

## **IS THERE REALLY A DEMAND FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE?**

*John Curtice and Roger Jowell*

The new Labour government elected on 1 May 1997 came to power on the basis of a manifesto that committed it to a wide range of domestic constitutional changes. These included reform of the House of Lords, the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act, the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into British law, devolution to both Scotland and Wales plus the creation of regional bodies in England, and the promise of a referendum on the electoral system used in Westminster elections. On most of these policies, the government had already made some progress on implementation within a few months of taking office.

The Conservatives, in contrast, opposed all of the proposed reforms. Indeed constitutional reform was arguably the issue on which the two main British parties were most divided at the election. After all, the gap between them on the traditional battleground of British elections, socio-economic issues, appeared to be as close as it had ever been after Labour had ditched Clause IV, committed itself to no increase in income tax rates, and promised not to spend more than the Conservatives planned to do between 1997 and 1999. Certainly, there was little sign of the consensus between the main political parties about the rules of the political game which has traditionally been a feature of British politics.

Apart from its domestic constitutional agenda, the new Labour government is also required to respond to further developments towards European integration, developments which, as in the case of the replacement of the pound by a single European currency, are widely thought to have 'constitutional' implications. In addition, the government has also inherited an

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incomplete Northern Ireland peace process, out of which it is hoped a new set of constitutional arrangements might emerge that will secure the consent of both the Protestant and Catholic communities. In short, the next few years could see little less than a revolution in British constitutional practice.

But did the election on 1 May 1997 of a government committed to constitutional change really reflect a new zeal for constitutional change amongst the British public? When voters placed their cross against the name of a Labour candidate were they not only signalling that they wanted a change in who governed them but also in how they were governed? Or was the election of a reforming government an accident, the product of an electorate turning to the only party that could hope to eject a discredited incumbent government from office and taking little notice of the fact that that party had become disenchanted with existing power structures after the experience of 18 years out of office?

Why should this matter? Part of the reason lies in theories about the role that elections can and do play in a liberal democracy. (For an introduction see Schumpeter 1976, Plant 1991.) On the one hand it is argued that elections give governments a mandate because voters decide how to vote on the basis of the promises that the parties make about the policies they would pursue if elected to office. If the principal protagonists make very different promises about a particular issue, as Labour and the Conservatives did over constitutional reform in 1997, voters will take notice and give considerable weight to this issue in deciding how to vote. On this argument the 1997 election result should indicate a mood for constitutional change.

If this theory is correct, it would appear particularly important to demonstrate that it applies to the 1997 British election. Changing the constitutional rules is widely regarded as an issue of particular importance in a democracy. For these rules lend legitimacy and authority to the actions of government. Both are undermined if the rules are not widely accepted, as the history of Northern Ireland has so clearly illustrated. Thus, perhaps more so than in any other area of public policy, any changes to constitutional rules should reflect and embody a public consensus.

However, perhaps all that voters do in an election is to focus on the performance of the incumbent government in office, and not the promises the parties make about the future. If voters are broadly happy with that performance, the government will be re-elected. If voters are unhappy they will opt for the opposition without enquiring too deeply about what the opposition promises it will do if elected. If this is what really happens in an

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election, then we cannot assume that the election of a reforming government represents a public endorsement of its proposals.

Indeed the Labour government itself seems to accept that this might be so. Despite the failure of the Conservatives to secure the election of a single MP in either Scotland or Wales, it has already proceeded with referendums on its plans for devolution to those two parts of the United Kingdom. Indeed the result of the Welsh referendum, a narrow 'Yes' vote, certainly suggested that many a voter who supported Labour, the Liberal Democrats or Plaid Cymru in May then voted 'No' in September. Meanwhile Labour is also committed to holding a UK-wide referendum on the electoral system used to elect the House of Commons sometime during the course of this parliament. True, the prospect of yet another referendum on Britain's possible entry into a single European currency may have been put off until after the next election, but such a referendum would doubtless be held soon after that election in the event of a second Labour victory.

So another reason for looking at attitudes towards constitutional change is to examine what the prospects might be for referendums on electoral reform or Europe. What does the evidence suggest the outcome might be? How stable are attitudes towards these issues? And what might be the considerations that could persuade voters to change their minds?

### **MEASURING DEMAND FOR CHANGE**

We propose to assess whether there really is a demand for constitutional change across Britain as a whole against four criteria. First we will examine how coherent attitudes towards constitutional reform are. It is often argued that if voters really do have clear views about a subject, and are not simply being obliging to an interviewer by answering her questions, we should find a clear and consistent relationship between their answers towards one question about that subject and the responses they give to another (Butler and Stokes 1974). This suggests that those in favour of one kind of constitutional change should tend to be in favour of another. After all, many of those who have campaigned in favour of constitutional change, such as the pressure group Charter 88, argue that Britain needs a comprehensive programme of reform and not just tinkering at the edges (Holme and Elliott 1988). And we would certainly anticipate that when we ask voters two questions about exactly the same reform they should give us the same answer.

Our second criterion is to ask whether there is a growing majority in favour of reform. Note that our interest is not simply in whether a majority is currently

in favour of change, but whether there is also evidence that support has been rising over recent years. Clearly the 1997 election can only be an indicator of a change in public mood if we can show that the public is more in favour of constitutional change now than it was in the 1980s when Conservative governments were re-elected. We might also conclude that if public support for constitutional change has been rising over a significant period of time, then any programme of reform is more likely to still be in tune with public opinion by the time it is actually implemented.

The third question we ask is who is in favour of constitutional change? Is it a subject that only raises the passions of the so-called 'chattering classes'? Or is it an issue whose time might yet still be to come, supported more strongly by the young than the old? Or perhaps in fact reform is already widely supported across all sections of society, representing a new political consensus whose implementation would indeed help to enhance the legitimacy of democracy in Britain.

Finally, and crucially, we examine the robustness of peoples' support for constitutional change. Do people answer consistently when asked about the same subject a few weeks or months apart? Or are their views skin-deep capable of being swayed in one direction or another by the last persuasive argument they have heard - or perhaps by the positions adopted by the parties and the leaders? These questions are particularly important in ascertaining the apparent prospects for the outcome of referendums on electoral reform and a single European currency.

