

POLITICAL ELITES AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

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During the last decade constitutional engineering has risen to become one of the most critical issues on the British political agenda. Many factors have mobilised the debate about reform (see, for example, accounts by Hennessy 1995 and Marr 1995a, 1995b). Yet it was Labour's conversion to constitutional modernisation as official party policy which moved prospects for reform from margin to mainstream (Norris 1995; Marquand 1992).

This process culminated in the 1997 Labour manifesto with an ambitious programme of reform covering a wide range of issues including devolution of powers from Westminster, reform of the electoral system, incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law, abolishing the right of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords, establishing an elected mayor for London, introducing a Freedom of Information Act, creating a lasting settlement in Northern Ireland, modernising parliamentary procedures, and improving standards of public life. The manifesto 'contract' pledged that during the lifetime of a Labour government:

We will clean up politics, decentralise political power throughout the United Kingdom, and put the funding of political parties on a proper and accountable basis.

(New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better, p.5).

All these proposals can be regarded as 'constitutional' issues, broadly defined in the Westminster tradition, since to a greater or lesser extent they affect the basic institutional and procedural rules of the political game and the continuous and evolving set of arrangements for government. This shake-up of conventions is seen as part of Tony Blair's attempts to sweep away the

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dusty old stereotypes of 'Beefeater Britain' to replace them with a modern parliamentary democracy. The outlines of the new constitutional settlement are starting to emerge; nevertheless many proposed reforms are likely to face serious political obstacles. Commentators like Dunleavy (1997) remain sceptical about how far the Blair government will deliver on all its manifesto commitments, if it hits the mid-term rocks.

Labour's conversion to constitutional reform seems critical to any prospect for its success. The puzzle is to explain why this conversion occurred, given the conventional wisdom about the role of cynical self-interest driving proposals for reform. Why should any rational vote-maximising party, which had just won the largest parliamentary majority since 1935, opt to change the electoral rules of the game under which they succeeded? And, in the same manner, why should the Conservatives set their face against devolution, when some estimates suggest they might become the official opposition party in a Scottish parliament with an AMS electoral system (Curtice 1996, 1997; Dyer 1997). Electoral advantage is commonly seen as the driving force in explanations of constitutional reform, but these developments suggest that political principles beyond cynical self-interest may also prove influential.

To understand the driving factors behind reform we can analyze the attitudes of politicians. Despite the important role of referendums, the process of constitutional reform will be largely determined by the Westminster parliament. Politicians, particularly Labour MPs, are likely to play a critical role here. Official Labour party policy has changed but it is not clear whether this shift has been imposed by the leadership or whether changes in policy are reflected in backbench attitudes. Is the parliamentary Labour party divided among modernisers, compromisers and traditionalists on these issues, or have they been converted?

To explore these matters, this paper analyzes the distribution of opinion, in particular whether there is now a consensus in parliament, particularly among Labour MPs, in support of the constitutional reform agenda. The paper describes the data drawn from the British Representation Study, 1997, and then maps out elite opinion towards reform. Lastly, the conclusion considers the implications of the results for patterns of party competition in Britain and for insights into the process driving constitutional reform.

THE BRITISH REPRESENTATION STUDY 1997

To examine these propositions we can turn to data from the 1997 British Representation Study, a nationwide survey of prospective parliamentary

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candidates and MPs from all major British parties standing in the 1997 general election (for technical details see Appendix A). With the full cooperation of all parties, the questionnaire was mailed to all candidates (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, and Green) at the start of the 'long campaign', in mid-summer 1996. The survey was completed well before the launch of the party manifestoes and the official election campaign. As with any survey, this represents a snapshot of opinion at the time, and attitudes may well have changed following the outcome of the election. In particular, only time will tell if attitudes towards reform may alter once Labour backbenchers entered government ministries, and we will monitor this in subsequent surveys. Nevertheless comparison with the 1992 results suggests that many attitudes among political elites reflect deep-rooted and well-developed convictions which are remarkably stable over time.

In total 1,628 questionnaires were distributed and 999 replies were received, representing a response rate of 61%. Replies were received from 277 MPs elected in 1997, or 43 percent of the current House of Commons, making this the largest available survey of MPs. Respondents closely matched the proportion of candidates and MPs in each of the British parliamentary parties (see table A1), thereby providing a representative cross-section of politicians. Attitudes expressed in the survey can therefore be regarded as reflecting the distribution of opinion in parliament. This study follows a similar survey of 1,320 politicians in 1992 (see Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Where similar items were asked in both surveys we can monitor change over time. Where questionnaire items matched those in the British Election Study cross-sectional survey (sample size 3615 unweighted) we can compare politicians with the electorate.

