

HANSAARD

Neglecting Democracy

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Declan McHugh & Phil

"[I]t ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions high respect; their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions, to theirs – and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own.

But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure,—no, nor from the law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

Edmund Burke

"The English think they are free. They are only free during the election of members of parliament."

Jean Jacques Rousseau

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What does democracy mean in the 21st Century? While the collapse of Soviet Communism at the end of the 20th Century has not spelt the end of History, it has certainly extinguished the idea of so-called 'People's Democracies' – at least outside China, North Korea and Cuba. Today, Western liberal democracy stands alone as the only operative system of government to have developed, and to be developing, in a manner that allows it a claim to be the inheritor of the democratic tradition. The individual practice of Western liberal democracy varies from one polity to another but certain core principles unite them and place them firmly in that tradition. They share a belief in the idea of a society based on laws which are made in a way that reflects the right of citizens regardless of ethnicity, gender, class or religion to participate, in some way, in their making; the idea that all citizens are equal before the law; the right of all citizens to associate freely; the right to free expression of opinion; the right to live without fear of oppression; the idea that there is an appropriate balance to be drawn between the individual's right to freedom and the collective good of all and that in the final analysis the government is accountable for its actions to the collective will. Questions and ambiguities exist, of course, but these guiding principles and ideals represent the starting point from which further debates may take place.

The right of citizens to participate in the process of law-making is a central feature of democratic systems. But this raises the question of what defines a citizen and what degree of participation is necessary for a polity to be described as democratic. For example, Aristotle claimed that the ability to participate in politics was the principal virtue that distinguished humans from animals; however, he rejected the right of women and slaves to

There are two broad models of participation in a democracy which, though distinct, are not mutually exclusive. One asserts the need for a maximalist approach to participation in general and voting in particular. It asserts the primacy of direct, active participation in decision-making by the whole citizenry and has roots in the republican tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, and – differently – in the work of thinkers like Rousseau, quoted at the beginning of this section. Its supporters see ‘direct democracy’ involving the whole polity as the purest manifestation of the ability of citizens to make laws.

This approach has proved less influential in practice than one based on the belief that the ordering principle of the democratic process is an indirect form of representative democracy, where citizens periodically vote for either single or multi-numerate representatives to make laws on their behalf. It is this approach which defines the British form of representative parliamentary democracy, as it has developed over the past 200 years. For its supporters this form of indirect democracy is seen as a more practical method of law-making, but it is also seen as a surer way to law-making which will enable the polity to develop in a more unified manner. Advocates of representative democracy believe that dedicated, elected representatives are able to make better laws because they have the opportunity to be more fully informed about, and better able to judge, the implications of laws for society as a whole. Such a sentiment has been expressed most succinctly by Edmund Burke, as in the other quote with which we began this section. In a direct democracy, they believe, powerful interests, emotions and short-term concerns will hold sway and lead not merely to bad laws but will ultimately prove divisive to the survival of other core democratic values associated with the rights of individuals and minorities.

In a representative democracy, the fact that the mass citizenry elect the law-makers periodically and have the right to dismiss them periodically means that ultimate power resides with the people but is mediated through a representative system. However, while the case of the representative democrats appeared broadly unassailable in a time when public confidence in the system was manifestly clear, it has recently come under challenge due to declining participation in politics generally and electoral politics t

follows, we explore the historical and philosophical roots of the British democratic system and democracy more widely, in order to show that a move toward direct democracy would be a mistake. Our intention is to defend the representative system, show that it is able to meet the fundamental challenges posed by the 21st Century, and present an agenda for change aimed at rejuvenating British politics and democracy.

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“We want a society where people are free to make choices, to make mistakes, to be generous and compassionate. This is what we mean by a moral society; not a society where the state is responsible for everything, and no one is responsible for the state.”