These criteria equip us to undertake a more searching and wide-ranging examination of the depth of support for constitutional reform than the subject has commonly received hitherto (for other important writing on this topic see Dunleavy and Weir 1991a; Dunleavy and Weir 1991b; Dunleavy and Weir 1995; Dunleavy et al 1995; Smith 1991; Worcester 1995). Much previous writing has, for example, only been based on the results of surveys conducted in the 1990s (but for an exception see Weir 1992). Here, we are able to provide a longer time perspective, and systematically compare attitudes now with those in the 1980s across a range of issues and measures. We are also able to move beyond the limitations of cross-section surveys which only interview their respondents once, and undertake analysis of panel surveys which interview the same respondents on more than one occasion, thereby enabling us to look at how stable individual voters' views on the subject are across time. We provide some of the first evidence of the impact of the 1997 election on attitudes towards constitutional change. And finally we analyse attitudes towards the domestic constitutional reform agenda alongside attitudes towards Europe (on which see also Evans 1995), and ask whether

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there is any link in the public mind about the two apparently different challenges to the existing constitutional order.

## **SOURCES**

Our evidence comes primarily from two main sources. The first is the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. Conducted almost annually since 1983 amongst a representative sample of the British adult population, this survey covers a wide range of topics including education and euthanasia, housing and health, crime and censorship. In addition it also asks questions about politics. We will make particular use of the BSA survey conducted in the spring of 1996 which asked a wide range of questions about constitutional change (Curtice and Jowell 1997).

Our second source is the British Election Study (BES). This is a survey-based study of political behaviour and attitudes which has been undertaken at every election since 1964. In 1997 the study had two main elements. The first was an hour long interview with a fresh representative cross-section of voters undertaken in the weeks immediately after polling day, and similar in design to previous surveys in the BES series. The second element was a panel of respondents who were interviewed twice (by telephone) in the four weeks before polling day and once again immediately afterwards. All of the panellists had originally been interviewed as part of the 1996 BSA sample. To distinguish it from the cross-section survey we will refer to this part of the 1997 BES as the British Election Campaign Study (BECS). Note that in the case of both the BES and the BECS, the results quoted here are provisional as at the time of writing the final version of the weighting scheme that will be used to ensure their estimates are as accurate as possible was not available.

In addition to these two main sources, we also refer to two further surveys. The first is the British Election Panel Study (BEPS). In this panel, the same group of respondents was interviewed on a regular basis throughout the whole of the 1992-7 parliament (for further details see Brook and Taylor 1996). The second is a 'deliberative poll' undertaken by Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) for Channel 4 television in the spring of 1995. An implementation of the ideas of Fishkin (1995), a representative sample of the British public whose views on Europe had been ascertained beforehand was brought together to question experts and politicians on Britain's relations with Europe. They were then questioned about their views once again at the end of the process. The exercise thus gives us some idea of what public opinion on Europe might be after it has become more informed about the topic, for example as the result of a referendum campaign.

## IS CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM A SINGLE PACKAGE?

We now turn to the first criterion we set out. Is constitutional reform a single coherent issue in the public's mind? Are those in favour of one particular reform also more likely to be in favour of others? And are people consistent in their answers if questioned more than once about the same reform?

First of all, we can examine the results of a factor analysis undertaken of answers given to the 1996 BSA survey. This survey is particularly appropriate because not only did it contain questions which touch upon nearly all of the Labour government's constitutional reform agenda, but it also asked about both Europe and Northern Ireland. It also addressed an issue which has not yet reached the agenda of any political party but which has now become the subject of public debate, viz. the future of the monarchy (see Worcester 1997). Factor analysis is a technique which enables us to establish on which issues attitudes tend to go together, and where they do not. If it were true that all constitutional issues, including Europe, constituted a single issue in the public mind then a factor analysis should find that all of the items in our survey correlate together on the same 'factor' or dimension.

**Table 1**  
**The Constitutional Packages**

Factor	Item	Loading	Eigenvalue
1. Electoral Reform	Introduce PR	0.77	(2.59)
	Change electoral system	0.73	
	Coalition government	0.66	
	Courts overrule parliament	0.42	
2. General Change	Importance Monarchy	0.68	(1.58)
	Scottish Parliament	0.60	
	Reform Lords	0.54	
	N. Ireland	0.54	
	Right to know Defence plans	0.48	
3. Europe	Withdrawal/Integration	0.85	(1.34)
	Single currency	0.80	
4. Freedom of Information	Right to know plans for new laws	0.81	(1.05)
	Right to know economic plans	0.80	

*For full details of the question wording of each item, see Appendix 1.  
The solution explains just over 50% of the variance.*

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*Source: BSA 1996*

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But this is not the case. As table 1 shows, the factor analysis identified four separate dimensions. One of these is a general 'constitutional change' dimension; those who favour the creation of a Scottish parliament also tend to favour reform of the House of Lords, the reunification of Ireland and freedom of information. They also attach less importance to the maintenance of the monarchy. But attitudes towards electoral reform do not form part of this dimension; neither do views about Europe. Both these subjects dominate their own separate factor. Finally, our fourth dimension is dominated by two further items which were also designed to tap attitudes towards freedom of information. This reflects the fact that as many as nine in ten of our respondents were in favour of a public right to know in these two instances, resulting in a far more skewed distribution than on any other question. We will accordingly exclude these two items from any further consideration in our analysis.

Constitutional change is not then a single package in the minds of the electorate. While there are some links, such as for example between reforming the House of Lords and creating a Scottish parliament, those who favour change on these issues do not necessarily back either electoral reform or further integration with Europe. Of course these latter two are precisely the two issues on which UK-wide referendums are likely to be held in future.

Moreover, when we look at attitudes towards electoral reform itself, we find striking evidence that the answers given are highly sensitive to the wording of the question put. On four occasions over the last five years we have asked the same group of respondents two different questions about electoral reform in different parts of the questionnaire. On each occasion we have secured a very different distribution of answers to the two questions.

As the first half of table 2 shows, responses to one of our two questions consistently suggested substantial support for the introduction of proportional system. Here we asked respondents:

How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? Britain should introduce proportional representation so that the number of MPs each party gets matches more closely the number of votes each party gets.