While we do not have items concerning the full programme of constitutional reform in the Labour manifesto, nevertheless we have batteries of items which can be used to measure support for many important proposals for institutional reform, as well as attitudes towards moral and financial standards of public life (sleaze), and a parliament for Scotland (see Appendix B for details).

DISTRIBUTION OF SUPPORT FOR CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Constitutional reform

First, we can establish the basic distribution of attitudes in parliament towards selected aspects of constitutional reform and see whether there is a shared consensus within parties. The BRS survey included five items designed to tap

responses towards a range of proposals for constitutional reform (see Appendix B), including public funding of political parties; establishing a written constitution; replacing the House of Lords with an elected Second Chamber; introducing proportional representation for UK elections; and holding a referendum on electoral reform. These items were designed to measure the general attitudes of politicians towards reform, rather than support for specific proposals contained in party manifestoes.

Table 1
Elite Support for Constitutional Reform

% Support	Con	Lab	LibDem	Nat	All
All politicians					
Replace Lords	6	95	95	87	69
Written constitution	6	86	98	96	67
Public Funding Parties	12	81	88	66	62
Introduce PR	4	56	100	98	57
Referendum electoral reform	2	67	84	71	54
All MPs					
Replace Lords w. elected chamber	2	95	100	100	76
Written constitution	9	85	100	80	71
Public Funding Parties	16	87	94	80	72
Introduce PR	11	49	100	100	48
Referendum electoral reform	7	68	77	40	56

Note: % 'definitely' or 'probably' should. See text for details.

Source: British Representation Study, 1997

Overall responses among politicians are heavily skewed in favour of reform, with the majority supporting a referendum on electoral reform, the introduction of PR and public funding of parties, and more than two-thirds

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favouring reform of the Lords and the establishment of a written constitution. A broadly similar pattern is found among Members of Parliament, with almost three-quarters supporting replacing the House of Lords with an elected second chamber and public funding of parties.

Yet the other striking finding in the distribution of attitudes revealed in the survey is how far constitutional reform now deeply divides British politicians (see table 1). Reform has become a cleavage rather than a consensual issue, sharply demarcating the Conservative party in government from all other politicians. In the past it was often assumed that the left-right economic cleavage on issues such as privatization and government spending represented the basic and most enduring division in British party politics, one which polarised in the early 1980s because of the influence of Thatcherism. In contrast, in the post-war period the manifestoes of the major parties shared a broad consensus on constitutional issues. Parties became somewhat more polarised on these issues in the early 1970s, because of Labour's shift towards devolution, but the difference by party was much smaller than the cleavage over the economy (see, for example, Norris 1997, p.151-177). Yet evidence from the 1997 BRS shows that, in terms of MP's attitudes, the post-war consensus on constitutional issues has shifted, and shifted decisively. A chasm has opened on these issues between the Conservatives, who while in government overwhelmingly opted for preserving the status quo, and all other parties who advocated reform (see table 1). A similar pattern was found across all items. There were slightly fewer Labour than Liberal Democrat politicians in the reform camps, and the difference between these parties was greatest on the issue of proportional representation. Nevertheless the gap between Labour and Liberal Democrats was always far less than the canyon between Conservatives in government and all opposition politicians.

Standards of Public Life

The Nolan inquiry highlighted a wide range of issues concerning standards of public life. The BRS survey included a battery of 13 items designed to see how politicians view these issues, such as whether they believed that most MPs have a high moral code or whether they will tell lies when it suits them politically (see Appendix B). Based on principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation three major dimensions emerged from these items concerning attitudes towards political finance; towards moral standards of public life; and towards the rewards of being an MP: see table 2.

The results reinforce our earlier findings about the gulf between Conservative and other politicians, and these differences were particularly evident on questions of political financing. Almost all (93%) Conservative politicians

believed that donations to a party should be kept private, if the donor so desired, a view shared by very few (12%) Labour politicians. More than three-quarters of all Conservative politicians also agreed with the statement that it is good for an MP to have another paid job because it keeps them in touch with the outside world, compared with only 6% of Labour politicians. Similar polarisation was apparent on whether parties should be