Margaret Thatcher

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British democracy should be stronger now than ever. Citizenship education is on the national curriculum, providing young people with the intellectual and practical resources to engage in political debates and make up their own minds about the importance of politics and the role of Parliament in their lives. The media – arguably bigger, more powerful and more accessible than ever before – is capable of providing the latest news and political analysis from around the world 24 hours a day. The rise of the internet and telecommunications technologies has meant that information is more readily available than ever before. And formal and informal mechanisms are in place which give all individuals the ability to lobby their MPs, to get involved in local politics, and to engage with decision-makers at virtually any level on a wide variety of issues. Scotland and Wales even have their own legislative bodies and there have been attempts – as yet unsuccessful – to devolve power to regional assemblies throughout the UK.

There has arguably never been a time when so many opportunities have been available for ‘the people’ to contribute to the democratic process, yet political

government policy suggests something very significant about how they perceive their role as democratic citizens. It suggests that they are not apathetic or indifferent to political issues but, rather, simply do not see formal political institutions as able, or willing, to represent their views. It suggests that they increasingly see voting in elections or lobbying MPs as a less effective means of getting things done than taking matters into their own hands and hitting the streets. In sum, this is not a polity in disintegration but one undergoing real and significant change.

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An interesting clue as to what that change could entail may be found in the *Study of Power and Democracy*, which was initiated by the Norwegian Parliament in 1998. As Professor Stein Ringen reported, in a recent review article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the Study was led by five professors who were given a practically unlimited budget to inquire into the health of Norwegian democracy. Over the course of five years, the Study produced 50 books, 77 reports and reams of articles, culminating with the publication of the final report in August 2003, which concluded that ‘the democratic chain of command in which governance is under the control of the voters has burst, and the very fabric of rule by popular consent is disintegrating before our eyes’.

The break in the democratic chain of command could not be explained by reference to national calamity, economic collapse or decline in civic life. On the contrary, Norway is among the richest nations in the world and appears politically stable and socially cohesive. In spite of all that, democracy was found to be in a seriously weakened shape. Many of the findings from the Norwegian study chime with the situation in Britain: declining membership of traditional democratic institutions, notably political parties; voter participation in local and national elections on a downward trend; and the greatest incidence of disengagement from traditional political institutions and activities amongst the young. Yet people remain political animals, interested in a variety of issues and willing to actively campaign on them. The difference is in the nature and forms of political participation. In Britain, as in Norway, the old representative institutions are being abandoned in favour of different and in some senses more direct channels of political action.

To understand why, we need to explore the nature and impact of substantial social, political and economic changes that have taken place over a number of decades. For much of the period after the Second World War, political action was largely embodied in – and regulated by – collective public bodies of one kind or another. Political parties were stronger than they are now and represented the principal route through which political opinions and interests fed into the political and policy-making process. The labour movement was represented by strong trade unions capable of communicating the views and opinions of their members to the highest levels of government; and the state itself was larger than it is now, owning and managing a raft of public utilities and services (such as the railways, the public services infrastructure, and council housing for thousands of people). The public realm, we might say, extended wider and deeper than it does now, influencing and regulating a huge proportion of each and every individual’s daily life, from the transport that carried them to and from work to the gas and electricity that lit their way and heated their homes.

From the late 1970s, however, this picture began to change. During the period of the Thatcher Government, in particular, the remit and functions of the state were significantly reined in. Many of the services and functions which were most visible to people were placed in the control of bodies which were (rightly) seen as separate from the state and driven by different concerns. Huge swathes of the population were encouraged to buy their council houses. By the end of the 1980s, the state had not only given up control of the utilities and services that kept people’s homes running, but the homes themselves.

These developments had a major impact on patterns of work, accelerating a process of century-long social change which, as A.H. Halsey noted in his introduction to the 2000 edition of *Social Trends*, saw old class categories significantly blurred. As a proportion of those in employment, manual workers fell from three quarters to under a half between 1911 and 1981, and to a third by 1991. Far greater numbers of women entered the workplace – by 1998 comprising 46% of the total occupied population. As patterns of work were radically altered, so living arrangements underwent significant change. Between 1971 and 2003 the proportion of one-person households increased from 18% to 29%, and the proportion of households containing the traditional family unit – couple families with dependent children – decreased from around

one third to just over a fifth. In the same period, the proportion of lone-parent households with dependent children almost doubled.