Respondents were invited to indicate how far they agreed or disagreed with this statement on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. As the table shows consistently just under a half agreed with the proposition while usually less than one in five disagreed.

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**Table 2**  
**It All Depends on How You Ask Us**

	1992 %	1994 %	1996 %	1997 %
1. Should Introduce PR				
Agree	48	49	45	49
Disagree	27	18	16	16
2. Change Electoral System				
Change	33	34	33	35
Keep As Is	60	60	59	60

*Source: 1992 1997: BES. 1994 1996: BSA*

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In contrast as the second half of the table shows we derive a very different picture from the answers to the following question:

Some people say we should change the voting system to allow smaller parties to get a fair share of MPs. Others say we should keep the voting system as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closest to your own. that we should change the voting system or keep it as it is?

In response to this pair of propositions we consistently find three in five in favour of keeping the existing electoral system while only around one in three say they want to change it. Evidently on electoral reform at least we must conclude that many voters do not have clear or consistent views. (For a similar finding see Dunleavy and Margetts 1997.)

What should we conclude from this inconsistency? First that many voters probably know relatively little about proportional representation and care even less. It is striking that in response to the first of our two questions, around one in three respondents either said they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the proposition or said they 'did not know' what their opinion was. Second, the outcome of a referendum will depend on the quality of the arguments put by both sides. Electoral reform is an issue where there are competing values at stake. Voters appear to want fairness but they also want effective government. Not only do they have different (and perhaps unstable) trade-offs between the two, but many of them are not yet sure of the relative merits of proportional representation and the existing system in achieving those objectives. We would suggest that if by the time of a referendum

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proportional representation does become associated with fairness it is likely to secure majority support; if on the other hand it becomes linked with ineffectiveness and weakness it will not win public backing. Which of these eventually pertains will depend on the quality of the campaigning (see also Curtice 1993).

So, on our first criterion at least, it is by no means clear that there is a demand for constitutional reform. We have uncovered clues that attitudes towards Europe and towards electoral reform may be different from those towards other aspects of constitutional change. And on electoral reform at least, the public is not even necessarily consistent in its views towards the same subject.

### **A GROWING MAJORITY?**

What of our second criterion? Is constitutional reform backed by a growing majority? Does the election in 1997 of a government committed to reform signal a change in the public mood since the 1980s?

On a number of topics we can in fact demonstrate that the public has become more favourable towards reform - and that on some issues majorities for change now exist where they did not before. For example, in 1983 only one in three believed that some kind of change was needed to the House of Lords; over the last three years at least half have consistently taken that view (see table 3).

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**Table 3**  
**Trends in Attitudes towards House of Lords**

<i>% saying House of Lords...</i>	1983	1994	1996	1997
should remain as it is	57	36	29	34
change needed	33	50	57	53

*Sources: 1983 1994 1996: BSA. 1997: BES.*

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One of the most controversial features of the House of Lords is of course that its membership is partly determined by the hereditary principle. An institution which is also reliant on that principle is the monarchy. Support for it too has plummeted. In 1983, no less than 65% said that it very important that Britain

should keep the monarchy. Three readings taken between 1994 and 1996 consistently put that figure at only 31-32%. True, only a very small minority as yet want to see the abolition of the monarchy, but there has evidently been a sea-change in the public mood, a change that occurred well before the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in August 1997. The widespread public criticism of the monarchy that was expressed in the days immediately after her death was undoubtedly a manifestation of a change that had already taken place rather than a new mood created by the shock of the death itself (see also Worcester 1997).

What of devolution? A majority of Scots themselves have long favoured the establishment of at least some kind of Scottish parliament. True, there is some doubt about whether there has been a long-term growth in support for a Scottish parliament, but opinion has certainly hardened with a growing proportion expressing support for independence rather than just devolution (Brown et al 1996; Mitchell 1996). But what of Britain as a whole? The last three British Election Studies have not only asked respondents in Scotland their views about how they think they should be governed, but have also asked people in England what they think about the possibility of a Scottish parliament. True, the precise wording of the question has been somewhat different in the three surveys (for details see Appendix 1), reflecting changes in the terms of the debate itself, so we have to be somewhat cautious in the inferences we draw. Even so, in each case respondents were given four or five options to choose between, ranging from independence at one extreme to the status quo at the other, rendering the questions broadly comparable. In 1987 only 59% of those living in either England or Scotland said that there should be some kind of change, be it independence, devolution or whatever. This was despite the fact that included in this figure is support for a very mild proposition that 'some other way [apart from independence or devolution] should be found to make sure the needs of Scotland are better understood by the government in London'. In contrast by 1992, despite the absence of that mild proposition from the options, as many as 65% backed some form of change, a figure which rose even further to 70% in 1997.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps an English 'backlash' is yet to come. But so far at least the English have been inclined, if

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<sup>1</sup> *In contrast to the BES, the British Election Panel Study (BEPS) administered the same question to its respondents in 1997 as it did in 1992. This also shows a small rise in support for constitutional change between those two dates. The trend is also confirmed if we look only at those respondents living in England. 56% backed change in 1987, rising to 64% in 1992 and 68% in 1997.*

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anything, to show increasing sympathy for the demands of Scots for constitutional change.

Where then at least we can construct a long-term time series, there has indeed been a trend towards increased support for constitutional change on those subjects that form part of our general constitutional change factor. There is however one notable exception. Support for a change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland has fallen somewhat. In 1983 a clear majority of people living in Great Britain, 58%, said that the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it to unite with the rest of Ireland and not remain part of the United Kingdom. In subsequent readings taken regularly between then and 1990, support for this view never dropped below 55%. But from 1991 onwards it has never again reached that figure, and in the 1997 election study only 51% backed unification. Clearly for many people in Great Britain, Northern Ireland is still very much a semi-detached part of the Union, but there has been a small though perceptible shift in favour of allowing it to remain.

But it is on attitudes towards electoral reform and towards Europe that we really see a very different pattern. Table 2 has already shown us that irrespective of which measure we look at, there has not been any increase in support for electoral reform over the last five years. In fact we can construct a much longer time series, back to 1983, for the second of the two questions we examined there. In table 4 we show the results obtained by the last four election studies; this selection has the advantage that in each case the question was asked immediately after respondents had experienced the operation of the existing system. If that experience makes a difference to peoples' views, then that influence will be equally present in all of our readings.