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Table 2					
Standards of Public Life					
% 'Agree or strongly agree'	All politicians	Con	Lab	LD	Diff. Lab-Con
Political finance					
Parties should be government funded	60	11	77	86	66
MPs should be banned from outside interests	49	9	71	59	62
Donations to party should be limited	48	11	72	56	61
Good for MPs to have a paid job	29	78	6	11	-73
Donations to party should be kept private	43	93	12	27	-81
Moral standards					
Most MPs will tell lies	53	25	58	67	33
Moral standards of politicians is declining	55	48	64	69	16
Most MPs make money improperly	13	3	16	16	13
British public life relatively uncorrupted	78	99	72	70	-27
Most MPs have a high moral code	69	92	63	57	-29
The problem of sleaze is overblown	46	96	23	22	-73
Rewards					
Parliamentary careers increasingly unattractive	56	68	45	55	-23
MPs greatly under-rewarded for the job	57	75	48	50	-27
Sample size	923	275	317	270	
<i>923 PPCs and MPs</i>					
<i>Source: British Representation Study, 1997</i>					

government funded, whether MPs should be banned from outside interests, and whether donations to the party should be limited. Labour's manifesto pledge to require transparency for party donations above a certain level, and their commitment to have the system regulating political finance scrutinised by the Nolan committee, was therefore fully consistent with attitudes within the party.

On moral standards there was slightly more agreement between Conservative and other politicians, but still significant differences were apparent. Conservative politicians expressed doubts that there was a serious problem of moral standards in public life, while Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians were less sanguine. In particular on the issue of sleaze, Conservatives overwhelmingly believed that the problem had been overblown, compared with only a fifth of Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians. Conservatives were also significantly more likely to believe that parliamentary careers are increasingly unattractive and MPs were under-rewarded for the job. Responses to all these statements suggest that the moral ethos in the Conservative party is distinctive, and, moreover, that it is at odds with the consensus shared by other politicians. This suggests that the problems of sleaze which plagued the Major government may not have been just an isolated phenomena concerning a few errant MPs, but rather may have reflected the prevailing standards of public life in the party.

When some of these evaluations are compared with public opinion it is apparent that the politicians had a far rosier image of their moral standards than the public (see table 3). Hence only 13% of politicians believed that 'most MPs make a lot of money using public office improperly', compared with almost two-thirds of the public. Similar mass-elite differences were evident in evaluations of the morality and honesty of MPs.

As an alternative indicator, to understand the normative ethics which operate among politicians, the BRS included an eight item battery asking whether it was right or not right to accept certain perks and privileges open to MPs (see Appendix B for details): table 4.

As shown in the table, two-thirds of all politicians believed that there was no problem about accepting a free lunch from a lobbyist, and a broad consensus was shared among parties. Nevertheless only a minority of politicians believed it appropriate to accept other favours, ranging from a bottle of wine/whisky (39%), free sports tickets (32%), payment to spouse for secretarial duties (31%), to payment for giving advice about parliamentary matters (21%), with almost everyone drawing the line at accepting free holidays abroad, money or gifts in connection with parliamentary duties, or

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payment for asking questions in Parliament. Most strikingly, however, we

Table 3
Public and Elite Perceptions of Moral Standards

% agree	Public			Politicians		
	Agree	Disagree	DK	Agree	Disagree	DK
Most MPs make a lot of money using public office improperly	64	22	14	13	80	8
Most MPs have a high moral code	28	59	15	63	29	8
Most MPs will tell lies if they feel the truth will hurt them politically	87	8	5	48	43	9

Sources:

Public: Gallup Survey November 1994 quoted in the Nolan Report Vol 1 HMSO May 1995 (Table 2 p.108).

Politicians: British Representation Study 1997

Table 4
Standards of Morality for MPs

% 'Right to accept'	Politicians				Public
	Con	Lab	LD	All	
Free lunch	88	63	59	67	48
Bottle of wine/whisky at Xmas	62	27	35	39	51
Free sports tickets	60	23	20	32	25
Payment to spouse	43	22	30	31	
Payment for parl service	45	9	14	21	7
Free holiday abroad	9	1	1	3	6
Money/gifts	8	1	2	3	7
Payment for Parl questions	2	0	0	0	2
Sample size	268	317	270	923	

Sources:

Politicians: British Representation Study, 1997

Public: Gallup Survey November 1994 - see table 3.

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again find a significant division between the ethos in the Conservative party and politicians in other parties. For example, almost two-thirds of Conservative politicians saw no harm in accepting free tickets for Wimbledon or other major sporting events, compared with only a fifth of Labour and Liberal Democrats. Moreover in general the Conservatives also proved more out of touch with public opinion than Labour politicians. This suggests that the ethos of the Conservative party reinforces different standards of public life, and standards for normal practice which seem at odds with the consensus among parliamentarians and the general public.