Such fundamental socio-economic change inevitably impacted on forms of association. Old collectivist structures and networks exhibited a decline.

areas, and the government afforded itself stronger powers in others. What developed throughout this period, then, was a new sense among many people that the state was less influential and less concerned with the kinds of political issues that directly affected their lives. As the state became more centralised, and the power and influence of the unions waned, growing numbers of people began to judge that political problems could best be resolved through means other than formal public channels. For many, politics – like charity – increasingly began and ended at home.

Even more recently, the significance of the nation-state in the everyday lives of citizens has been further eroded by the globalisation of political power and markets. Just as the role of the state became increasingly concerned with macro issues like defence and foreign policy over the more localised issues which affected people's lives in the 1980s, so in the 1990s its role in these areas too had been diminished. Increasingly, supra-national institutions like the EU, and non-governmental bodies like the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and multi-national corporations like Microsoft, McDonalds, and Citibank are seen to wield enormous political and economic power on the global stage, capable of affecting national economies and influencing government decisions across borders. The growing sense among citizens of developed nations that big businesses, super-rich entrepreneurs, and unelected bodies have the power to influence the fate of nations throughout the world has been fed by the recent boom in books by writers like Naomi Klein, Norweena Hertz, and Joseph Stiglitz, who have helped to bring these debates into the political mainstream. As a consequence, many UK citizens are now more sceptical than ever about the role of the Westminster Parliament in political decision-making and economic planning, as its power is reduced not only in the domestic sphere but the wider sphere of international and foreign policy too.

It is not the aim of this paper to evaluate the merits of the decisions and developments outlined above. Rather, it is merely to point out that in the wake of all this change people now approach politics and political institutions differently from how they once did. The way in which people participate in the democratic process has changed: many tend not to vote, as they see the commitments and actions of political institutions and politicians as divorced from the issues which affect them in their lives. Instead they sign petitions,

attend meetings, boycott products, and hold demonstrations: political actions which are real, visible and born out of genuine political commitment, but which circumvent traditional mechanisms and structures. Hence, critics who argue that civic disengagement is the consequence of a wider erosion of 'social capital' – or social trust – among the public are only half right. They are correct that traditional structures and networks – trade unions, working clubs, church groups and so on – that used to act as facilitators of political debate and organisation have declined and that this has caused a shift in the way people understand themselves and their place in the political community. But it is simply not the case that this has caused the kind of generalised disengagement with political issues or the death of political debate in Britain that certain commentators fear. The problem is not widespread political apathy, but rather that a vital link that connected citizens to the state and the formal democratic process has been broken.

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What all this suggests is that Britain would appear to be suffering from the same kind of breakdown in the democratic 'chain of command' between voters and political decisions as was identified in Norway. Britain, like Norway, is suffering from a breakdown in representative democracy caused in part by seismic socio-economic changes to which existing democratic institutions have not adequately responded. At a time when they badly needed to adapt their structures in order to counteract the corrosive effect of socio-economic and political change, state institutions have in fact helped to make matters worse. Instead of seeking to provide new and alternative avenues to involve people in decision-making, the formal political process has sucked power further away.

Political parties have become professional electoral machines with few formal members and even fewer active members, and largely exist for the sole purpose of propelling career politicians into municipal chambers or national legislatures. Once there they are subject to the tight discipline of party leaders, enforced by party whips, which restricts the scope for independence of thought and action. Moreover, party loyalty often requires support to be given to measures that irk grassroots members and the wider public, and, at times, go against the instincts of the representatives themselves. Of course, that is always likely to be the case in a representative system where representatives

are obliged to exercise their own judgement. The problem is that the majority are seen to sacrifice their own judgement, not as Burke feared to the opinions of the public, but rather to the views of their party leaders.

The charge that elected representatives are no better than party automatons is nothing new and has long been reflected in anti-party sentiment, which can be traced back over a century. However, deeply ingrained public hostility towards party politics has been compounded in recent years by the tone of political debate, which appears at odds with reality and thus fails to excite or engage the public. It has become increasingly clear that the old ideological divide that used to serve as the lens through which people came to understand the world, and seek solutions to social, economic and political problems, is closing. The clash between 'capital' and 'labour' embodied in the political tussle between the Conservatives and Labour has been largely eclipsed by a newer, largely social democratic consensus on some form of limited capitalism.