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**Table 4**  
**Trends in Attitudes towards Electoral Reform**

<i>% saying...</i>	1983	1987	1992	1997
Change Voting System	39	36	33	35
Keep As Is	54	58	60	60

*Source: BES*

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There is no sign here of any rising tide of support for electoral reform. Indeed, if anything it appears that opinion has become slightly more wedded to the existing system. In truth, not too much should probably be made of this.

Compared with subsequent BSA as well as BES readings, support for change proved to be unusually high in 1983, a temporary reaction perhaps to Lady Thatcher's landslide victory that year. Thus as early as 1986 when we next asked the question, only 32% opted for change. But clearly there are not any signs of a growing majority for electoral reform; indeed there must be doubts whether there is a majority at all.

If attitudes towards electoral reform have shown little sign of change this is certainly not true of attitudes towards Europe. As table 5 illustrates, between 1983 and 1992 the British public became increasingly supportive of our membership of the European Union. But thereafter Euroscepticism has clearly taken root, such that the proportion in favour of our continued membership is now little higher than it was in the early 1980s. In other words attitudes towards Europe have exhibited a cyclical pattern rather than evidence of a growing majority.

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**Table 5**  
**Trends in British Attitudes towards EU Membership**

<i>Britain's membership of the EU...</i>	1983 %	1987 %	1992 %	1997 %
should continue	53	63	71	58
should withdraw	42	32	22	30

*Sources: 1983,1987: BSA. 1992 1997: BES.*

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So once again we see a clear distinction between attitudes towards most constitutional issues and views about both electoral reform and Europe. On the former there is considerable evidence of a rising tide of support. On the latter there is no such evidence at all. It looks as though the government has committed itself to future referendums on the two aspects of constitutional reform on which it can be least sure of securing public support.

### **WHO SUPPORTS CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE?**

Our third criterion is who supports constitutional change? Is it, for example, simply a concern of the 'chattering classes'? Or does it have widespread support amongst all sections of society?

One simple way in which we can operationalise the notion of the 'chattering classes' is to examine the association between support for constitutional

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change and educational qualifications. Table 6 (next page) compares the attitudes of, on the one hand, those who have a degree with, on the other, those who do not have any educational qualifications at all. And indeed we see, on all of the items included in the table, that those with a degree are more likely to be in favour of reform than those without any education qualifications at all. But at the same time the gap varies considerably. In the case of the House of Lords, a Scottish parliament or the monarchy, there is a relatively small difference. In the case of electoral reform and of Europe there are more obvious differences. European integration and electoral reform do indeed appear to be primarily the preserve of the chattering classes; in the case of other constitutional issues this is less obviously so.

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**Table 6**  
**Education and Reform**

% who favour...	Education	
	Degree	No Qualifications
Change House of Lords	64	55
Scottish Parliament	71	62
Monarchy Not Very Important	73	68
Change Voting System	48	26
Introduce Euro	55	20
Strengthen European Union	24	10

*Definitions:*

*Scottish Parliament: All in favour of some form of independence or devolution*

*Monarchy Not Very Important: All who do not say that is 'very important' to keep the monarchy*

*Introduce Euro: All who favour the introduction of the Euro either in place of or alongside the pound.*

*Strengthen EU: All who favour Britain staying in the EU and trying either to increase the EU's power or to work for the creation of a single European government*

*Source: BSA 1996*

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Meanwhile we might enquire whether the young are more in favour of change than those who are older. Such a pattern might be an indicator of a generational difference, implying that support for reform might grow further in future as older people, doubtful of the merits of reform, are replaced by

younger people who want to see change. In fact table 7 shows only limited support for this possibility. The one issue on which younger people most clearly take a different view from older people is on the importance of keeping the monarchy. More extensive analysis by Heath and Park (1997) suggests that this difference is indeed a generational one rather than a tendency for respect for the monarchy to be an accoutrement of age. But in general the differences between the age groups are sufficiently small that, even if generational differences are present, it would take a long time before they had a significant effect on the overall distribution of public opinion.

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**Table 7**  
**Age and Reform**

<i>% who favour...</i>	Age	
	18-34	55+
Change House of Lords	56	58
Scottish Parliament	71	65
Monarchy Not Very Important	76	59
Change Voting System	36	24
Introduce Euro	31	26
Strengthen European Union	18	12

*Definitions: See table 5*

*Source: BSA 1996*

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Indeed, in general the differences between various social groups in their attitudes towards constitutional reform are relatively small. Change tends to be either universally supported or opposed across the social spectrum. But then there is perhaps relatively little reason why we should anticipate large differences between social groups on this subject anyway. After all, there is little reason why most of these possible constitutional changes should be expected to have a more favourable material impact on some people's lives rather than others. Perhaps we need to look at the values and loyalties that people bring to the subject of constitutional reform instead.

One possibility is that those with a low level of trust in the political system are more likely to be in favour of constitutional change. We have indeed explored this possibility previously (Curtice and Jowell 1995; Curtice and Jowell 1997). We found that those with a relatively low degree of trust in the political system are indeed somewhat more likely to be in favour of reform.

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But the relationship is not particularly strong. Thus, while amongst those with a low level of trust as many as 64% believe that change is needed to the House of Lords, even amongst those with a high level of trust 51% still take that view. Moreover, analysis of the 1996 BSA survey has revealed that the gap between those with high and low levels of trust has narrowed in recent years.

Considerable interest has also been engendered recently by the possibility that the performance of and attitudes towards a political system might be influenced by the degree of 'social capital' in a society. It is argued that in a society where people find it difficult to trust each other this makes it less likely that people will engage in the co-operative behaviour needed for a political system to function effectively. Atomised individuals, it is argued, are inclined to take a cynical view of their politicians and political system (Putnam 1995). This might mean in the British context that those with a low level of social trust might be more in favour of constitutional change.

