



# HAS CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM 'RECONNECTED' VOTERS WITH THEIR GOVERNMENT?

This Briefing examines what impact Labour's programme of constitutional reform has had on attitudes towards the political system. It asks whether the reforms have, as their designers hoped, 'reconnected' citizens with their government. To answer this question, we draw on various questions asked as part of the British Social Attitudes and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys in summer 2000.

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## Introduction

For many years, critics have argued that Britain's democratic system is atrophying. They have claimed that citizens are able to exert only weak control over a system of government that finds it difficult to meet popular needs and demands because of its centralised nature. But in 1997, the Conservative government, whose leader, John Major, had enthused about the traditions and institutions of British life, was replaced by a Labour administration which embraced calls for the reform of many of those same institutions. For example, less than a year before becoming Prime Minister, Tony Blair argued:

"Changing the way we govern, and not just changing our government, is no longer an optional extra for Britain. So low is public esteem for politicians and the system we operate that there is now little authority for us to use unless and until we first succeed in regaining it." (*The Economist*, 14<sup>th</sup> September, 1996).

One of the main weapons in Labour's attempt to restore public confidence in Britain's political system was a programme of constitutional reform. Indeed the implementation of that programme was arguably the most striking characteristic of Labour's first administration. The reforms included the creation of new devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, the strengthening of individual rights through a Human Rights Act, the removal of the bulk of hereditary peers from the House of Lords and the introduction of new proportional voting systems for both devolved and European elections.

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### **Satisfaction with British democracy**

First of all, we examine recent trends in public satisfaction with the way democracy is working in this country. Was Tony Blair right to believe that public esteem for politicians is low? And has the implementation of Labour's reforms improved matters?

One key measure is how much trust people have in key political institutions and actors. Drawing on surveys going back to the mid-1970s, we find that:

- Levels of trust in politicians have always been low and have changed little in recent years (only around one in ten of us trusts politicians "to tell the truth when in a tight corner").
- But trust in governments has fallen over the past decade. In 1991, at least one in three of us trusted governments to "place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own party". Now only one in six of us do so.

Meanwhile, in response to a question about how well the political system is performing and how much could be done to improve it, only around one in three (35%) currently believe that Britain's system of government could not be improved or could be improved only in small ways, with almost two thirds (63%) believing quite a lot or a great deal of improvement is needed. By contrast, thirty

years ago, as many people believed Britain's system of government was performing well as thought it was performing badly. While satisfaction with British democracy improved slightly immediately after the 1997 general election, following the change of government, this improvement proved to be a blip, with trust and confidence in the political system now back to the low levels first found in the mid-1990s.

These data suggest the Prime Minister's concern about the standing of politicians and the system was well placed. But they also indicate that the constitutional reforms introduced since 1997 may not have stemmed the flow of support from the political system. Moreover, our results also suggest that the current low level of political trust may be one of the causes of the recent low electoral turnouts. Previous analyses of British Social Attitudes surveys have cast some doubt on whether those with low level of trust are less likely to participate in elections (Curtice and Jowell, 1995, 1997). But the latest survey shows that there is at least some link between trust and turnout. For example, 78 per cent of those who trust governments to put the interest of the nation first at least most of the time claim to have voted in the 1997 election, compared with only 62 per cent of those who almost never trust governments. However, trends in the level of trust cannot on their own explain the large drop in turnout between 1997 and 2001, since the drop in levels of trust in government since 1996 is insufficient to be able to account for the twelve point drop in electoral participation between 1997 and 2001.

### **Attitudes towards constitutional reform**

Reformers believe that changes in the constitutional architecture address grievances that the public have about the way that they

are governed. And our own previous work also gave reason to believe that the reform programme might have a favourable impact on political trust. This is because throughout the 1990s, those with lower levels of political trust were, for the most part, more likely to have a favourable view about constitutional reform than those with higher levels of trust (Curtice and Jowell, 1995, 1997). We therefore surmised that perhaps their trust would be restored should constitutional reform be implemented.

But of course implementing constitutional reform could only help restore public confidence in Britain's system of government if people actually welcome its impact in practice.

Table 1 shows what impact people think four examples of constitutional reform have had on the way that Britain is governed. So far at least, the perception appears to be not much. Reform of the House of Lords, freedom of information, and the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are each judged by a majority so far to have made no difference to the way Britain is run. True, in each case, more feel that the reform in question

has improved matters than they think it has made them worse, but with the exception of freedom of information the positive balance is only a small one.

