What's trust got to do with it?

Public Trust in and Expectations of Politicians and Parliament

Centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance

Political Studies Association
1950 – 2010
60 years of political studies

HANSARD SOCIETY

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author who is happy to invite analysis and discussion of these views.

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Executive Summary

1. Politicians have rarely been trusted. The expenses scandal did not therefore lead to a collapse in trust in politics and politicians because levels of trust were already so low.

2. For a majority of the public allegiance to or preference for a party trumps perceptions of wrong-doing by a particular candidate.

3. MPs should concentrate on reforms to tackle lost satisfaction, relevance and influence rather than trying to address trust.

4. Parliament has seen a marked decline in public confidence – only 19% see it as an influential institution on their everyday life.

5. The public are more positive about political and governmental institutions of which they have direct experience. Familiarity has a strong influence on favourability.

6. Declining levels of satisfaction and influence are linked to a perception that decisions are made at a distance by unaccountable bodies – e.g. judges, the EU, multi-national corporations.

7. Declining investment in local and regional media will impact detrimentally on public perceptions of politics in their local area, and will have national repercussions given the link between familiarity and favourability.

8. Those parliamentary reforms proposed after the expenses scandal that link the political institution with the local community are most likely to be effective at deepening the relationship between Parliament and the public – e.g. petitions; recall of MPs.

9. Standards agenda reforms to improve transparency and accountability – e.g. Freedom of Information (FoI), Standards in Public Life – have helped engender a culture of suspicion rather than trust.

10. The public hold MPs to a higher ethical standard than they hold themselves. This is not consistent

with the view that politicians should also be 'ordinary people'.

11. Politics lacks a professional body to police and protect it, and serve the collective interest of members. Unlike most other professions, politicians also engage in direct partisan criticism of each other on a daily basis which has a corrosive impact on public perceptions.

12. An accepted ethical code might be drawn up for MPs and embodied in a revised parliamentary oath.

13. Marketisation of politics and the culture of consumerism it feeds off damages politics and politicians. Levels of satisfaction and confidence are linked to the fuelling of public expectations about politics and politicians. The more people know about politics the more it fails to meet their hopes and expectations.

14. The public lack proper understanding of what an MP does – they can readily identify the role and function of a judge, doctor, or teacher but most find it more difficult to identify for an MP.

15. There is no clear public consensus about what the role and function of MPs should be. There are significant differences of view that break along class lines.

16. Parliament is a stronger body today – *vis-a-vis* the executive and in terms of exercising its scrutiny function – than in the past. However, it is not as well regarded as in the past.

17. The public want more independently minded MPs willing to vote against the party line, but they recoil from any party that is perceived to be split.

18. There is no silver bullet for tackling public distrust and disengagement with politics. However, engendering a greater familiarity with politics, politicians and Parliament, and building on the more positive views people already have of their local experiences may offer the best chance of success.

What's trust got to do with it?

INTRODUCTION

The conventional reaction to the parliamentary expenses scandal across the political spectrum was to decry the broken bond of trust between politicians and the public, to promise measures to boost trust in the future through greater accountability and transparency and to propose a range of parliamentary and electoral reforms designed to shake up the system and put MPs and Parliament beyond reproach.

But did the expenses scandal really cause a collapse in public trust of politicians and the political system? Is a decline in trust at the heart of the problematic relationship between the electorate and those who seek to serve them? If not, what is the problem? What factors do account for the weakening bond of connection between MPs and the public?

Given the events of the last year what are the prospects for the future relationship between the next generation of MPs and the public? Can they avoid the mistakes of their predecessors or are some of the problems more deeply rooted and liable to re-emerge in the new Parliament? When it comes to the practice of politics, do the public and MPs want the same thing? Is there a public consensus about the role and work of an MP, an understanding that is critical if issues such as remuneration and resourcing are not to be a constant thorn in the side of politicians in future years?

In light of what we know about the relationship between politicians and the public, was the political response to the scandal – for example, the creation of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, new proposals to recall MPs, and improve public engagement with Parliament – focused on the right reforms? Will they be sufficient to address public concerns?

Are public expectations of our parliamentarians realistic or are they held to an unreachable standard and therefore always destined to disappoint? And what responsibility do the public share alongside politicians in trying to repair the damage done to our democracy in the years ahead?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but as devastating as the expenses scandal has been it has opened up an opportunity to discuss the role and function of politicians and Parliament; it has created space for a new dialogue about what kind of representative democracy we have and what kind we want in the future.

This general election is rightly adjudged to be a critical cleansing moment, a necessary step in turning the page on the problems of the last Parliament with a new intake of MPs – possibly the largest turnover on record since the second world war – breathing fresh gusts of air into the august corridors of Westminster. But in truth the next general election after this one may be the most critical, for if a new group of politicians come into Parliament, and the public, after five years, sense that little has changed, then public attitudes to politics and politicians may plummet still further.

With this in mind the Hansard Society, the Political Studies Association (PSA) and the Centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance (C2G2) at the University of Southampton came together earlier this year to organise a working group to contribute to the dialogue and debate.

All three organisations share a common interest in democratic engagement and participation from both a research and practitioner perspective, an interest reinforced by the practical links between the staff, members and supporters of each organisation.

The PSA exists to develop and promote the study of politics. An international membership organisation, it embraces academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy makers, researchers and students in higher education. Celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, the PSA is dedicated to creating a better informed public backdrop to the discussion of politics and actively contributing to the renewed dialogue about the future of representative democracy both nationally and internationally.

The research undertaken at C2G2 focuses on a problem rather than methods-driven approach to the central political questions of today's world in relation to power, co-operation, security, inequality and democracy. Conducting leading edge research into the nature of politics and citizenship in society today, as well as the role and work of Parliament, the Centre strives to forge a strong relationship between the word of political analysis and the practice of politics in the world.

The Hansard Society is the UK's leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity. Its *raison d'etre* since its foundation in 1944 has been to work to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics.

Drawing together leading academics in the field alongside practitioners from the world of politics, Parliament and the media, the presentations and discussions at the working group sought to illuminate some of the complex issues facing the public and politicians in the post-expenses firmament. Discussion also focused on how the worlds of academia, politics and the media might develop a more collaborative relationship, to help and learn from each other in the interests of developing a more informed environment for political debate in the future.