In the event there is no evidence that this is so. In the 1997 BSA we included a question which has been commonly used to measure social capital in the United States. We asked, 'Generally speaking would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?'. A majority (57%) put themselves in the distrustful camp. But these respondents proved, if anything, to be rather less likely to be in favour of either electoral reform or greater European integration than those who were trustful of their fellow citizens. Social capital is evidently not a bulwark against demands for constitutional change.

But a further indicator which we implemented in the 1997 BES proves to be rather more revealing. In that survey we included half a dozen items designed to measure respondents' degree of attachment to Britishness. Thus, for example, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the claim that, 'Britain has a lot to learn from other countries in running its affairs'. Together the items constitute a British national sentiment scale (for further details see Heath and Kellas, this volume, Heath et al, forthcoming). In table 8, we have simply divided our respondents into half according to their score on this scale, enabling us to compare the attitudes towards constitutional change of those with below average scores with the views of those with an above average score<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The scale runs from 1 to 5. In our dichotomisation those with a low score are those with those with a score of less than 3.4, Those with the a high score are those with a score of 3.4 or more.

As we can see, those with a high level of attachment to Britishness are noticeably less likely to back constitutional change than those with a low level of attachment. It is perhaps hardly surprising that this should be so in respect of attitudes towards Europe, or even a Scottish parliament, both of which are widely regarded as a threat to the maintenance of the United Kingdom as an independent sovereign state. But neither reform of the House of Lords nor alteration of the electoral system involve any threat to the independence or integrity of the United Kingdom, and yet attitudes towards these two are clearly correlated with our national sentiment scale as well. This suggests that people's willingness to contemplate any kind of constitutional change may well be linked to notions of pride in one's country. If so, this suggests that attempts to appeal to national pride could potentially play an important and unexpected role in any referendum on an alternative electoral system.

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**Table 8**  
**British National Sentiment and Reform**

<i>% who favour</i>	National Sentiment	
	Low	High
Change House of Lords	60	45
Scottish Parliament	77	62
Change Voting System	43	27
Introduce Euro	47	26
Strengthen European Union	25	9

*Definitions: see table 5. Note, however, that the wording of the Scottish Parliament question in this table is different from that in table 5 (see Appendix 1). Respondents in Wales are also not omitted here.*

*Source: 1997 BES provisional data*

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If loyalty to Britain is one form of emotional attachment that appears to influence attitudes to constitutional change, partisan loyalties are, less surprisingly, another. After all, as we noted earlier, the Conservatives have consistently opposed constitutional change while Labour and the Liberal Democrats are both broadly in favour. In table 8 (next page) we can see that

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those who say they identify with the Conservatives<sup>1</sup> (rather than simply say they would vote for them) are in each case less likely to support constitutional change than either Labour or Liberal Democrat identifiers. But within that broad generalisation there are also some important differences between the items. First, on some, most notably electoral reform, it is Liberal Democrat identifiers who are most in favour of change while on others, such as changing the House of Lords, it is Labour identifiers who are the strongest backers of reform. And second, the differences between the party's supporters on Europe are much smaller than they are on the other issues.

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**Table 9**  
**Party Identification and Reform**

% who favour...	Party Identification		
	Con	Lab	LDem
Change House of Lords	46	68	54
Scottish Parliament	66	73	75
Monarchy Not Very Important	57	74	60
Change Voting System	20	36	59
Introduce Euro	26	31	30
Strengthen European Union	10	19	12

*Definitions: See table 5*

*Source: BSA 1996*

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Neither of these subsidiary patterns should surprise us. In the spring of 1996, when these data were collected, the key features of the parties' positions on Europe were that the Conservatives were internally divided while Labour were reluctant to allow much of a gap to open between the parties on the issue. In short, neither party was providing a clear lead to the electorate. Meanwhile, on electoral reform the Liberal Democrats are clearly in favour of change whereas Labour is internally divided and committed only to the

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<sup>1</sup> *We are referring here to the concept of party identification or partisan 'self-image' which is widely used in the study of electoral behaviour. It is designed to denote those who have an affective attachment towards a party. See, for example, Butler and Stokes (1974) or Norris (1996).*

holding of a referendum. This again is reflected in the views of their supporters. Of course these patterns could well indicate that some people develop an identification with a party because of the position it adopts on constitutional change. But they also strongly suggest that some voters are likely to take their cue about what to think about constitutional change from the party they support. If this is so, the positions adopted by the parties themselves are potentially far from inconsequential in determining the outcome of any referendum.

Yet at the same time our evidence also suggests that much of that potential has still to be realised. Conservative supporters may be less likely to support constitutional change. But that does not stop a majority of them being in favour of the creation of a Scottish parliament, in flat contradiction of their party's official policy, while nearly half are in favour of reform of the House of Lords. Equally two in five Liberal Democrat identifiers fail to back electoral reform on the measure used here; they also display little evidence of the Euro-enthusiasm of their party.

Indeed, the strength of association between party identification and attitudes towards constitutional change is generally weaker than the association between party identification and attitudes towards issues of equality and redistribution, that is the classic left-right economic issues that have traditionally been the main source of division between Labour and the Conservatives. Thus, for example, on the same 1996 BSA survey there was no less than a 37 point gap between Conservative and Labour identifiers in the proportion who agreed that 'Ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth' and a similar 36 point gap in the proportion believing that 'Government should redistribute income from those who are better-off to those who are less well-off'<sup>1</sup>. The only gap that matches these in table 9 is the 39 point difference between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in attitudes towards electoral reform. None of the differences between Conservative and Labour identifiers approach this level at all.

We acquire some indication of why this should be so from table 10 (next page). When we first interviewed the respondents to the British Election Campaign Study (BECS) we presented them with half a dozen policy positions and for each one asked them to identify which of the parties was

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<sup>1</sup> *These two items form part of a 'socialism/laissez-faire' scale which was developed to provide a methodologically robust way of measuring the classic left-right dimension. For further details see Curtice (1996); Evans and Heath (1995); Evans et al (1996).*

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most of in favour. In each case we chose policies where we believed it was clear which party was most in favour. We also repeated the questions when we interviewed them again just before polling day.

