

Britain: Brown's "new politics" a cynical cover for authoritarianism

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The proposals advanced last week by Prime Minister Gordon Brown as the basis for "a new type of politics" show that his government has continued the anti-democratic and rightward lurch of his predecessor, Tony Blair.

Brown marshaled virtually every piece of rhetoric and hyperbole used by Labour since 1997 to once again proclaim a politics "built on consensus and not division" that supposedly transcends party politics, reaches out to the people and does not leave "great social challenges simply to the market alone."

He was clear why this was necessary. He noted that whereas once 84 percent of people voted, in the last election it was less than 62 percent, and whereas in the 1950s 1 in 11 people joined a political party, today it is 1 in 88, with only 1 in 3 people identifying with a political party.

But, after a decade in office, he chose to ignore the role of the Labour government in bringing this situation about through its championing of policies dictated solely by the needs of big business at the direct expense of the electorate—measures that both encourage and demand the alienation of the mass of working people from the political process and the constant erosion of civil liberties. Instead, he advanced measures by which this offensive against the working class can be continued behind a populist veneer of "consulting the people."

Brown is proposing the creation of "Citizen's Juries," supposedly "chosen independently" to discuss specific policy issues. These initial consultation exercises are to be followed by a "nationwide set of Citizens Juries held on one day" to look at issues like crime and immigration, education, health, transport and public services.

This will lead up to a "Citizens Summit" to "formulate" a "British statement of values"—"part of the wider programme on consultation led by Jack Straw and Michael Wills on the British statement of values, the idea of a British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, rights and duties, the components of the Constitutional Reform Bill."

Brown will also set up new standing commissions to bring together "people of all parties" and outside the party system. A "Speaker's Conference" would then bring together all parties to work together "with patriotic purpose...to advance our country's best interests and ideals."

On the most prosaic level, Brown's initiative is bound up with an effort to tear the ground from under the feet of his political opponents—particularly the Conservatives, in the period leading up

to an election—a task made all the more urgent because the "bounce" in Labour's support resulting from Blair's departure has already all but vanished.

With the Conservatives deeply divided over David Cameron's somewhat feeble attempt to distance the party from its Thatcherite image, Brown is seeking to reinforce Labour's claim to be her successor as the "natural party of government" in ruling circles. To this end, Brown expressed his admiration for Margaret Thatcher, a "conviction politician" like himself who "saw the need for change."

Brown has also continued Blair's efforts to bring his nominal opponents into government and has previously appointed former Confederation of British Industry head Sir Digby Jones and former First Sea Lord Sir Alan West as ministers. His announced raft of public and cross-party policy discussion was accompanied by his bringing in Conservative MP Patrick Mercer as a security adviser to Lord West and fellow Tory MP John Bercow to head a review of services for young people with disabilities. Liberal Democrat MP Mathew Taylor will advise on land use.

Matthew d'Ancona in the Conservative magazine, the *Spectator*, expressed the widespread incredulity at the noted right-winger Mercer's appointment. The former Conservative spokesman on homeland security was sacked from the Tory front bench this year by Cameron after he suggested that being called a "black bastard" was just part of Army life. He writes, "Mr. Blair used to talk about 'Operation Hoover,' his campaign to recruit One Nation Tories and Lib Dems to the New Labour cause. Mr. Brown seems to have dumped the Hoover and got hold of a super-powered, commercial-use Dyson."

Later that week, Swedish businessman Johan Eliasch, who recently resigned from his post as Conservative deputy treasurer and who lent £2.6 million to the Tories, is set to become an adviser to Brown on deforestation and green energy. He will not renew his party membership and wants his loan to be repaid.

There are clear echoes of France's Nicolas Sarkozy recruiting leading Socialist Party figures into his government, though the traffic is at least formally moving in the opposite direction. It led Rachel Sylvester to complain in the *Telegraph* that "Gordon Brown's consensus is a one-party state." But such a movement of MPs from one side of the House of Commons to the other can only take place because the two main parties are virtually interchangeable right-wing formations to the point where there might as well already be a one-party state.

Brown, like Blair before him and Sarkozy across the Channel, is seeking new mechanisms of rule under conditions where none of the old parties have the necessary authority and popular support to impose their common pro-big-business policies. It is not only that the claim that Citizens Juries et al. will not genuinely involve the public in government. They are a means by which the erosion of governmental accountability to the electorate will be both legitimised and deepened.