This paper is the result of that working group. The findings and ideas set out here draw on the discussions that took place, augmented by additional reflections derived from the research of the participants and other research colleagues working in this field. As such this paper is not a direct record of the seminar itself but draws heavily on the contributions of the participants, information about whom can be found in the Appendix.

TRUST

Trust, whether of individuals or institutions, is widely asserted to be a necessary precondition for good government and a good society. Academics on both sides of the Atlantic – Robert Putnam and Richard Layard, for example – both note a high correlation between trust on the one hand and community well-being and personal and familial happiness on the other.

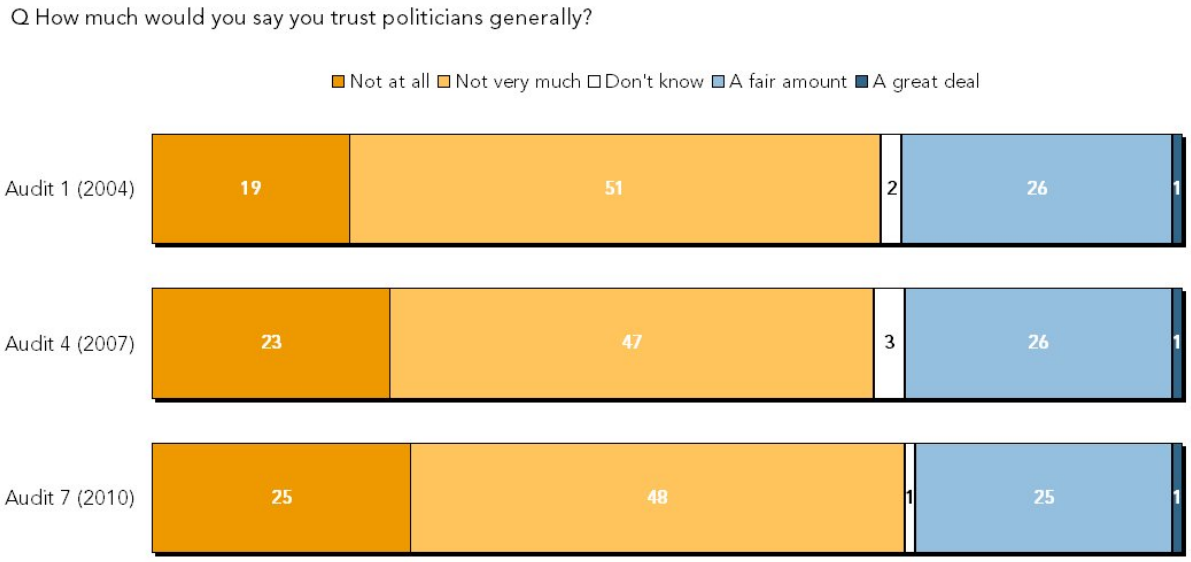
In the political context, trust is conventionally viewed as essential to maintaining and strengthening the bond – the 'democratic chain of command' – between the elected and electors, which underpins political consent in our democratic system and enables politicians to take difficult public policy decisions in the national interest. In so far as politicians and Parliament are discredited and distrusted, then, so it follows, it will be exponentially more difficult to take big, far-reaching and potentially unpopular decisions. Trust is deemed essential because it breeds legitimacy and therefore facilitates a greater willingness among the public to abide by the decisions made by politicians.

However, politicians have rarely been trusted. In the 1970s, research found that 60% of the public believed that people involved in politics told the truth only some of the time.[1] The 2007 *Eurobarometer Survey* of public attitudes found that only 34% of the UK public trusted Parliament,[2] and the Committee on Standards in Public Life has consistently found in its biennial *Trust in Public Life* surveys that politicians are among the least trusted of professions when it comes to telling the truth.[3] Qualitative focus group research in 2005, well before the expenses scandal, found that politics was viewed 'as the pursuit of an exclusive and disreputable elite of 'hypocrites and liars''.[4] Parliament was deemed to embody the traits of sly, greedy and deceitful creatures such as rats, weasels, snakes, foxes and vultures.[5]

Though the public may have been deeply shocked by the expenses scandal their reaction did not manifest itself, contrary to conventional wisdom, in collapsing levels of trust in politics and politicians. Research by the Hansard Society and others demonstrates that there has been no such collapse, but only because levels of public trust were already very low. The latest annual *Audit of Political Engagement* (based on public opinion research conducted in November/ December 2009) shows that 26% of the public trust politicians either 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' – a decline of just 1% on the number who reported the same in 2004.[6] Of this 26% however, only 1% trust politicians 'a great deal'.[7] Although 51% of the public reported 'not very much trust' in politicians in 2004, that figure has declined only marginally to 48% in the latest *Audit*.[8] There has, however, been a discernible shift in the number of people who, when asked about their trust in politicians, respond by saying 'not at all'. In total, 25% report having no trust at all: 6% higher than in 2004.[9] There appears then, over the course of this decade, to have been a hardening of attitudes among those inclined to distrust politicians generally: more people today are likely to say they have no trust in politicians than was the case seven years ago.

There is very little variation between different age groups in terms of trust in politicians but those in social grades AB are rather more likely to trust them than average (33% of ABs trust politicians 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount').[10] Ethnic minority respondents are also a little more likely than average to trust politicians (36% do).[11] Even amongst the more politically active citizens, only 38% trust politicians, while 62% trust them 'not very much' or 'not at all'.[12]

Figure 1: Trust in Politicians



Source: Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society), p.89.
Base: c.1,000-2,000 GB adults 18+.