Of the six items, two referred to constitutional issues, proportional representation and independence for Scotland. And these proved to be the two issues on which the public found it most difficult to name the correct party. Moreover, the election campaign itself apparently did little or nothing to advance the electorate's knowledge. True, the relatively low level of correct answers for the two constitutional issues may in part arise because the correct answer in both cases was a third party. But our evidence hardly supports the notion that most voters have a clear view about where the parties stand on constitutional reform. Little wonder therefore that the subject is less strongly correlated with partisanship than traditional economic issues.

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**Table 10**  
**Knowledge of Party Policies**

<i>% correctly identifying party most in favour of</i>	Spring 1996	Late April 1997	
Privately run railways	81	77	(Con)
Minimum Wage	75	77	(Lab)
Local authority control of schools	54	52	(Lab)
Cut spending and taxes	50	47	(Con)
Proportional Representation	39	43	(LDem)
Independence for Scotland	32	34	(SNP)

*Party named in brackets indicates the answer that was deemed correct*

*Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997*

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Asking our third question has uncovered a number of important findings. Only to a limited degree is constitutional change an issue that particularly appeals to a younger generation. Voters are probably influenced by the positions that the parties themselves take. It is likely that if the Labour party, or at least its leader, eventually comes out in favour of a Yes vote in a referendum on proportional representation more Labour supporters are likely to vote Yes as a result. But at the same time, the parties are not, as yet at

least, as influential on this issue as on those economic issues that have traditionally divided Labour and the Conservatives.

We have also discovered that feelings of national pride appear to make a difference, and that how such sentiments are or are not appealed to could have an important role in the outcome of any referendum on either a single currency or changing the electoral system for Westminster. At the same time, we have uncovered yet further evidence that attitudes towards these issues are different from those towards other aspects of constitutional reform. Unlike changing the House of Lords or devolution, proportional representation and Europe are still somewhat the preserve of the 'chattering classes'.

### **HOW ROBUST IS SUPPORT FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE?**

The last of our criteria is to ask how robust is support for constitutional change? Are the public's views easily changed, or do they clearly have firm opinions that are unlikely to be changed during the course of any referendum campaign? Our focus here is confined to the two issues, Europe and proportional representation, where a referendum is indeed in prospect.

The next nearest thing to a referendum campaign is an election. Although election campaigns are about the parties and the leaders themselves as well as about a wide range of different issues whereas referendums offer the opportunity to focus on a single issue, elections are also an occasion when voters are subjected to more attempts to persuade and mobilise them than at any other time. Moreover, Europe, and in particular whether Britain should join a single European currency, was one of the more prominent issues during the 1997 election campaign (Butler and Kavanagh 1997). For example, rather than endorsing a party, some national newspapers issued lists of Eurosceptic candidates from all parties that they wished to see elected. And the then Prime Minister, John Major, devoted the whole of a party election broadcast to the subject following the revelation that some ministers in his government were stating they were opposed to a single currency, contrary to the official party line of 'wait and see'. One way therefore of assessing the robustness of support for constitutional change is to examine what happened to attitudes during the 1997 election.

We have in fact two measures of what might have happened available to us. The first comes from the BECS which asked its respondents about their attitude towards a single currency, first of all in interviews conducted in the first half of the campaign, and then again immediately after polling day. Meanwhile, the 1997 BSA which was for the most part completed before

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polling day, asked the same question about a single currency as the 1997 BES, undertaken after polling day. In the first case we are comparing the attitudes of the same respondents before and after the election. In the second case we are comparing the results of two independent cross-sections of voters.

Both measures agree that, despite the excitement that Europe generated during the election campaign, the distribution of public attitudes was left unchanged. In the BECS sample, 12% were in favour of the replacement of the pound before polling day, and exactly the same proportion, 12%, were in favour afterwards<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile 17% supported the pound's abolition in the 1997 BSA, 16% in the BES.

However, the results of a deliberative poll on Europe conducted by SCPR for Channel 4 in 1995 does suggest that attitudes could change in a referendum campaign. The objective of this exercise in many respects was to mimic what might happen in a referendum campaign by giving a representative sample of around 300 people the opportunity, over a weekend, to hear and to question both experts and politicians about Europe. In order to measure what impact this process had, they were questioned extensively about their views before the weekend began, and then asked the same questions at its conclusion.

As table 11 shows the weekend had a significant impact on opinion. The sample were much more in favour of closer European integration by the end of the weekend than at the beginning. Thus, for example, before the weekend less than one in three wanted a much closer relationship with Europe; afterwards over half favoured the idea. This pro-European switch was found across a wide range of measures, including on attitudes towards a single European currency.

Here we have quite clear evidence of how exposure to arguments about Europe can change attitudes. We would not wish to suggest that this means that there is bound to be a swing in favour of Europe in any referendum campaign; the weekend proved to be one where the pro-European argument was better represented, not least because all three of those who spoke on behalf of the main political parties (including the Conservative representative,

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<sup>1</sup> *Indeed, as many as 85% of BECS respondents either supported or opposed the Euro at both interviews (disregarding the distinction between introducing the Euro in place of or alongside the pound). This, for example, is higher than the 77% who gave the same answer in response to a question about taxation and government spending (again similarly collapsed into a dichotomy).*

Ray Whitney) proved to be pro-European. But it does indicate that there is a substantial potential for movement in one direction or the other.

Indeed we do not have to rely solely on such 'experimental' evidence to see that this is so. We can also observe attitudes changing quite quickly by looking at what happened amongst the general population during the course of the 1992-7 parliament. Table 12 charts what happened during that period in relation both to attitudes towards Europe in general and to attitudes towards a single currency in particular.

**Table 11**  
**Deliberative Poll on Europe**

<i>% agree...</i>	Pre	Post
Britain should have much closer relationship with Europe	31	53
Strengthen European Union	26	47
Britain should definitely unite fully with European Union	25	43
Replace pound with Euro	20	31

*Pre: Attitudes before deliberative weekend. Post: Attitudes at the end of the deliberative weekend.*

*For definition of Strengthen European Union see table 5. Replace pound with Euro are those respondents who agree Euro should be introduced in place of the pound and not just alongside it.*

*Source: SCPR/Channel 4 Deliberative Poll*

**Table 12**  
**Trends in Attitudes towards Europe 1992-7**

<i>% saying</i>	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Britain should leave the EU/ work for a reduction in EU's powers	39	38	36	37	58	46
Pound should be only currency in Britain	53	66	62	62	68	61

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*Source: 1992: BES. 1993-7: BSA.*

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The table clearly confirms the rise in Euroscepticism after 1992 we previously saw in table 5. But it also demonstrates that this was not a steady secular trend, but rather occurred in one large leap. Moreover, the timing of that leap was different in respect of attitudes towards European integration in general from what it was in respect of a single currency.