One reason for this far from ringing response may be the indifference of the English who, comprising the bulk of Britain's population, also constitute the majority among our survey sample. Might the reaction to constitutional change be more positive in an area where reform has supposedly had a greater impact on people's lives? To answer this question, we examine the perception among Scots of the impact of the Holyrood Parliament on the way that Britain as a whole is governed (using data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey). And, indeed, we do find a more positive response among Scots to devolution, with over one third (35%) believing that the creation of the Scottish Parliament has improved the way that Britain is governed. But over four in ten respondents (44%) believe the Parliament has made no difference. Even here, then, the popular reaction to a high profile piece of constitutional re-engineering is only lukewarm.

**Table 1: Evaluations of constitutional reform**

Perceived impact on the way Britain as a whole is governed...				
		... improved it a lot / a little	... made no difference	... made it a little / a lot worse
Reforming the House of Lords	%	11	69	8
Introducing freedom of information	%	25	59	3
Creating the Scottish Parliament	%	19	53	13
Creating the Welsh Assembly	%	15	56	12

Base 2229

Source: British Social Attitudes

But what impact have the reforms had on people's trust in government? To answer this question, we need to conduct two additional pieces of analysis.

First, we compare the relationship between political trust and attitudes towards constitutional change in 1996 (before the reforms were implemented) and 2000 (by which time much of Labour's programme was in place). If reform has had a positive impact on levels of political trust we would expect to find that trust has risen more among those favouring the constitutional reforms that have been implemented than it has among those who are less favourably disposed to reform.

Table 2 undertakes this analysis in relation to one reform, freedom of information. It does so by looking at people's views about whether the government should have "the right to keep its defence plans secret" or whether they think, "the public has a right to know what they are". Of course, the question we examine here does not address the government's freedom of information legislation directly (as it posits a

greater freedom than that legislation has put in place). But we might reasonably assume that the 45 per cent who say that public has the right to know such plans comprises those who would be most committed to the principle of freedom of information. But, if this is the case, then Labour's legislation seems to have done little to raise their confidence in the political system. Rather, their level of trust has fallen just as much as has the confidence of those who think the government has the right to keep its defence plans secret.

These findings do not apply only in relation to freedom of information; the same pattern exists with regard to views about Scottish devolution. Thus, despite the advent of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, levels of trust and efficacy fell by more or less the same amount between 1996 and 2000 among those who favour devolution as they did among those who do not think Scotland should have any kind of parliament at all.

**Table 2: Changes in trust by views about freedom of information 1996-2000**

Attitudes towards defence plans	% trust government just about always/ most of the time		
	1996	2000	Change
Public should normally have right to know	19	13	-6
<i>Base</i>	572	1189	
Government should have right to keep plans secret	26	18	-8
<i>Base</i>	249	394	

Source: British Social Attitudes

Our second way of examining the impact of constitutional reform on political trust is to compare what has happened in a part of Great Britain that has experienced high profile constitutional change with another part that has not. As we have already suggested, the most obvious example is devolution; introduced to a significant extent in Scotland but not in England. If devolution has restored confidence in government, we should find more favourable trends in trust in Scotland than in England. But, as Table 3 reveals, trends in trust have almost been identical in Scotland and England over the course of the last three years.

So it appears that Labour's programme of constitutional reform has indeed done little or nothing so far to increase people's confidence in how they are governed. But these figures should not necessarily be regarded as the public's final word on the reforms. After all, advocates of reform might reasonably argue that it will take time for its benefits to become apparent. Indeed, the UK government's freedom of information legislation had not even come into force by the time of our survey.

Alternatively, advocates of reform might be tempted to argue that its inability to increase people's confidence in government reflects its failure to go far enough. In particular, some point to the fact that Labour has failed to implement the one piece of its constitutional programme that they see as having the most potential impact on the way Britain is governed; holding a referendum on whether the House of Commons should be elected by an alternative, more proportional, electoral system.

However, as we have previously argued (Curtice and Jowell, 1995), it is far from clear that electoral reform is sufficiently popular enough a cause to assume even that the public would vote in its favour, let alone respond to its introduction by showing higher levels of trust. In our most recent survey, just 35 per cent think that we should "change the voting system for general elections to the House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs", little different from the readings that have been obtained in response to this question on a number of occasions since 1983.