Interestingly, in the one area of the UK where tribal politics survives and clear ideological divisions remain – Northern Ireland – electoral turnout is far higher than the national average. However, throughout most of the country (and increasingly, even in the north of Ireland), we have seen what Ferdinand Mount has described as 'the decline of rage and fear politics'. Political identities have become freed from their traditional ideological moorings; they are more complex, fluid and changeable than they were when the adversarial system was conceived. Consequently, we have seen a rise in issues-based politics (and, connectedly, single-issue parties), with traditional ideological identities and conflicts taking a back seat. Yet, in terms of their dialogue, political parties appear unable to break out of the adversarial mould. In a world of changing political identities and issues-based political action, the politics they present to the public through the media is increasingly dislocated from the reality of everyday life and is still couched in overwhelmingly negative terms. In direct contrast to consumer marketing, electoral appeals are dominated by one party attacking another – usually for being untrustworthy – rather than each proclaiming its own virtues. In consequence, growing numbers of people perceive all parties to be unworthy of their support.

In large part, the reason why the political parties are trapped in this cultural time-warp is due to the forums in which politics and government is conducted.

Municipal town halls up and down the country and the Westminster Parliament appear as monuments to another age. The sheer physical layout of these buildings encourages an adversarial style of politics and debate that no longer usefully serves or applies to modern society. But the flaws of these democratic institutions run much deeper. They have become less relevant and less effective in the

democracy would be a mistake. Far from strengthening democracy in Britain, direct democracy would undermine it – weakening the policy-making process, failing to address most of the points that we have thus far raised, and turning the political process into a free-for-all of entrenched (and often incommensurable) political interests. In the following chapter, we briefly outline what we take direct democracy to be, and explain why it is not a compelling alternative to the representative model. We then go on to build a case for the renewal and reinvigoration of representative democratic politics in Britain.

What this view embodies is the idea that democracy is best served by the displacement or marginalisation of traditional institutions and the establishment of newer, more responsive, more interactive forums of debate capable of genuinely expressing the views of the people. In this sense, they actually share

form of voting, marching, signing petitions, or whatever. The claim that direct democracy would automatically empower the 'silent majority' to contribute to political debates is therefore at best questionable.

But even if this were not the case – and we could be confident that opening up direct channels of communication between the British public and decision-making structures meant that people previously excluded from democratic debates would be welcomed into them – it does not address the major issue at the heart of this debate: namely, that the inclusion of diverse viewpoints into democratic debates – the ability to participate – is only one function that needs to be performed by a democratic system. For a system to be viable, it must do more than merely get people talking: it must *decide* and *do* things. Participation and inclusion are only meaningful if people's views can be seen to make a difference and to influence the development of policy. The problem with direct democracy is that its advocates seem so preoccupied with working out how to include as many voices as possible in democratic debates that they forget to explain exactly how these dialogues will produce actionable policies or *decisions*.

It would seem on the face of it obvious that an important function of any democratic decision-making process is that it is capable of making *decisions* which are democratic and fair. But this important point is often neglected by those who fail to make any real distinction between what makes for a fair democratic *debate*, and what makes for a fair democratic *decision-making process*.

This last point is absolutely crucial and represents one of the most fundamental differences between direct and representative democracy. Given what we have already said about the social, political, cultural and religious diversity which exists in contemporary liberal democracies like Britain, it would be naïve in the extreme to assume that public debate and participation would always achieve a clear consensus on answers to political problems and that it is the role of state institutions simply to put this consensus into action on the people's behalf. If the modern world has shown us anything, it is that consensus and unanimity on political issues is often impossible, and while democrats might strive for as much consensus and agreement as possible, it is simply a fact of political debate that certain values and ways of life will remain incompatible with one