Interestingly, the 2008-09 *Citizenship Survey* found a significant difference between the number of people who trust their local council compared to Parliament. Sixty-one percent of the public in England reported trusting their local council 'at least a fair amount', whereas only 34% said the same about Parliament.[13]

Importantly, there appears to be a correlation between levels of trust and satisfaction with MPs. Trust in politicians is considerably higher than average amongst those who report being satisfied with MPs generally – 53% of this group trust politicians compared with just 9% of those who are dissatisfied with MPs.[14]

Perceptions of trust are certainly rooted in public views of the truthfulness and honesty of their representatives. But the public's concept of trust is more complex than this alone: reflecting perhaps elements of how they determine levels of satisfaction with their elected representatives, the trust concept also appears to embrace a broader framework which includes perceptions of a representative's competence, hard work, and local community commitment as well. The public significantly value honesty over hard work and political success but may be willing to trade this on occasion. Despite the expenses scandal, for the majority of the public allegiance to or preference for a party appears to trump perceptions of the wrong-doing of a particular candidate. Research conducted by Ipsos MORI in March found that 53% of the public said they would vote for the party they would want to win the election

even if it meant voting for an individual caught up in the expenses scandal. Only 38% said they would vote for a different candidate even if this meant voting against the party they really wanted to win the general election.[15] This situation is not unusual. Recent research examining the link between political wrong-doing and accountability in a range of countries supports this thesis. It has found that typically a representative will be re-elected not removed, even in instances where they have been charged with criminal behaviour.[16]

The public's lack of trust in politicians and politics here in the UK should also be set in context. It is not unique. The *European Social Survey* shows that over one in 10 Europeans have no trust in politicians and half report low levels of trust.[17] Compared to financial and other forms of political malfeasance that have come to light across the globe, the MPs' expenses scandal was a relatively small scale form of corruption. In democracies as diverse as Ireland and Israel, France and Italy, former Prime Ministers and Presidents have been charged with acts of personal corruption that have allegedly enriched them to the tune of millions of pounds, and in the USA representatives at all levels of federal and state government – senators, congressional representatives, governors and city mayors – have been imprisoned for corruption over the last two decades.

However, the situation in the UK with regard to trust in political institutions may be more acute than elsewhere in Europe. The 2009 *Eurobarometer* survey found that just 17% of the British public trusted Parliament, a decline of 13% on the year and 15% lower than the average level of trust in national parliaments across the EU. The *Eurobarometer* consistently finds that the British are less trustful of a range of institutions: government, Parliament, political parties, the EU, and the European Commission – than their European counterparts. The only exception to this is the judicial and legal system in which just over half (53%) of the public express trust, 5% higher than the EU average.[18]

So if levels of public trust in politicians as individuals have not collapsed and are not unique, and if the public are not necessarily minded to kick out candidates that have behaved egregiously, what accounts for the public attitude to politics – for the sense of malaise and the anti-politics culture that now exists? Do the roots of the problem lie more in political institutions than politicians per se? Is this a relatively new phenomenon or has it long been in train, and merely unmasked and magnified by the expenses scandal?

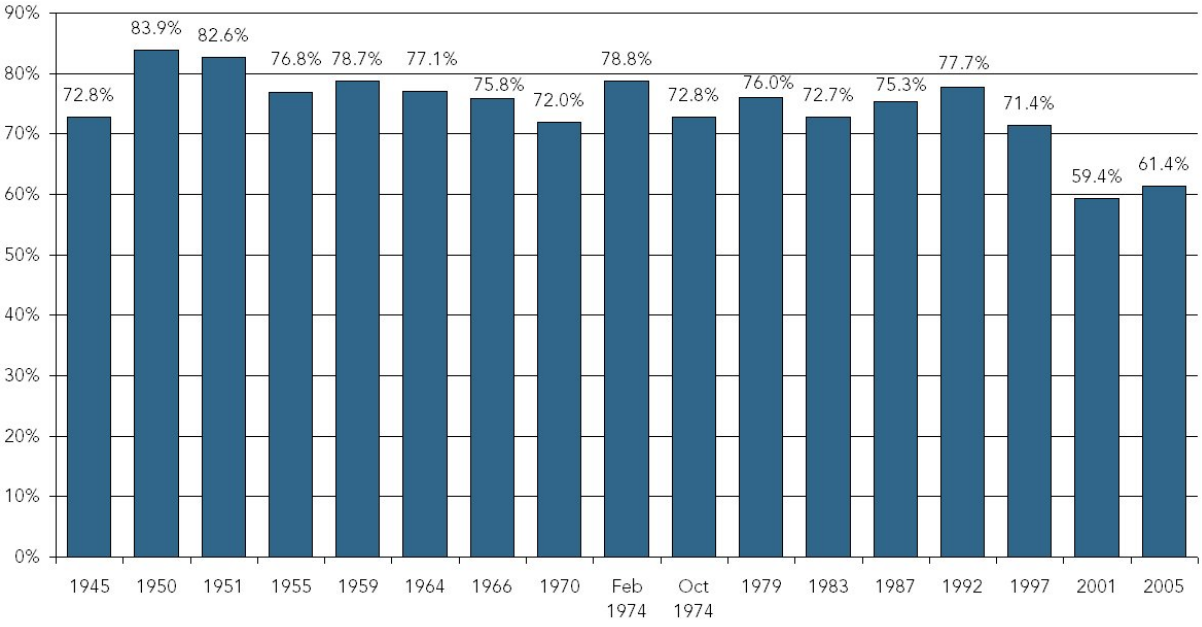
What factors contribute to the public's disengagement from the political process and political institutions?

DISENGAGEMENT

The terms 'apathy' or 'apathetic' are frequently used in popular commentary on public attitudes to politics. But the public is neither uninterested nor indifferent to politics. Over the last three decades the public's level of interest in politics has remained constant within the 50%-60% bracket. Over half the public (53%) are either 'very' or 'fairly' interested in politics.[19] Men claim a greater interest in politics than women (58% versus 48%), though women are more likely to be interested in local issues than men (80% versus 75%).[20] More affluent social grades report higher levels of interest, with ABs twice as likely to be interested as DEs (by 73% compared to 38%).[21] Two thirds (66%) of 55-64 year olds are 'very' or 'fairly' interested, the highest proportion of any age group but only 38% of 18-24 year olds report the same.[22] Two thirds of the public (66%) reject the notion that politics is 'a waste of time' and even among those who are least interested in politics or least likely to vote, fewer than two in five agree with the statement. Similarly, of those who say they are certain not to vote, only 38% believe politics is 'a waste of time'.[23]

However, the public is clearly disengaged from politics and parties, as evidenced by for example, declining levels of voter turnout at recent general elections and levels of party membership. As Figure 2 illustrates, the last two general elections

Figure 2: Turnout at UK general elections



Source: E. Tetteh (2008), *Election Statistics: UK 1918-2007* (London: House of Commons Library), RP 08/12.

have produced the lowest turnouts on record since 1918 at 59.4% and 61.3% respectively.