**Table 3: Trust in England and Scotland 1997-2000**

		1997	2000	Change 97-00
% who trust the government to put nation before party "just about always" or "most of the time"	England	34	17	-17
	Scotland	29	13	-16
	<i>Base: England</i>	2551	1928	
	<i>Base: Scotland</i>	882	1663	

Source: 1997 England: British Election Study; 1997 Scotland: Scottish Election Study 1997; 2000 Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2000

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Moreover, if it is the case that the current low level of trust and efficacy reflects a feeling that constitutional reform has not been sufficiently extensive, then we should find that trust has fallen more over the last four years amongst the one third or so who say they are in favour of changing the electoral system than it has amongst those who say they want to keep the system as it is. However, if anything the opposite is the case. For example, the percentage willing to trust governments at least most of the time fell by just three points between 1996 and 2000 among those in favour of electoral reform but by eight points amongst those wanting to keep the existing system.

Thus far, our analysis of the impact of constitutional change on public attitudes has proceeded largely by mapping trends over time and space. Thus, we have shown that trust in government has not risen following the introduction of key constitutional reforms since 1997, nor have trends in trust been more benign in an area that has been granted significant devolved powers (Scotland) than in another to which power has not been devolved (England). These analyses are enough in themselves to suggest that the constitutional reforms have not – yet – helped to reverse the decline in public trust in government.

But what then lies behind this decline? Might it be that the reforms have simply not worked particularly well in their first few years; that the well publicised ‘teething problems’ of the devolved assemblies, for example, have served to reduce people’s confidence in them? If we examine attitudes in Scotland, there is little doubt that expectations of what the Holyrood Parliament is likely to deliver have fallen. Far fewer people now than in 1997 believe that the Parliament will improve Scotland’s economy or its education system, or will increase the voice of ordinary people in how Scotland is

governed (Surrridge, 2001). So perhaps the reason why the implementation of constitutional reform in general, and the creation of the Scottish Parliament in particular, have so far failed to increase trust is that they have failed to live up to expectations?

But for this explanation to hold water, we would have to show not only that expectations in the Scottish Parliament have fallen (they have), but also that it is this fall which appears to have caused the decline in trust. And it is the second part of the causal chain that does not stand up. If it did, we should find that the relationship between expectations and trust has remained fairly constant over the period from 1997 to 2000; it would then be the decline in the numbers with high expectations that might explain the fall in trust. But what we actually find is that the decline in trust among Scots has occurred as much among those who still have high expectations as it has among those with low expectations (in fact, the decline in trust has been *greater* among those with high expectations). In other words, whatever is driving the drop in Scots’ trust in government, it is not declining expectations of the Scottish Parliament.

## **Conclusion**

Our research has highlighted two key findings about the relationship between constitutional reform and public attitudes and behaviour. First, the decline in confidence in how we are governed that emerged during the last Conservative government has not been reversed during Labour’s first term of office. In particular, Labour’s programme of constitutional reform appears to have done little or nothing to reverse that decline. Second, the decline in confidence may have depressed turnout at recent elections, although its role should not be exaggerated.

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Constitutional reform does not appear to have been the right remedy for the recent decline in confidence in government. But that does not mean that there is no remedy at all. In order to understand recent trends in confidence and participation we probably have to look at other political developments in recent years. Do governments deliver on their promises? Do politicians avoid accusations of sleaze? And does there seem to be much to choose between the parties? Arguably the answers to those questions has been 'no' for too many voters under both the Conservative and Labour administrations in recent years to encourage voters to go to the polls or to have much confidence in how they are governed. If so, the future health of Britain's democracy probably depends on whether or not this must always be so.

### Bibliography

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### Further details

The research reported here is part of a wider programme of enquiry into public attitudes towards government and the impact of constitutional reform on the links between citizens and their government. For further details, interested readers might consult:

Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd, 'Political Engagement, Trust and Constitutional Reform', in Alison Park *et al*, eds, *British Social Attitudes: The 18<sup>th</sup> Report*, London: Sage, 2001.

John Curtice, 'Devolution and Democracy: New Trust or Old Cynicism?', in John Curtice *et al*, eds, *New Scotland, New Society? Are Social and Political Ties Fragmenting?* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

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