another, as will the political positions they embody. It is difficult to see how any amount of democratic debate is likely to resolve deep disagreements between 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' supporters over laws governing abortion, for example, or between religious groups and animal welfare activists about methods of slaughtering animals, or gays and evangelical Christians about laws governing homosexuality. In conflicts such as these, democracy requires that strong, legitimate institutions – empowered by the popular and collective consent of the people – weigh the arguments and make difficult decisions on behalf of the citizen body. These decisions will not always be popular and will rarely carry the endorsement of everyone involved. This is inevitable given the incompatibility of many of the values which will be at stake. But it highlights a crucial role that independent representative institutions play in the democratic system: given the fundamental plurality of values which will exist in a diverse society like Britain, and given also the commitment to individual freedom and self-legislation built into the foundations of democracy (that we discussed earlier), there is a crucial need for institutions which can make difficult choices among competing claims, none of which (from a political point of view) are specifically 'right' and none of which are exactly 'wrong' on any given issue.

Some would reject this, of course, claiming that democracy is in fact best served by leaving decision-making power up to the political community as a whole through the widespread use of referendums or some form of online or computerised ballot. Those that have argued for this believe that it is the purest and most defensible model of democracy, where decision-making power is taken out of the hands of institutions altogether and shared equally among the population. Far from improving and purifying democracy, however, such a system would simply enshrine the vested interests of the powerful and replace truly democratic, reflective, decision-making with what John Stuart Mill called the 'tyranny of the majority', where the interests of minorities are systematically over-ridden and marginalised by the voting power of the groups who happen to compose the largest or most powerful group in society. It would protect vested interests by placing enormous power in the hands of those in a position to influence political opinion on a large scale. Big business, the mass media, and other influential groups would wield far greater power than they do under the current system and, more than ever, public policy would be shaped and determined by those able to pay for the lobbyists, public relations executives and advertisers to

communicate their messages effectively and dominate the democratic arena through the brute forces of money and influence. As Thomas Jefferson pointed out long before the advent of spin doctors and PR executives, democracy – when understood in this way – is ‘nothing more than mob rule, where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49’. For Jefferson, a just political system does not simply convert the will of the majority into political action – it ensures the representation of all views and all groups no matter how small a minority.

It cannot be right that democracy is best served by a system which allows power to be concentrated in a powerful elite or majority at the expense of all those other, smaller, often more nuanced minority views which exist in society. Indeed, the measure of a democratic system is not its ability to enshrine a majoritarian hegemony but its ability to stand up for the rights and needs of minority groups even in the face of overwhelming public opinion to the contrary. As the writer Apointed ohdividutatw[(minost iTJTubjs no54.egemony but 7ts abili Tw[(cve27n0. *0.0n7hure7 (0)ay abtrv027fong]s Jand.226675ta0.0001Ve. 7(uaAnthevri053that

Put bluntly: if the majority of society is racist, homophobic, or prejudiced in some other way then we should not assume that democracy is best served by automatically assuming that this majority has the right to determine policy for the whole of society. And on a more everyday level it is only now, as a result of our democratic system being more open to, for example, minority religious claims that many cultural practices and religious holidays are being recognised in schools and other organisations throughout Britain. Where the traditional Christian majority once determined policy, now other groups are making their voices heard and influencing the policy agenda. Democracy is strengthened by institutions which carry sufficient strength and authority to stand up to the majority and to afford a disproportionate political voice to those groups who experience greater difficulty in getting their views heard in order that they might contribute to debates on an equal playing field – groups like the poor, the disabled and members of religious minorities. Hence the consociational power sharing arrangements set up in Northern Ireland. It is a crucial and ironic flaw at the heart of direct democracy, therefore, that by seeking to devolve decision-making power down to the political community as a whole (in the interests of making the process fairer and more representative of minority interests), it in fact condemns many people who are outside the political mainstream to the whims of elites and majorities. This, as we said earlier, is down to the fact that ‘democratic debate’ and ‘democratic decision-making’ are distinct and separable things: while direct democracy might well ensure that minority voices have a presence in political *debate* it also ensures – paradoxically – that they will not have any such presence in *decision-making*. Fairness in one does not necessarily entail fairness in the other – and the problem with direct democracy is that it simply does not adequately address the question of how debates are turned into decisions and, in doing so, it advocates a strategy for decision-making which would make the position of the groups it tries to represent much worse than it would be under a more representative system.