In the 1950s nearly 4 million people (approximately one in 10) in this country belonged to a political party. Today the figure is less than half a million. Party membership as a proportion of the electorate is extremely low: the figures for 2005 showed that just 0.7% of the population were Conservative Party members; 0.4% were Labour members; and 0.2% Liberal Democrat members.[24]

In contrast, civic participation and membership of non-political organisations has held up, though the public's level of engagement tends increasingly to be short-term and often shallow in form, often individualistic rather than collective in nature. The recent *Our Nation's Civic Health* report indicates that the extent of involvement in civic activities 'varies considerably' with only 35% of the public participating in informal, and 26% participating in formal volunteering activities each month.[25] Reflecting the shift to more sporadic activity, levels of informal volunteering remain constant whilst those for formal volunteering are falling. Over the course of a year, the 2008-09 *Citizenship Survey* found that just under half (47%) of the public in England participated in at least one form of civic engagement activity – a figure that has also remained relatively constant over the years.[26] Around 40% of the public have taken part in civic participation activities (e.g. signing petitions or contacting a local councillor), 20% have taken part in a civic consultation activity (e.g. completed a questionnaire or attended a local meeting), and 10% have taken an active part in a decision-making process.[27] The most popular form of political engagement is signing a petition and there are regular swings each year in response rates to individual political activities. This is a pattern also mirrored across Europe as recorded in the *European Social Survey*.

SATISFACTION, INFLUENCE AND RELEVANCE

In terms of public attitudes, the three biggest areas of change over the decades are reflected not in trust or interest in politics, but in levels of satisfaction with, perception of influence over, and the actual relevance of politicians and political institutions. The public appears to have far less faith and confidence in the political system and politicians today than they did 50 years ago. In the late 1950s and early 1960s survey research found that the public were generally content with and proud of the political

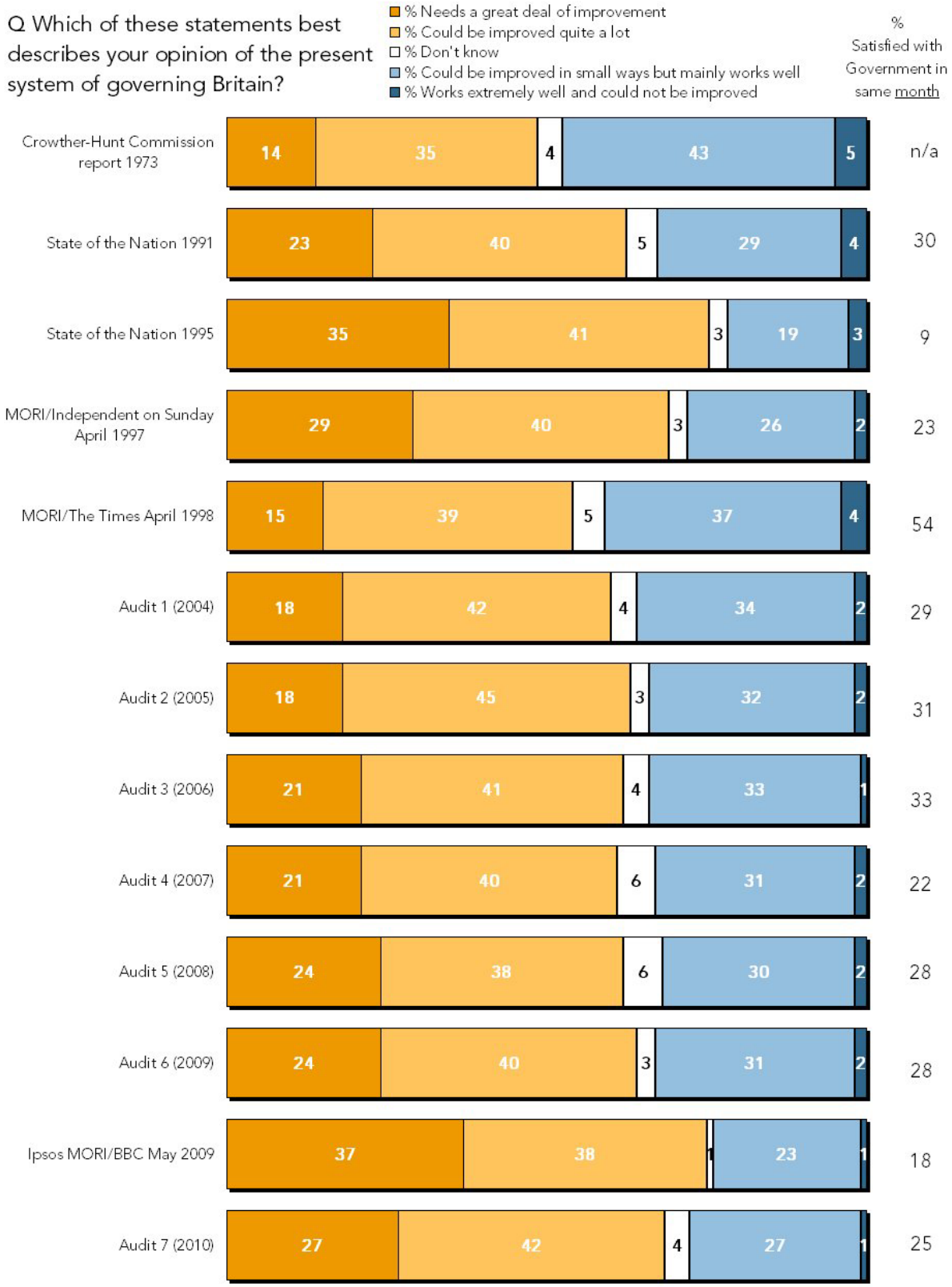
system and its competence in delivering for citizens as well as their own ability to influence the decision-making of that system both nationally and locally.[28] Today, however, the reverse is largely true. Where, once, half the population had pride in the country's political institutions and politicians, today politicians rank at the bottom of the scale of pride and esteem alongside estate agents and tabloid journalists.[29] The public appear, however, to have residual respect and affection for Parliament as an institution – if not its inhabitants – with 60% reporting in the latest *Audit* report that they believe it 'is worthwhile'.[30] But they increasingly do not regard it as an influential institution on their daily life. Only 19% of the public say it is one of the top three institutions that have the most impact on their lives, marking a significant decline from the 30% who said the same in 2004.[31] 38% of the public report being dissatisfied with Parliament – up 5% in the last three years – and unsurprisingly 44% are dissatisfied with how MPs do their jobs – up 8% since 2004.[32] However, although public dissatisfaction with their own local constituency MP has also risen, it has done so at a lesser rate – just 4% between 2004 and 2010.[33] Despite the expenses problem and the focus on individually named MPs, only 16% of the public are dissatisfied with how their MP is doing his/her job compared to 13% who said the same in 2004.[34]

