

British democracy in “terminal decline,” report finds

Chris Marsden
11 July 2012

The latest annual study by Democratic Audit, a research organization based at the University of Liverpool, accurately depicts important aspects of the decay of democratic rule in Britain under the impact of a growing divide between rich and poor.

The academic think-tank finds, “Almost all available indicators suggest that representative democracy is in long-term, terminal decline” and that this decline, though universal, is particularly evident in the UK.

Among the more salient facts cited is the decline in voting and participation more generally in political life.

Turnout in general elections averages just 60 percent and is only half that in some elections. Staggeringly, only one percent of the population belongs to a political party.

These averages conceal even deeper levels of alienation among workers and youth. Only 57 percent of social grades DE vote (manual workers, part time workers and those relying on benefits), compared with 76 percent of social grades AB (upper middle and middle class professionals). Only 44 percent 18-24 year-olds vote compared with 76 percent of 65 plus. The report cites general levels of political engagement (beyond voting) as being typically 2-3 times greater for classes AB compared with members of social classes DE.

“The huge contrasts between members of different social classes in even discussing politics is particularly striking,” the authors state.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, the report’s lead author, told the

Guardian, “Over time, disengagement skews the political process yet further towards those who are already more advantaged by virtue of their wealth, education or professional connections. And without mass political participation, the sense of disconnection between citizens and their representatives will inevitably grow.”

Politics has in fact already become the exclusive domain of big business and the super-rich. Almost half of the UK’s top 50 firms are connected to a minister or MP, dwarfing the corresponding figures for the European Union-15 group at 7.1 percent.

“Corporate power is growing,” the report explains, threatening “to undermine some of the most basic principles of democratic decision-making... the power which large corporations and wealthy individuals now wield on the UK political system is unprecedented.

“The closeness of relationships between senior politicians and large media corporations, most notably News International, is a powerful example of this trend,” the report states, adding that, more generally, the “interweaving of political and corporate power” is “many times greater than that found in other established democracies.”

It is no surprise, given such naked government by and for the ruling elite, that the difference in election turnout between lower paid workers and upper management and professionals has grown from 13 percent in 1997 to 19 percent today. Though this is not noted, 1997 was the year when the Labour government of Tony Blair was elected. Rather than reversing the trend of political alienation, the pro-business policies it

pursued deepened the legitimate disaffection of workers with a political system that serves them so badly.

The authors suggest that the decline of trade unions as a “countervailing force” has also contributed to the growth of political disaffection. More correctly the decline of the unions, with membership at just 26.5 percent officially and in reality much lower, is because these organisations have done nothing to defend workers from the predatory attacks of government and the employers. Rather they have worked to demobilise and betray any and all expressions of social opposition to the ruling class’ agenda of ever-deeper austerity.

Naturally enough, the authors have no solution to offer. Instead they throw their hands up in despair—proclaiming that “no viable alternative model of democracy currently exists”—and propose a few constitutional reforms such as “stronger powers for MPs to hold ministers to account”, “a written constitution to ensure institutions such as the Electoral Commission were not vulnerable to being abolished by future governments” and reform of the House of Lords “by having mostly elected members.”

They will no doubt be aware of how impotent and inadequate this all sounds, but they nevertheless want to fix something that cannot be mended.

Whatever their own perplexity, the report by Democratic Audit has provided the service of gathering together material of an incendiary political character. And others understand this fact very well.

The report was shared exclusively with the *Guardian*, and columnist Jonathan Freedland expounded on the broader implications of the political disaffection identified. He writes July 6 of the crumbling of the “pillars of national life,” of the public disgracing of bankers, corporations, politicians, the police and the press.

“One by one, institutions that people once depended on—banks, parliament, police, press—have been exposed as, if not legally corrupt, then rotten with greed.”

And the result is that: “Dip into any radio phone-in or online comment thread and you can hear the fury all

this is creating.”

Freedland’s answer to all of this is as hopelessly at sea as is that of Democratic Audit.

“Labour has to voice this anger,” he warns. “Ed Miliband did so early, with his assault on ‘predator’ capitalism. He needs, though, to go further, not just so that his party can win back power—but for the sake of democratic politics itself. For if this rage does not find a peaceful outlet, it will find another way. But make no mistake: it will out.”

The ability of the Miliband and of the Labour Party to give voice to social anger and alienation does not exist. A party wedded to the capitalist system and totally beholden to the global financial oligarchy can offer little other than verbal posturing as an opponent of capitalism’s worst excesses. But when it comes to advancing policies that mean anything real to the disaffected masses, who want jobs, a living wage, decent education, health care, a pension, it can offer nothing but deepening misery and austerity.

Freedland comforts himself by asserting that, “The clear alternative ideologies around which collective rage cohered in, say, the 1930s are absent now. No one believes the masses are about to storm the palace.”

The journalist refers to a period in which millions of workers were animated by a profound belief that capitalism had failed and were prepared to fight for a socialist alternative. Freedland may wish to dismiss the possibility of a re-emergence of such sentiment and of it finding political articulation. Nevertheless, what he identifies—a “mood of radical disillusionment”—constitutes a portion of the objective basis for the development of a new, mass revolutionary movement in Britain.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact