framework allows particular instances of democratic governance to be placed on a scale bounded by ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ poles. Further, it suggests the conditions that need to be satisfied in moving between these outcomes. The most relevant from the perspective of this study concerns the links between citizens and the political system. Thick links require elaborated citizen engagement.

Taken in conjunction with recent empirical literatures on citizen identities and attitudes, this approach leads to a number of conjectures about the evolution of democratic governance. The framework and the conjectures are explored in the following sections. The first outlines the framework. The second section draws on recent literatures concerning political developments in mature western states. By joining these literatures to the framework, we derive four conjectures about the evolution and renewal of democratic governance. In later chapters, these conjectures are tested against actual experience in Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Democratic governance

What is democratic governance? Over the past couple of decades, the theories that might frame an analysis have blossomed. On one side, many have been attracted to the application of the economic assumption of rational action to political life (e.g. as surveyed in Shepsle, 2006). On another, others have been drawn to behavioural conceptions that originated in organisational theory and sociology (e.g. surveyed in March and Olsen, 2006). This present study is based on two polar conceptions, which are derived from the model of democratic governance outlined by March and Olsen (1995). In both schemas, democratic governance has four basic elements – identities, accounts, political institutions and capabilities. These are discussed in turn. This is followed by consideration of two psychological models that variously represent processes of citizen choice – appropriate behaviour and an instrumental calculus. These alternative models introduce energy and dynamism to the basic schema. They also create the two polar (‘thick’ and ‘thin’) patterns. They thus operate at both analytic and normative levels. This architecture is explained in more detail in the following paragraphs.

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Identity

Identity is the first and fundamental variable. It has the same necessity in moral and political orientation as space in physical orientation. Reflecting its recursive character, democratic governance has been grounded in varying patterns of identity (e.g. class, gender, environmental sympathies, trade unionist, doctor, etc.). Reflecting the association between modernity and the division of labour, occupation and/or socio-economic status have often been critical. Trade unions formed around occupational groups. Later, social democratic parties redefined occupational status as class identity. Meantime, other parties that formed around distinct identities began to take shape – farmers constituted agrarian parties; religious affiliation provided the basis for Christian parties; ethnic loyalty was the foundation for nationalist parties, etc.

Change in identities can occur in one of two ways. It can occur outside an existing power structure as a challenge to the dominant pattern. Class in the nineteenth century and the new social movements of the 1960s illustrate this dynamic. It can also occur within an existing dominant pattern as the implications of a broader category are unpacked. The move from social democratic citizenship to rights for more particularised categories, such as pensioners, single parents and disabled citizens, etc., exemplify this latter process.

Identity can also be more or less differentiated. This can occur at the level of a whole society and at the level of individual citizens. Thus a particular citizen might identify as a woman and an environmentalist as well as a supporter of neo-liberal economic strategies (privatisation, extended role for markets, etc.). The trade-off between these affiliations would vary with circumstances and contexts – a conflict which the processes of democratic deliberation might be expected to resolve.

Moreover, different patterns of identity will be evident in different historical moments. Indeed, a liberal democratic setting provides a context where various supplementary possibilities can be progressively explored. This is one of its many virtues. '(Citizenship is a) constitutive belonging, integrating and shaping other allegiances and particular identities derived from social affiliations like the family, voluntary associations, class or one's market position' (March and Olsen, 1995, p. 37; see also Appiah, 2006). In passing we note that in March and Olsen's schema democratic orientations are presumed to be integral to identity. Whilst this leaves open the question of how they arose, it does not affect this present analysis which is using their approach as a heuristic framework in specific empirical settings.

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In democratic politics, citizen identities are championed by political associations (e.g. Taylor, 2007, pp. 423–472). Only three forms of representative association have been invented: political parties, interest groups and social movements. However political parties can be ambiguous agents of representation. They can act as representative bodies or as (as in the cartel theory) agents of the governance system.

Finally, identity is also an evaluative category. In Charles Taylor's words: 'My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications, which provide the frame or horizon within which I try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable, or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose' (1989, p. 27; also Murdoch, 1993, p. 425).

In an applied analysis, this category invites a focus on changing patterns of identities as reflected in the presence, advocacy and impact of organised political actors – political parties, interest groups and social movements. It might be argued this constrains unduly what qualifies as a politically salient identity – for example lack of skills or other resources, coercion, repressive tolerance or oppressive conditioning might all constrain organisation and advocacy; or identity might be based on non-verbal or non-human claims. However, in a representative political system, it seems a reasonable working assumption that identity claims will be expressed via organised actors, albeit with some claims represented by proxy. For example, the environment movement champions the claims of nature and natural systems and animal liberationists those of non-human life. Meantime, as already noted, the above three modes are the only ones so far invented. Hence the presence of such organisations can be taken pragmatically as an indicator of politically relevant identities.

Accounts

The second variable in our model of democratic governance involves accounts or governing ideas. These can take two forms: they are the ideas which regulate political collaboration and exchange and constitute the current conventional wisdom; or they are the ideas that are challenging these framings. Accounts perform a variety of supplementary roles. They identify politically relevant identities and describe the situations that confront them – for example, social democratic politics involve stories that focus on social class and describe a programme that offers hope and relief to particular categories of citizens. Although they all licensed an active role for the state, these programmes came in Marxist, socialist, Catholic social doctrine and social liberal versions.

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Accounts are also stories about the causal links between events and behaviours. For example, Keynesian accounts provided a story about the role of the government budget in alleviating unemployment. It allowed post-Second World War governments to promise this outcome to their citizens. For their part, neo-liberal stories involved ideas which underwrote the shift away from Keynesian approaches in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Blyth, 2002). In such ways, ideas (or accounts) create the ‘energy’ (direction, scope, motive and ‘will’) of democratic governance. They ‘affirm that history is subject to meaningful control’ (March and Olsen, 1995, p. 141). They are explanations that make actions imaginable.

In any particular political system, different stories may be constructed around the same identities. Here is how Beer described the stories about class in British political culture:

Is class a divisive force in the community or a unifying one? Is it necessary for social order or is it merely an instrument and emblem of privilege ... The British political tradition attributes great importance to these questions. As a body of beliefs widely shared in British society, it confronts Britons generally with such questions and at the same time gives support for diametrically opposed answers. (1969, p. xi)

A democratic order is composed of a complex ensemble of stories, variously informing its different planes, with each plane generally operating in the shadow of the one above it. Thus a constitutional story underwrites the structure of power. Parties compete in the shadow of this narrative. In social democratic states, this competition has involved competing stories about the role of government. In turn, each policy system involves narratives that operate in the shadow of the latter. Hence welfare or health systems are established in the shadow of a broader narrative on social justice. At particular junctures, parties may also promote stories that contest both the structure of power and the role of the state – for example, the Liberal Democrats in Britain are seeking not only substantive change in various policies but also voting reform, which would replace the two-party system with a multi-party system. Elsewhere, Bull and Newell (2008) argue that competition that covers both the rules of the game and substantive policy has undermined effective governance in Italy.

In general, substantive and procedural accounts coalesce to create dominant patterns (e.g. ‘mass politics’, ‘catch-all politics’⁶). At the same time, ‘democratic political institutions are seen to be based on layers

⁶ These terms are discussed in more detail later – e.g. pp. 20–23 and pp. 161–163. They refer to the orientation of political parties. Mass parties mobilise and represent