In terms of general satisfaction with the system of governance in the country, the picture tends to fluctuate from year to year but has been on an overall downward trend since the early 1970s as Figure 3 demonstrates.

Where 48% of the public thought the system of governance either 'works extremely well and could not be improved' or 'could be improved in small ways but mainly works well' in 1973, today the same figure stands at just 28%. This assessment should be put in political context, however, for as difficult as the political and economic challenges of the last few years have been, public perceptions of the system of governing the country are no worse today than they were a decade ago and indeed are a little better than they were at the mid-point of the Conservative government of John Major.[35]

Importantly, there is surprisingly little variation between the social classes with regard to satisfaction with the system of government, though women and older people (65-74 year olds) are more dissatisfied than men and younger age groups.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with the system of governing



Source: Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society), p.27.
Base: c.1,000-2,000 GB adults 18+.
'Satisfaction with Government' taken from MORI/Ipsos MORI data with fieldwork in the same months.

In terms of the influence individuals believe they can personally exercise in the system, most people (41%) tend to disagree with the proposition that 'when people like me get involved in politics, they can really change the way that the country is run'.[36] Thirty-seven percent believe they can make a difference – up 6% in the last year, perhaps reflecting the imminence of the general election given the strong, underlying belief the public continues to have in the efficacy of voting.[37] Fifty-eight percent believe 'voting in a general election gives me a say in how the country is run' and only a quarter of the population disagree.[38] There is no difference in attitude between supporters of Labour and the Conservatives (66% and 65% respectively agree with the statement) but Liberal Democrat supporters are even more positive – 71% agree.[39]

Seventy-three percent of the public believe they have 'not very much influence' or 'no influence at all' over decision-making locally, and 85% feel the same with regard to decision-making nationally.[40] This perceived lack of influence is rooted primarily in the belief that politicians do not listen to what the public has to say and that the political system does not allow them to have influence and therefore overlooks their views.[41] In stark contrast, in 1963, 60% of the public reported feeling that they would be taken seriously if they raised an issue with the government.[42] That said, the public today tend to be more positive about political and governmental institutions of which they have direct experience than they are of those that are more distant to them. Research has consistently demonstrated that the public perception of, and confidence in, local services – for example, the local hospital or GP, school or college – is higher than the perception of and confidence in the NHS or the national education system. Familiarity has a strong influence on favourability.

Declining levels of satisfaction and influence generally appear linked to a pervasive perception that decisions are now made by distant, unaccountable institutions: whether that is by unelected judges, the European Union, or multi-national corporations to name just a few examples. The power of local government is also more limited which has a knock-on effect on public perceptions given that it is often at the local level that people get their most direct and personal experience of politics and the system of government. The decline of local and regional media is likely to augment this problem. In its recent inquiry into The Future for Local and Regional Media, the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select

Committee received evidence which pointed to a bleak picture for regional TV news. It was also predicted that local and regional newspaper advertising will decline by £1.4 billion over the next five years.[43] What methods of communication will fill this vacuum? Nationally, the media has become more adversarial and prosecutorial, fusing reporting and comment. Much of the political coverage is negative in tone, sometimes bordering on the cynical, and MPs and Parliament often struggle to communicate their good work effectively through these national channels. Local media has therefore traditionally provided a useful outlet for MPs to communicate directly with the public, particularly about local issues. While new digital media is a useful insurgent tool in the context of a political campaign, and clever application of new technology can overcome otherwise insuperable financial barriers, Twitter, Facebook and similar social networking sites cannot at a local constituency level replace the accessibility and content of the local or regional newspaper.

Given these concerns about levels of trust in relation to political institutions and what we know about the importance of the public's local contact with and experience of MPs and politics, this might suggest that those parliamentary reforms proposed in response to the expenses scandal which are most rooted in building a link between the institution and local communities might stand a better chance of realising their objective and deepening the relationship between Parliament and the public. For example, petitions providing a direct link between local people and Parliament; recall of MPs to enable constituents to remove their representative if responsible for egregious misconduct, would both address this institutional-local community link.

Previously, policies introduced to address issues of trust through the provision of greater transparency and accountability have also had a detrimental impact on satisfaction and influence, indicating how even well-intended policies can have damaging unintended consequences. As researchers at the Constitution Unit reported, Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation may have many advantages, but contributing to public trust and confidence has not been one of them.[44] Transparency and access to information can provide a restraint against abuse but it does not provide a mechanism for the building of trust in and of itself. Likewise, the approach to the enforcement of standards in public life – primarily through the establishment of independent unaccountable bodies – has not stemmed the tide of problems. The new

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) is also an unaccountable body. Politically it was largely untenable given the events of the last year for MPs to retain control of their pay, pension and expenses system. In the long-term however, the unaccountable nature of IPSA may emerge as a problem.