The timing of the leaps in each case strongly suggests they were a response to specific events. Opposition to a single currency rose markedly from just over half to as much as two-thirds between 1992 and 1993. In between those two surveys the pound was forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism on 'Black Wednesday' in September 1992. Meanwhile, the growth of a more general scepticism towards European integration clearly happened between 1995 and 1996. In 1995 only just over one in three wanted to see either a reduction in the EU's powers or British withdrawal; by 1996 nearly three in five took that view. In between, in the spring of 1996, it was announced that there was a possibility that so-called 'mad-cow disease', or BSE, could be passed on to humans, with the result that Britain was banned by the EU from exporting its beef to the rest of the union, an action which the British government tried unsuccessfully to challenge by withdrawing co-operation in the conduct of EU business.

In short, political events, events which made it appear that Britain was no longer in control of its fate and was being bullied or even dictated to by the rest of Europe, appear to have had a very specific and direct impact on British opinion. It perhaps should not surprise us that if Britain is forced out of the precursor of a single currency, the exchange rate mechanism, its citizens should become more sceptical about the merits of joining a single currency. And banning one of the symbols of British (or at least English) national cuisine from the kitchen tables of continental Europe was hardly likely to promulgate enthusiasm for further European integration amongst the British public.

Attitudes towards Europe are then potentially capable of quite rapid change. Even so, any government will still have a substantial battle on its hands if it does wish to try to persuade us of the merits of joining a single currency. To succeed, it will probably need the assistance of its European partners to help generate some 'good news' stories about Europe. It will also have to mount a more effective campaign than its opponents. Even if all that does happen, success is by no means guaranteed; we should remember that at the end of the deliberative poll weekend, still only one in three were in favour of scrapping the pound.

We can undertake the same analysis of the impact of the 1997 election on attitudes towards electoral reform as we did in respect of attitudes towards a single European currency, that is by looking at the answers given by members of the BECS before and after the election, and also by comparing the results of the 1997 BSA and BES surveys. The results, however, are very different. Both comparisons clearly indicate that the 1997 election did see a change in attitudes towards electoral reform, with support for change lower at the end than at the beginning. According to the BECS, before polling day 36% were in favour of changing the electoral system (that is as measured by the second of the two questions in table 2), but after polling day, only 30% were in favour. Equally, 39% of BSA respondents, mostly interviewed before polling day, were in favour of changing the system, compared with only 34% of BES respondents interviewed after polling day.

So, attitudes towards electoral reform do not appear to be that robust either. We should also bear in mind that attitudes towards the subject also swung against proportional representation during the 1992 election, an election at which electoral reform clearly became a campaign issue for the first time (Curtice 1993). Evidently, as we have already suggested, the pro-reform lobby does not necessarily have the strongest arguments.

Our evidence also suggests that the pro-reform lobby may have another problem. It is commonplace to argue that the attitudes of politicians towards changing an electoral system is dictated by whether or not they think change might be in their own interest. Thus the Liberal Democrats who find it difficult to win seats under the existing system have long been in favour of change, whereas the Conservatives who have won more elections than anybody else under the existing system are opposed. However, it also appears that the views of the public are similarly influenced.

The evidence is in table 13. In this table we divide respondents to the BECS according to whether, after polling day, they reported having voted Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat. We then show separately for each of these three groups the proportion who were in favour of changing the electoral system, first when they were interviewed in the first half of April before polling day, and then when they were subsequently interviewed after polling day.

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**Table 13**  
**Vote and Attitudes towards Electoral Reform in 1997**

<i>% in favour of changing voting system</i>	Vote 1997		
	Con	Lab	LDem
Early April	17	40	60
May	17	29	53

*Source: BECS*

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We can see immediately where the movement against electoral reform was concentrated. It occurred amongst those who voted for the victors under the current system. Support for change amongst those who voted Labour was eleven points lower after the party had achieved its landslide victory than beforehand. And amongst Liberal Democrat voters, whose party had just secured its largest number of MPs for nearly 70 years, support for change fell by seven points. Amongst Conservative voters, who saw their party ejected from office, the relatively small band of electoral reformers was undiminished.

In short, it looks likely that the success of the opposition parties in defeating the Conservatives quelled some of their supporters' enthusiasm for electoral reform. The result seems to have persuaded them for the time being at least that the existing system was not quite so bad as they had thought at all. It looks as though we can anticipate that the way in which some Labour supporters vote in any referendum on electoral reform will be determined by their view at the time of their party's prospects under the existing system. It may well be the case that the prospects for electoral reform may look a little brighter if by the time of any referendum Labour is less popular than it was throughout 1997.

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**Table 14**  
**Partisanship and Attitudes towards Electoral Reform, 1983-97**

<i>% in favour of changing the voting system</i>	Party Identification		
	Con	Lab	LDem

1983	27	36	66
1987	21	41	60
1992	15	38	66
1997	23	32	58

*Source: BES*

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Certainly, the change of mood amongst some Labour and Liberal Democrat voters has already had one interesting consequence. As table 14 shows, between 1983 and 1992 the gap between each parties' supporters on attitudes towards electoral reform had gradually been widening. This change reflected the growing distance between Labour and Conservative policies on the issue, and the fact that electoral and constitutional reform was gradually becoming a more important issue in political debate. But after the 1997 election we find that the distance between each party's supporters on electoral reform is now no greater than it was in 1983.

The parties may be as far apart in terms of policy on the electoral system as they have ever been. But their electorates clearly are not. This would seem to underline our earlier suggestion that the ability of the parties to deliver their voters to one side or the other in a referendum may be relatively limited. In addition the fact that no more than one in three Labour voters backs reform, and even not much more than half of Liberal Democrats, clearly indicates that the result of the 1997 election did not in itself give the new government a mandate to change the electoral system.