Scottish Parliament

Lastly, we can gauge attitudes towards a parliament in Scotland using the following question:

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 own 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.

Or, there should be no change from the present system.

The results, in table 5, show that politicians largely followed official party policy on these issues, with the SNP favouring independence, most Liberal Democrats and almost all Labour politicians supporting devolution, and the Conservatives overwhelmingly backing preservation of the status quo. In many ways politicians' responses on a Scottish parliament are the most predictable out of all the attitudes which we have examined, perhaps reflecting the fact that here we are asking about policy proposals which have long been settled as the subject of party debate.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

At the end of the twentieth century the modernisation of the British constitution has also gradually bubbled to the centre of the political agenda.

Long-term conditions which contributed towards this include significant challenges to the two-party system at Westminster, the disproportionality of the British electoral system, a rising tide of nationalism in Scotland, and a series of political scandals which have eroded public confidence in the political system (Norris 1995). Short-term catalysts including mobilisation by groups like the Electoral Reform Society, Demos and Charter '88. The Constitutional Convention played a critical role in developing detailed cross-party proposals for the new Scottish parliament and coordinating devolution activity north of the border (Marr 1995b; Brown, McCrone and Paterson 1996, pp.45-60). Once the Pandora's Box of electoral reform sprang open in Scotland, it proved difficult to close for European elections and local government.

Table 5
Attitudes towards Scottish Parliament

% in columns	Politicians				
	Con	Lab	LibDem	SNP	All
Scotland independent, separate from UK and EU	0	1	0	0	1
Scotland independent, separate from UK, part of EU	1	2	11	100	11
Scotland part of UK, own elected Assembly with some tax/spend powers	1	95	88	0	59
No change from present	98	3	1	0	30

Source: BRS-97

The media headlined problems of sleaze which bedevilled the Major government, and the subsequent work of the Nolan committee focussed attention on standards of public life in parliament (Ridley and Doig 1995; Leigh and Vulliamy 1997; Hennessy 1995, pp.181-200). Well-publicised problems of party donations have also afflicted the Blair administration,

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opening issues of public financing for parties to the scrutiny of Sir Patrick Neill, chair of the Parliamentary Standards Committee. In Northern Ireland, a pattern of 'two-steps-forward, one-step back' progress in the peace talks, initiated under Major, promises a new settlement in the province. Pressure for constitutional change in mainland Britain has long been maintained, often against the odds, by a centre-left coalition led by the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the SNP. The inclusion of Liberal Democrats as well as Labour members on a cabinet sub-committee considering reform options signalled a major breakthrough in cross-party cooperation.

Yet, as argued earlier, it was Labour's conversion which has been critical for any prospect of success. The Labour manifesto set out an ambitious programme of reform touching on most, although not all, aspects of the constitutional settlement. Whether this programme is adopted depends upon many factors, including support from Labour MPs when these issues are debated in the Commons.

In seeking to explain support for reform, we have seen in this paper that politicians are divided sharply on these issues, with those in the governing Conservative party far more strongly in favour of the status quo while members of opposition parties opted for reform. This cleavage was not simply a product of differences in official party policies, like manifesto pledges on electoral reform, since the gap was also evident in the moral ethos of standards of parliamentary life.

The implications of this analysis suggest that the momentum of the reform movement, which has gradually been gathering steam in Britain since the early 1970s, has influenced attitudes in the Labour party. The Conservatives clearly remain opposed to most aspects of this reform, but given the size of the Labour landslide this is unlikely to prove a serious obstacle to legislation. Perhaps attitudes in the Labour party will change once in power; this remains to be seen. There are many reasons why Labour's proposals may be watered down, modified or simply abandoned in the next few years (Dunleavy 1997). Sitting on the government side of the house might influence attitudes, and only time will tell whether Labour's conversion was temporary or permanent. But if Labour's ambitious programme on reform is indeed implemented this promises to produce a great reform parliament. What this study demonstrates is that this change is not just a matter of official party policy, but instead receives the widespread backing of Labour, Liberal Democrat and nationalist politicians. There are many steps before this programme of reform is passed and implemented, and many problems en route, but, as we are about to enter the twenty first century, the end of Beefeater Britain may, perhaps, possibly, be nigh.