Baroness Onora O'Neill's Reith Lectures earlier in the decade remain prescient: if anything, FoI and the standards agenda has helped foster and augment a culture of suspicion with knock-on effects for the public's perception of the system of governance, the relevance of institutions and the influence they, as one individual, can exercise in the system.[45]

The politicians, by focusing on policies designed to engender trust, have missed the bigger, broader underlying concern. They cannot readily regain what they have never really possessed, namely trust, but they have lost satisfaction, relevance and influence in recent decades, and perhaps by focusing reforms so much on trust they have helped to exacerbate this loss themselves.

MPS AND PARLIAMENT

To a degree not seen for many years, the expenses controversy has opened up a dialogue about the nature of the role and function of MPs: how do they spend their time; what do the public want them to prioritise?

A lot therefore rides on the shoulders of the new intake of MPs. The public have high expectations of their conduct and strong views about how they should carry out their job. Research by Dr Nick Allen of Royal Holloway and Dr Sarah Birch of Essex University suggests that the public believe MPs should be more ethical than the general public. Survey research for their Ethics and Integrity project found that 58.2% of the public believed politicians should be held to higher standards than ordinary members of the public.[46] Their findings are borne out in the recent qualitative research for the *Audit of Political Engagement:* it also found that the public desire that MPs hold themselves to a higher standard in the public interest.[47] The expenses scandal has reinforced an impression that politicians are different from ordinary people; that they have acted above their peers and with no regard for the law. It has entrenched the 'us and them' view. Far more research is needed to determine how the public form their judgements about politicians in respect of ethics, and how they apply those standards, to say nothing of whether those standards are indeed the right ones against which they should be assessed. At the heart of this

debate is a tension between public perception and personal and political reality: is it realistic or fair to hold MPs to a higher standard than we would hold ourselves? Is it consistent to want MPs to be like us, to be ordinary, and yet expect the extraordinary of them in respect of conduct? How can this tension be addressed – continue with reforms and restrictions on the role of politicians, with all the pros and cons that attach to such measures, or work to re-shape public perceptions and expectations in the future?

There is certainly the prospect that the next Parliament will consist of a significant number of hair-shirted puritans desperate to avoid being entangled in any issue that smacks of feathering their own financial nest. In respect of their own personal expenses it is entirely appropriate: but, as Dr Alexandra Kelso's analysis of the parliamentary expenses scandal shows, it will not be to the benefit of their constituents or democracy generally if significant cost-cutting is extended to areas of their work that should quite properly be resourced.[48] Good democracy cannot be provided on the cheap.

Unlike other professions, politicians rarely have a sense of collective ownership of and interest in the problems that beset them as a body. As Dr Sarah Birch suggested at the working group, whereas other professions do engage in competition this is generally conducted in a private way, hidden from public view. In contrast, politicians engaged in partisan battle routinely go on television and radio and openly criticise each other in the strongest terms, all of which has a corrosive impact on public perceptions in the long-term. Politics may be institutionalised but there is no professional body to police and protect it, and thereby serve the collective interests of members of the profession, in the way that such mechanisms exist, for example, for lawyers and doctors. Election and then re-election is the only test of success: competence rarely has a significant bearing on the outcome.

Excessive partisanship also means there is no forum in which politicians can discuss mutual issues of interest and concern and develop that internal sense of collective ownership of problems. An institution that lacks a clear ethos is weaker and more vulnerable than those that have such a mission. Mechanisms are needed to ensure each member of the House of Commons recognises the role they have to play with respect to addressing the collective damage wreaked on the institution in recent years.

Dr Meg Russell of the Constitution Unit at UCL suggested, several years prior to the expenses scandal, that politicians should be encouraged to sign up to a 10 point charter. This should include, she suggested, a commitment to frankness about politics; the offering of political leadership; honesty about constraints; being prepared to show fallibility; rejecting opposition for opposition's sake; responsible campaigning; defending the role of political parties; and not exploiting lack of voter trust by seeking short-term gain from disengagement, particularly by respecting the integrity of opponents.[49] A charter such as this is both idealistic and highly optimistic. But amidst the partisan battle some consideration should be given to developing an accepted ethical code that might, for example, be embodied in a revised parliamentary oath. The House of Lords, with its new code of conduct arrangements has set the pace of reform here and the Commons has some way to catch up.

But public satisfaction with and confidence in MPs is about more than just ethics. It's also about the fuelling of public expectations and the dichotomy between a parliamentarian's role and obligations as a national representative dealing with matters of policy and law-making and their local role as a constituency representative and 'turbo-councillor'.

The marketisation of politics and the culture of consumerism that it feeds off have damaged politics and politicians. Rather than contending visions between politicians of integrity, each committed to their own perception of the national interest, politics has increasingly, in the eyes of many, been reduced to a marketing game in which each side offers up promises to the public but rarely engages in open and forthright debate about the negotiations and compromises that are required when it comes to developing their public policy agenda.

Even pre-dating the expenses scandal the public have long believed that MPs are self-interested. In 1994 for example, 52% of the public believed MPs put their own interests first; only a quarter that they prioritised their party's interests.[50] And yet the public also recognise that most people try to become MPs in order 'to help people in their local area'. The problem is they believe these good intentions are rapidly overrun as members are swallowed up by the system.

MPs are more focused on local issues, on what their constituents want, than ever before. They are more accessible – through staffed constituency offices; new mobile and digital communications;