Voters' views on Europe and electoral reform at least then are clearly not robust. As it is clear that the public are currently against a single currency and may not be in favour of electoral reform either, the potential volatility of the public's views must in fact be considered advantageous to the reformers' chances of winning a referendum of either subject. But of course it also implies that opinion could move against them rather than in favour too!

## **CONCLUSION**

Two clear conclusions emerge from our analysis. First, the result of the 1997 election could only to a limited degree be said to reflect a new mood in favour of constitutional change amongst the British public. On some issues, such as reform of the House of Lords, there does appear to be a new consensus in favour of change. On others, such as Scottish devolution, previous majority support appears to have hardened. But attitudes towards

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electoral reform and a single European currency look rather different. On neither of these is it clear that a majority is in favour of change, while such support as there is for these changes appears to be particularly concentrated amongst the 'chattering classes'. More generally, our study suggests that elections are indeed uncertain instruments for measuring support for constitutional change

This suggests that Labour's decision that a change of electoral system or the introduction of a single currency will have to secure support in a referendum is, from the point of view of democratic theory, the right one. But of course, it might be pointed out that as Labour did not campaign explicitly in favour of either change at the last election, in contrast to the other reforms we have considered, our results are hardly surprising. Yet we should bear in mind that we have found that while parties probably do have some influence on voters' attitudes toward constitutional change, so far at least that influence may be weaker than it is on other issues. Certainly it did not stop a majority of Conservative voters in England backing the creation of a Scottish parliament or nearly half favouring support for the House of Lords. This alone suggests the public mood cannot be read from election results.

The parties' relative lack of influence is one of the reasons for our second main conclusion. This is that the outcome of any referendum on either Europe or electoral reform looks highly uncertain. They are issues where judgements are surrounded by competing values, and where the quality of the campaigning could well make all the difference. In the end our attitude towards both may well eventually depend on how we feel about Britain as a nation - and on events. And they of course are the most unpredictable phenomena of all.

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## **APPENDIX 1: DETAILED QUESTION WORDINGS**

These are the detailed question wordings of the items included in table 1.

### ***Introduce PR***

How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? Britain should introduce proportional representation so that the number of MPs each party gets matches more closely the number of votes each party gets.

### ***Change Electoral System***

Some people say we should change the voting system to allow smaller parties to get a fair share of MPs. Others say we should keep the voting system as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closest to your own, that we should change the voting system or keep it as it is?

### ***Coalition Government***

Which do you think is generally better for Britain? To have a government formed by one political party or, for two or more parties to get together to form a government?

### ***Courts Overrule Parliament***

Which of these statements comes closest to your view? British courts should be allowed to overrule parliament on any law that denied people their basic rights or, Britain's democratically elected parliament should always have the final say on what the law should be?

### ***Importance Monarchy***

How about the monarchy or Royal Family in Britain. How important or unimportant do you think it is for Britain to continue to have a monarchy, very important, quite

important, not very important, not at all important or, do you think the monarchy should be abolished?

### ***Scottish Parliament***

An issue in Scotland is the question of an elected Assembly - a special parliament for Scotland dealing with Scottish affairs. Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union.

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK, but part of the European Union

Scotland should remain part of the UK but with its own elected Assembly that has some taxation and spending powers

There should be no change from the present system

### ***Reform Lords***

Do you think the House of Lords should remain as it is or is some changed needed?

### ***N. Ireland***

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it to remain part of the United Kingdom or, to unify with the rest of Ireland?

### ***Right to know Defence Plans***

Do you think the government should have the right to keep its defence plans secret, or do you think the public should normally have the right to know what they are?

### ***Europe - Withdrawal/Integration***

Do you think Britain's long-term policy should be..

...to leave the European Union

...to stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU's powers

...to leave things as they are

...to stay in the EU and try to increase the EU's powers

...or, to work for the formation of a single European government?

### ***Single Currency***

Here are three statements about the future of the pound in the European Union. Which one comes closest to your view?

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Replace the pound by a single currency

Use both the pound and a new European currency in Britain

Keep the pound as the only currency for Britain

***Right to know plans for new laws***

What about its plans for new laws it is thinking of introducing? Should the government have the right to keep these secret or should the public normally have the right to know what they are?

***Right to know economic plans***

What about its economic plans? Should the government have the right to keep these secret or should the public normally have the right to know what they are?

The following are the detailed wordings of the questions on the creation of a Scottish parliament asked on the 1987, 1992 and 1997 British Election Studies.

***1987***

An issue in Scotland is the question of an elected Assembly - a special parliament for Scotland dealing with Scottish affairs. Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become completely independent

or, there should be an elected assembly for Scotland

or, some other way should be found to make sure the needs of Scotland are better understood by the government in London

or, keep the governing of Scotland much as it has been

***1992***

See 'Scottish Parliament' above

***1997***

An issue in Scotland is the question of an elected parliament - a special parliament for Scotland dealing with Scottish affairs. Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has some taxation powers

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has no taxation powers

Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament.

## **APPENDIX 2: TECHNICAL DETAILS OF PRINCIPAL DATA SOURCES**

### ***British Election Study 1997: Cross-Section***

3,615 persons aged 18+ were interviewed face-to-face between May and early August, with 90% of the interviews conducted within six weeks of 1 May. Scotland was overrepresented in the sample, with a total of 882 interviews conducted north of the border. These cases have been appropriately downweighted in the analyses reported here, though the weighting used is only a provisional version. The sample was selected at random from the Postcode Address File, and the overall response rate was 62%.

### ***British Social Attitudes 1996/British Election Campaign Study 1997***

3,662 persons were interviewed face-to-face in the spring and early summer of 1996. After weighting, the sample is intended to be representative of the population aged 17+. With the exception of 42 respondents aged 17-18 this sample constitutes the 1996 BSA. The sample was selected at random from the Postcode Address File, and the overall response rate was 68%.

Further interviews were obtained by telephone with 1,800 of this original sample in the first two weeks of April 1997, a second interview was administered to 1,809 respondents in the second two weeks of April 1997, while 2,047 persons were successfully contacted within three weeks of 1 May. These additional waves constitute the BECS.