Representative democracy, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes between participation and decision-making, and applies different rules to each. The role of the political community in a representative democracy like ours is to confer

and influenced laws. Direct outcomes ranged from changes to the law on the siting of telecoms masts to the protection of Roman burial grounds. As Peter Riddell has noted, these actions 'are not earth-shattering perhaps, but they are the kind of issues that worry voters'. Thus, there are measures that could easily be introduced that would strengthen the connection between Parliament and the public by enabling citizens to have a closer involvement in the decision-making process, without undermining the mediating role of representatives.

However, if the ties that bind the Westminster Parliament to the British populace have grown weak, then the connection with the supranational tier of European governance is even more fragile. The originator of over 60% of all legislation enacted in the UK today, the European Union suffers from an enormous democratic deficit. The European Parliament may be elected, but the body that has primacy – albeit under the observation of national governments – is the unelected European Commission. However, as Professor Ringen has pointed out, 'the real problem is not so much in decision-making as such, as in the virtual impossibility of unmaking a law once made, in particular treaty law. This gives the European Court near unlimited power to impose on and above national legislatures its view of what European law bids nations to do or not do...[Thus the] final democratic deficit in the European Union is not in the power of the Commission but in the absence of a democratic legislature to balance the power of the Court.' Hence, it is imperative that the institutions of the European Union generally are made more democratic and more accountable to their electorates. Of course, there are those who argue that rather than struggling to achieve such reforms, Britain should simply withdraw from the EU. Such a position is simplistic and mistaken. Interestingly, Norway is not a member of the EU but, recognising its dependence on being inside the economic system of free trade, nonetheless implements and complies with EU law. The lesson from this, according to Simon Jenkins, is that, 'All European states are *de facto* "within Europe". Withdrawal is not meaningful.' There is no choice but to try and reform the institutions of the EU as part of a wider effort to rebuild the chain of command that must extend from citizens, through local government, to the national Parliament and beyond.

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At the beginning of this pamphlet we asked what democracy means in the 21st Century and identified a rough cluster of defining principles. When measured against them, it seems fair to say that democracy in Britain is alive and well. We have a constitution rooted in the rule of law, free and fair elections, people are not oppressed, state power is constrained by appropriate democratic checks and balances, and basic human rights are respected and encouraged. People are free to vote or not to vote, to pursue their lives according to their own deeply held beliefs, and to change their minds about these beliefs regardless of who might prefer otherwise: nothing is true merely because those in positions of power say it is, and no government is automatically right merely because it is in power; truth and falsehood, right and wrong, are decided in a context of free debate and discussion involving all those with an interest in the outcome. No-one is imprisoned for political dissent – indeed, political debate is encouraged in schools, universities and town halls across the country. In all these things, Britain distinguishes itself from a range of nations whose states systematically oppress, torture, and terrorise their members for no reason other than that they hold views that the Government discourages. In such a world, worries among the political class about the supposed 'crisis' of British democracy appear trifling and self-indulgent. Should we not be more concerned about the position of people in nations which are undemocratic, instead of wringing our hands about whether our democratic institutions are democratic *enough*, or whether citizens feel engaged *enough*?

The answer is yes and no. As a democratic nation we do have a responsibility to aid the spread of democratic ideals in other nations, but we should not be so complacent about our own democracy as to ignore its weaknesses and

that formal institutions need to appear more relevant to the lives of individual

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Neglect

Education and representation

HANSARD
SOCIETY

Decline through

Representative democracy is in decline. Fewer people are joining political parties, fewer people are participating in general elections. The political system has never been so unpopular. The institutions are stretched to breaking point, as distant and unaccountable as ever. They may be antiquated, remote and increasingly irrelevant.

Professor McHugh and Professor Parvin chart the profound social, economic and cultural changes that have led to the increasing numbers of voters of no party preference. They explore the formal political process and the role of the media in the defence of the rule of law. They also examine the roots to its appeal and the role of the media in the century and a half since its primary focus on those who buy and sell. The present system should be replaced by a more direct and accountable system.

Analysing the state of the nation, the authors argue that the current system of representative democracy is in decline. They argue that the current system of representative democracy is in decline. They argue that the current system of representative democracy is in decline.

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