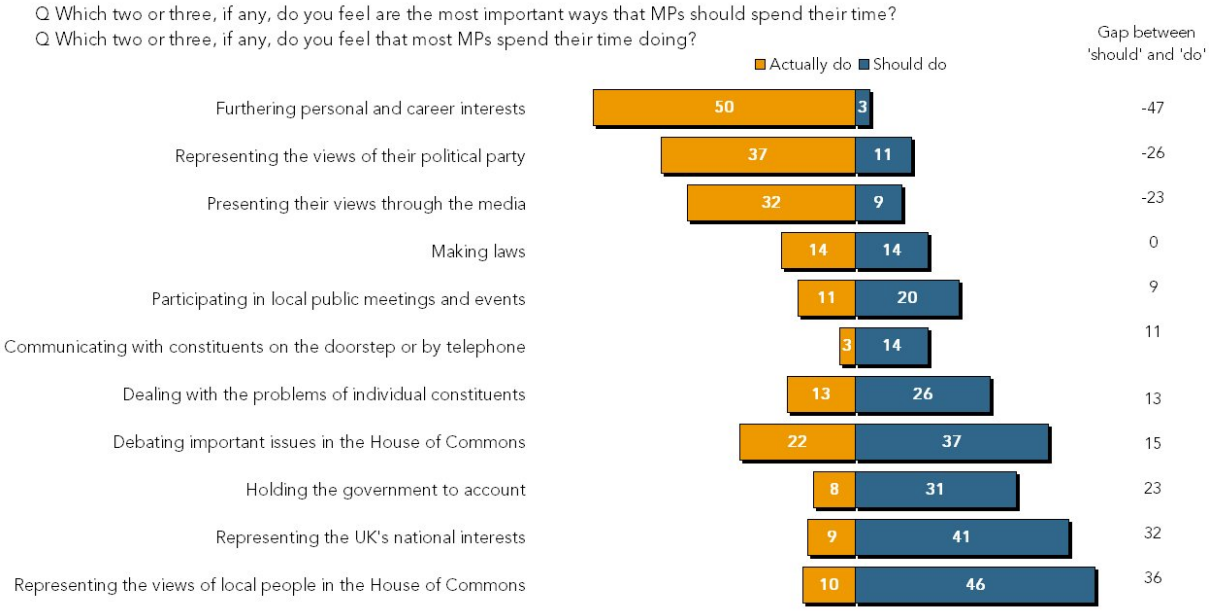
advice surgeries; and the community canvassing and newsletters that remain the lifeblood of any political campaign. They are more hard-working than ever, though to paraphrase recently retired MP Tony Wright, hamsters are also busy but they are not necessarily productive. Many MPs are notorious for their inability to prioritise and it is therefore not always clear that their endeavour is strategically targeted and effective. There is a legitimate fear that for some the high levels of constituency activity they are engaged in is not just a product of the electoral vulnerability of their seat but is displacement activity resulting from dissatisfaction with their role and work in Parliament.

What is not clear, and where more research is needed, is exactly what impact an MP's constituency work actually has: does it really enhance their electoral prospects; does it help inform their parliamentary work and if so how and to what degree?

Public attitudes to and expectations of MPs should be seen in the context of a general lack of knowledge about what MPs actually do. Although the public can readily identify the role and function of a judge, a doctor, or a teacher most find it much more difficult to identify the same in respect of an MP. Only 50% of the public report knowing 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about the role of MPs and 62% admit they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about Parliament.[51] Few people believe that MPs actually get involved in the types of activities the public considers most important for MPs to do. Just under half the public (46%) believe most MPs should 'represent the views of local people in the House of Commons' but only one in 10 people believe that most MPs do this.[52] As Figure 4 demonstrates this gives a perceptions gap of 36 points.

Similarly two in five people (41%) say MPs should be spending their time 'representing the UK's national interests' but only one in 11 (9%) believe MPs do this – giving a perceptions gap of 32 points.[53] Tellingly, there are few significant differences between men and women or across age groups in terms of what they think MPs should do with their time, though younger people are less likely to prioritise holding government to account than older age groups.[54] The differences between the social classes are, however, more stark: more affluent social groups place greater emphasis on an MP's parliamentary role. Fifty-six percent of ABs prioritise 'representing the views of local people in the House of Commons' compared to just 28% of DEs who say the same. Forty-eight percent of

Figure 4: Ways MPs should and do spend their time



Source: Hansard Society (2010), *Audit of Political Engagement 7* (London: Hansard Society), p.93.
Base: 1,156 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates: 13-19 November 2009.

ABs think 'debating important issues in the House of Commons' should be one of the two to three priorities for MPs but only 25% of C2s and 34% of DEs say the same. Similarly, 46% of ABs say MPs should prioritise 'holding the government to account' but this is a priority for only 25% of C2s and 22% of DEs. In contrast, 21% of ABC1s say MPs should prioritise 'dealing with the problems of individual constituents' but this is a much higher priority for people in social classes C2DE (31%).[55]

Worryingly, those with higher levels of knowledge about politics (as tested in a political quiz) are more likely to say that MPs spend their time 'furthering personal interests' and 'representing the views of their political party'.[56]

This mixed picture of public attitudes presents politicians with two particular and not easily resolved problems. Firstly, there is no clear consensus about the role and function of MPs: there are significant differences of view that break primarily along social class lines. And yet, MPs themselves collectively are becoming a less socially diverse group, more homogenised in terms of class and profession as Figure 5 illustrates.

They may therefore be less responsive and attuned to these differences of view and their implications. Ultimately, as long as these differences remain stark, it is going to be very difficult for MPs to fashion their role in a way that meets public expectations, as they strive to balance their constitutional functions in

Figure 5: MPs' occupations 1987 to 2005

	Number					Percent				
	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Professions	**262**	**258**	**272**	**270**	**242**	**41.7%**	**41.1%**	**43.2%**	**42.9%**	**39.3%**
Barrister	57	53	36	33	34	9.1%	8.5%	5.7%	5.2%	5.5%
Solicitor	31	30	28	35	38	4.9%	4.8%	4.5%	5.6%	6.2%
Doctor	5	6	9	8	6	0.8%	1.0%	1.4%	1.3%	1.0%
Civil service/local govt	22	26	37	35	28	3.5%	4.1%	5.9%	5.6%	4.6%
Teachers: University/college	36	45	61	53	44	5.7%	7.2%	9.7%	8.4%	7.2%
Teacher: school	48	57	65	64	47	7.6%	9.1%	10.3%	10.2%	7.6%
Business	**161**	**152**	**113**	**107**	**118**	**25.6%**	**24.2%**	**18.0%**	**17.0%**	**19.2%**
Miscellaneous	**133**	**154**	**188**	**200**	**217**	**21.1%**	**24.6%**	**29.9%**	**31.7%**	**35.3%**
White collar	27	46	72	76	78	4.3%	7.3%	11.4%	12.1%	12.7%
Politician/Pol organiser	34	46	60	66	87	5.4%	7.3%	9.5%	10.5%	14.1%
Publisher/Journalist	42	44	47	50	43	6.7%	7.0%	7.5%	7.9%	7.0%
Manual Workers	**73**	**63**	**56**	**53**	**38**	**11.6%**	**10.0%**	**8.9%**	**8.4%**	**6.2%**
Miner	17	13	13	12	11	2.7%	2.1%	2.1%	1.9%	1.8%
Total	**629**	**627**	**629**	**630**	**615**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Source: Butler et al, *The British General Election of 2005* and earlier editions.
See S. Lightbown & B. Smith (2009), *Parliamentary Trends: Statistics About Parliament*, Research Paper 09/69, (London: House of Commons Library), p.28.

