

Dr. Stuart Wilks-Heeg

Stuart Wilks-Heeg is Executive Director of Democratic Audit and Senior Lecturer in social policy at the University of Liverpool. A graduate of the London School of Economics, Stuart has also studied at the universities of Copenhagen and Rotterdam, and was awarded a PhD by the University of Liverpool in 2004. He was recently commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to undertake a study of 'The Purity of Elections in the UK' (2008) which revealed significant concerns about electoral fraud, the state of the electoral registers and the pressures on the system of electoral administration. In 2010, he was lead author of the Electoral Commission's report on electoral registration. He is currently leading Democratic Audit's fourth full audit of democracy in the United Kingdom, using the internationally acclaimed Democratic Audit framework.



Democracy is Dead, Long Live Democracy

Predicting the future of democracy is a dangerous enterprise, literally so if presumptions are backed by force. In his infamous essay published in the summer before communism collapsed in eastern Europe, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed that global consensus about the virtues of liberal democracy represented ‘the end of history’.¹ Fukuyama could not have foreseen the circumstances in which a future US president would seek to impose such a world-view via military interventions. Yet, as the attempt to embed liberal democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan continues, in the face of ongoing insurgency and civilian and military deaths, it hardly seems necessary to recap why Fukuyama is often invited to eat his own words.

But my task is not to predict the future of world geo-politics. It is to assess what UK democracy might look like ten years from now, and this task is in many ways straightforward. Indeed, I can make three confident predictions from the outset. First, there will be no shortage of people in 2020 proclaiming a crisis of democracy in the UK. Second, the democratic pessimists of the near-future will have plenty of evidence to support their claims and, aside from the lunatic fringe, they will mostly be right. Third, while the pessimists will have their critics, those predicting a better future for democracy will mostly be clutching at straws, including the unhelpful retort that the problem with the pessimists is that they are not being optimistic enough. Contrary to the familiar cliché, then, there are more certainties in life than death or taxes.

How is it possible to be so certain? There are at least three reasons. First and foremost, the long-term trends, on which robust forecasting is invariably based, are both undeniable and incontestable. Across just about every imaginable indicator of the state of UK democracy since 1945, the curve of the graph begins to slope downwards from the early 1970s and reaches a nadir in the period from 1999 onwards. Whether our measure is voter registration or voter turnout, party membership or party activism, popular identification with political parties or public faith in elected politicians, the data sets point the same way – and that way is down.

All the record lows for turnout in UK elections were set from 1998–2005. The proportion of the population expressing very strong identification with a political party shrank from 45 per cent in 1964 to nine per cent in 2005. Levels of party membership dropped from 1 in 11 voters in the 1950s to a mere 1 in 88 in the mid-2000s. While political scientists rightly remind us that there was no golden age, from today’s perspective, the 1950s and 1960s really do shine brightly, whatever the tint of our spectacles. There is just one set of data which suggests a counter-trend, to which I will return – as it requires careful interpretation.

The second reason for our certainty is that evidence of democratic erosion is not unique to the UK; it is characteristic of all established democracies. No country which was already a democracy in 1945 bucks the trend of declining engagement and growing popular cynicism. It is scarcely necessary to trawl through the vast reams of evidence from comparative political science; a solitary, but exhaustive, Scandinavian case study tells us just about everything we need to know. From 1998–2004, generously funded scholars undertaking the Norwegian ‘Power and Democracy’ study scrutinised the state of democracy in a country which ranks in the global top three on just about every indicator of democratic quality. The conclusions they reached were damning: ‘the democratic chain of command in which governance is under the control of voters has burst and the very fabric of rule by popular consent is disintegrating before our eyes [...it is...] not only that there are weak points in the chain but that a chain that was once solid has fallen apart’.² For the UK, which ranks in the bottom quartile of established democracies, the Norwegian study poses serious questions.