Brown claims that “Citizens Juries are not a substitute for representative democracy, they are an enrichment of it.” In reply to his first claim, “yes they are,” and to the second, “no they are not.”

In a representative democracy, politicians are supposed to present a manifesto of their policies and they are then voted into office on that basis by the entire electorate. Instead, Brown proposes to advance policies that have only been put before a “representative sample” of 12 to 20 people and proclaim this as a mandate to govern. What exactly constitutes a representative sample? One based on past voting preference, class, ethnicity? A jury of dozen people—however they are selected, has no mandate to determine political policy. It will merely provide a pre-selected and pliable tool to legitimise policies presented solely by the government with no one countering its propaganda.

As to the actual independence of the Citizen’s Juries, there is none. Even officially, the position is that the selection process will be determined by individual government departments, which are all run by Labour. In practice, the basis of their appointment has already been worked out centrally and never submitted to public scrutiny. Two are already meeting only days after having been announced—one on children’s issues and another on crime and communities.

The decisions on how the juries are selected and conducted are declared independent because they are made by a consultancy firm known as Opinion Leader Research (OLR). Its website boasts that it is “known by Research magazine as the ‘House of Influentials’” and that this is because “we are plugged into the people that really matter.”

The “people that really matter” that OLR is “plugged into” is the government and the prime minister. OLR is owned by Chime Communications, in which Brown’s personal adviser Deborah Mattinson owns about 2 million shares worth around £1 million. An investigation by the *Sunday Telegraph* found that in just the past two years, OLR has won nearly £3 million worth of contracts “across an astonishing array of government departments and agencies.” These include the Treasury that was run by Brown as Chancellor and the Department of Constitutional Affairs “when it was led by Labour’s deputy leader, Harriet Harman, a close friend of Miss Mattinson.”

This figure “does not include work before 2005 and contracts awarded by many other public sector clients listed on OLR’s website, such as the Environment Agency, Ofcom, and the Learning and Skills Council,” the *Telegraph* states.

OLR was recently paid nearly £800,000 by the Department for Work and Pensions to organise a forum to discuss pension policy and £153,000 by the Department for Education and Skills for a similar event. While Gordon Brown was chancellor, the Treasury

awarded the company work worth more than £150,000.

One of its more lucrative contracts was worth £1.25 million for the Department of Health to conduct a public consultation called “Your Health, Your Care, Your Say” in 2005. The September 5 *Times* says of the exercise, “It was so unbearably exciting that not a single report was filed from it.”

The undemocratic nature of the entire exercise is exemplified by its culminating in asking these bodies to sign off on a supposed “British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.” The Bill is a means by which the government intends to further undermine existing human and civil rights provisions by making rights that should be universal conditional on upholding supposedly “British values” and accepting “responsibilities” to the state.

The exercise raises major issues of constitutional principle, just as do questions relating to immigration, asylum and a host of other issues that are to be put before Citizen’s Juries. But we are asked to trust in a government that has repeatedly demonstrated its contempt for civil liberties and propensity to lie and dissemble to present the facts in a way that allows a dozen people to pronounce on policy after a few days of stage-managed “discussion.”

It is an extraordinary example of the erosion of genuine concern with democratic rights that this has not even elicited negative comment from pro-Labour broadsheets such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. The Liberal Democrats have even tried to trump Brown, with party leader Sir Menzies Campbell calling in the *Guardian* for what would be “Britain’s first written constitution” to be drafted by a convention whose membership has been half chosen by “random lot.” The *Guardian* explains that this is aimed at preventing the convention “from being colonised by constitutional reform fanatics.”

Even as these measures were being advanced as a broadening of governmental accountability, the government was preoccupied with the question of whether or not to call a snap General Election—perhaps in a matter of days after parliament resumes. To do so would itself be manifestly undemocratic. It would all but exclude anyone other than the major parties due to the financial constraints on mounting a campaign at such short notice and would leave the electorate to decide between the devil and the deep blue sea. Internally, Brown is seeking to prevent the Labour Party conference from ever again voting against the government on policy, by ending the existing right to move and debate “contemporary motions”.



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