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Table A1
BRS Sample of British MPs and Parliamentary Candidates

Members of Parliament	Survey N	Survey %	MPs 1997 N	MPs 1997 %	Average Error
Con	60	21.7	165	25.8	-4.1
Lab	180	64.9	418	65.4	-.5
LDem	32	11.5	46	7.2	4.3
Nat	5	1.8	10	1.6	.2
All	277	100.0	639	100.0	2.3

Parliamentary Candidates	Survey N	Survey %	PPCs N	PPCs %	Average Error
Con	295	30.2	648	31.7	-1.5
Lab	333	34.1	640	31.4	2.7
LDem	285	29.2	639	31.3	-2.1
Nat	63	6.4	112	5.4	1.0
All	277	100.0	2039	100.0	1.8

Source: British Representation Study 1997

APPENDIX A: TECHNICAL NOTE ON THE BRITISH REPRESENTATION STUDY, 1997

The research project was conducted under the direction of Pippa Norris (Harvard University) in collaboration with Joni Lovenduski (Southampton University), Anthony Heath (Nuffield College/ CREST), Roger Jowell (Social and Community Planning Research/CREST), and John Curtice (Strathclyde University/CREST). The research was distributed and administered from the School of Economic and Social Studies at the University of East Anglia and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The BRS contains questions which have also been asked of the public in the British Election Study, 1997, directed by the CREST team, facilitating a mass-elite

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comparison. The 1997 survey followed a similar study in 1992 conducted at the University of Edinburgh (Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

We would also like to acknowledge the support of all the parties, particularly the help provided by Dame Angela Rumbold, MP at Conservative Central Office; Peter Coleman, The Labour Party; Sandra Dunk, Candidate's Officer at the Liberal Democratic Party; Alisdair Morgan, National Secretary of the Scottish National Party; Karl Davies, Chief Executive of Plaid Cymru; and the Secretary of the Green Party. The study would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of all the candidates who took time from a busy schedule to complete the questionnaire. We would also like to thank colleagues who commented on earlier versions of the draft questionnaire and the assistance of all who worked on the project including qualitative interviews by Lucy Peake (Southampton University), data entry by David Jones, Nick Bent and Kenton Beerman (Harvard University), and survey administration by Anne Martin and Wendy Hooke (University of East Anglia).

The project used a mail survey which was sent out to all candidates selected by the main British parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, and Green) by 1st June 1996. The Labour and Conservative parties had chosen about 600 candidates at this stage, although other parties had selected fewer. The first wave of the survey was sent out, with an official covering letter from each party, from 18th June to 3rd July 1996. A post-card reminder was sent out two weeks later, followed by a third wave with a complete questionnaire and reminder letter in mid to late July. In total 1,628 questionnaires were sent out and we received 999 replies, representing a response rate of 61.4 percent. The survey includes 179 MPs elected in 1992 and 277 MPs elected in 1997. In addition, we received 122 refusals (7.5 percent), usually from MPs who noted that as a matter of policy they never responded to any surveys. The response rate indicates a fairly even balance between parties although the rate of return was higher among candidates than incumbent MPs. See table A1.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS AND CODING

Table 1: Institutional Reform

Q29 Do you think the government should, or should not, do each of the following things, or doesn't it matter either way?

Provide public funding of political parties

Establish a written constitution

Replace the House of Lords with an elected Second Chamber

Introduce proportional representation for British elections

Hold a referendum on electoral reform

Table 2: Standards Of Public Life

Q16. Can you tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about the work of Members of Parliament?

Strongly agree/ agree/ disagree/ strongly disagree.

Political Finance

It is a good thing for MPs to have another paid job because it keeps them in touch with the outside world

Political parties need to be properly funded by the government to do their job properly

MPs should be banned from all consultancies and outside interests

Any individual who gives money to a political party should be allowed to keep their gift private if they wish

There should be a limit on how much money a single individual can give to a political party

Standards Of Morality Dimension

Most MPs have a high moral code

Most MPs will tell lies if they feel the truth will hurt them politically

The proportion of 'sleaze' in British politics has been blown out of all proportion

Compared with many other countries, there is relatively little corruption in British public life

The moral standards of British politicians have declined in recent years

Most MPs make a lot of money using public office improperly

Rewards Of Parliamentary Careers

MPs are greatly under-rewarded for their work

Parliamentary careers are becoming increasingly unattractive

Table 4: Standards Of Morality For MPs

Q17 Do you think it right, or not right, for MPs to accept the following from a lobbyist...

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Perks Dimension

Bottle of wine or whisky at Christmas

Free lunch at a restaurant

Free tickets for Wimbledon and other major sporting events

Payment to their spouse for secretarial duties

Payment for giving advice about parliamentary matters

Corruption Dimension

Money or gifts in connection with parliamentary duties

Payment for asking questions in parliament

A free holiday abroad