The third reason for my prognosis is that recent attempts to remedy matters within the UK through a variety of ‘fixes’ – some quick, others more considered – have served only to demonstrate the lack of a magic bullet solution. Perhaps the most absurd recent intervention has been the notion that low turnouts arise from the difficulty which busy fin de siècle electors have reaching their local polling station on election day and that electoral participation would therefore be increased by allowing people to vote by post, Internet or text message. The legacy of this ‘electoral modernisation’ programme since the late 1990s has been the perpetuation of record low turnouts and a decline in public confidence in the security of the ballot.³

To be fair, several reforms introduced since 1997 have been both more profound and more considered. We now have, among others, tighter regulation of party funding, devolution to the Celtic nations, and a Freedom of Information Act. Such reforms were long overdue, and have become embedded parts of a reordered democratic framework. Yet, none have yet delivered the transformative effect which many had anticipated. Nobody would now advocate abolishing the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament, and experts are right to praise the democratic quality of the devolved institutions at the end of their first decade. But voters seem decidedly more ambivalent – Scottish and Welsh electors have hardly flocked to vote for their Members of Scottish Parliament (MSP) and Assembly Members (AMs). Meanwhile, reforms introducing greater transparency and accountability have often had unanticipated consequences. By enabling the media to expose a constant series

of breaches of the new regulations, and even examples of undoubted corruption, the new party funding and Freedom of Information (FOI) regimes, for instance, have indirectly helped to fuel growing public disdain for party politics.

The failure of New Labour's (initially) broad-ranging constitutional reform to reverse popular discontentment with our democratic structures should remind us that meaningful reform takes time. Even if we were to quickly adopt some of the most radical reforms which have been advocated over many decades, almost all would take at least a decade to generate change; for some of them it may already be too late for them to make any real impact.

Though it may be easy to read the runes of our immediate democratic future, two obvious points of controversy remain. The first, which dominates academic debates, centres on competing explanations for the erosion of representative democracy. The second, of more direct concern to policy makers, is focused on whether we can do anything about it. Of course, as the words on Karl Marx's tombstone remind us, any answer to the first question begs an answer to the second – 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world [...] the point is to change it'. And, as Marx would surely confer, the answer to the second question also depends on how we answer the first.

There is space for only the briefest personal observations in response to both questions. On explanations, there is a compelling argument that the decline of representative democracy cannot be disentangled from the decline of class politics, which also peaked in the immediate post-war decades. There is also a need to consider the implications of what John Keane describes as the emergence of 'monitory democracy', in which the principal interlocutors for elected politicians are no longer voters, or even fellow party members, but a wider democracy industry made up of the media, spin doctors, special advisers, pollsters, think-tanks, regulatory bodies and others. With this vast monitory apparatus filtering all forms of political communication, the chain linking voters and politicians has fallen apart without the political class really noticing.

We are highly likely to be facing the death of democracy as we once knew it. This should not surprise us. In some ways, it should not particularly concern us. History is littered with defunct forms of democracy, from Ancient Greek city-states to assemblies of Viking 'free men', and we may not be able to salvage a model of representative democracy in terminal decline. Instead, the issue for policy makers is to understand how the era of representative democracy has embedded universal democratic values in ways which earlier forms of democracy did not, and which offer scope for future variants of it to emerge.

Here we must return to that one set of indicators which suggests some counter-trends to democratic decay. Measured over several decades, levels of interest in politics in the UK and elsewhere have remained remarkably stable and, significantly, participation in several forms of non-party politics shows signs of overall growth. The desire for democracy in everyday life remains strong, and offers the foundation from which our democratic order can adapt, if only slowly and painfully, to face the challenges of the 21st century. The one straw to which the optimists need to be clutching in ten years time is this scope to develop a more participatory democracy. We must spend the next decade ensuring it does not slip away for good.

- 1 Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History' *The National Interest*, issue No 16, summer 1989.
- 2 Stein Ringen, 'Where Now, Democracy?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 February 2003.
- 3 Stuart Wilks-Heeg, *Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern*, York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.