Parliament with the demands of their constituency base. Many candidates standing in this general election have indicated a desire to be very locally oriented but in the event of a hung Parliament they may fall short of this ideal in the face of political and parliamentary realities at Westminster.

Secondly, the data also suggests that the more people know about politics the more it fails to meet their hopes and expectations. This is the other side of the coin to the debate about improved citizenship education and political literacy. There is plentiful evidence that increased familiarity with politics and the political system (derived through improved levels of knowledge) enhances the degree to which people are favourably disposed towards it. However, citizenship education is only part of the package – there needs to be a fundamental change in political culture if public attitudes are to be re-shaped. As long as the public are destined to be disappointed this will continue to have a detrimental impact on their level of satisfaction and their perception of influence within the system.

In popular wisdom MPs are slavish and ineffectual: lobby fodder for their party whips. In this view, they compare unfavourably with a previous golden age whose political firmament was studded with independently minded backbenchers. But as Professor Phil Cowley's research at Nottingham University has demonstrated, there was no such golden age and MPs are far from supine.[57] In the last decade we have witnessed the largest rebellion since the repeal of the Corn Laws over Iraq; and historically large rebellions on the government backbench over issues such as Trident, student top-up fees and foundation hospitals. Whether a huge

influx of new MPs, inexperienced in the ways of Parliament, will prove to be as independently assertive as some of their predecessors or rather become creatures of the whips, remains to be seen.

Like MPs, Parliament is regularly perceived in a 'golden age' light, an institution – the House of Commons in particular – in decline when compared to the past. This 'decline of Parliament' thesis would have it that Parliament was once the sturdy equal of government, holding ministers of the day to account through rigorous scrutiny and making law superlative in quality of preparation and content to that seen today. However, as Dr Alexandra Kelso's study of the history of parliamentary reform dating back to 1900 powerfully demonstrates these assumptions are simply not based in fact.[58] As with MPs, there was never a 1950s parliamentary nirvana to which we should aspire today.

On any objective test, Parliament in 2010 is a stronger institution that it was in decades past. Contrary to perceptions of an all-mighty executive members are more prone to rebellion against the whips than ever before. The work of select committees has vastly improved scrutiny of government. Public Bill Committees now facilitate public engagement in the legislative bill process; Westminster Hall debates allow for more detailed coverage of topical and often constituency related interests; and the Liaison Committee can question the Prime Minister directly several times a year. And the House of Lords, emboldened by a mix of elected hereditaries and appointed members, is a more rigorous scrutiny body than ever before, willing and able on a regular basis to assert the influence it derives from being a no overall control chamber. Parliament is also a far more transparent organisation – the website in particular providing a huge yet under-utilised treasure trove of freely available information, access to debates and committee investigations via audio and video feed, and social networking links. Parliament is far from perfect and substantial reforms are still required but, put in historical context, it is immeasurably better than in times past.

Ironically however, though Parliament is a stronger body today, it is not as well regarded as it was in the past: hence the persistence of the decline of Parliament thesis in popular commentary. In part this is because Parliament is identified in the public mind with MPs and their actions: it doesn't have an independent profile. At the height of the expenses scandal, an Ipsos MORI poll for the BBC found that just 20% of the public were satisfied with 'the way the Westminster Parliament is

doing its job these days'.[59] Other research in 2008, before the expenses scandal broke, found that just 19% of the public believed Parliament was 'working for them'.[60]

Sixty-two percent of the public admit they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about Parliament; only 40% believe Parliament holds government to account – though many do not know the difference between the two and use the terms interchangeably.

As with MPs however, public attitudes are complex, sometimes contradictory and therefore difficult to respond to. Young people aged under 25, for example, are the group most likely to be satisfied with the way Parliament works, and yet they are also the age group most likely to be critical of it as an institution. Just 29% believe it holds government to account; and 36% that it is working 'for you and me'.[61]

As the arena in which partisan politics plays out, the House of Commons in particular faces a challenge in respect of public attitudes. On the one hand, the public want more independently minded MPs willing to vote against the party line. However, the public instinctively recoil from parties that are perceived to be split. It is a contradiction that cannot readily be resolved.

CONCLUSION

Public attitudes to politics and Parliament are highly complex and rarely uniform. Academic research by members of the political science community, as highlighted in this pamphlet, demonstrates the complexity of these attitudes.

The public have long held politicians in low esteem and have long lacked trust in them. A level of scepticism about the political class is a healthy part of our democracy, but problems arise when that scepticism turns into cynicism and contempt.

The way in which politics in this country is conducted is at fault and needs to be addressed collectively. What is missing from the political debate is a sense of understanding and acceptance among the parties that this is not a party problem but a collective political problem. That the deep public dissatisfaction with politics is derived from more than just a lack of trust and the reverberations of the expenses scandal.

Politics need to re-assert not just respect for but the relevance of both politicians and political institutions and re-establish a

sense of greater satisfaction with our system of representative democracy. If politicians are not to continually disappoint the public then they need to become better at managing public expectations, by being clearer about what they promise, by engaging the public in a debate about what is realistically possible, and about the inevitable trade-offs and consequences that one political decision may have on another.

In practical terms what we know of public attitudes suggests that any direct attempt to regain public trust may be doomed to fail. Nor do greater accountability and transparency represent a problem-free solution to bridge the growing gap between politicians and the public. Indeed, they may serve only to unduly magnify public perceptions of the scale of the problems to be faced. And if the default public position is not to trust MPs and Parliament then change to institutions and political processes may also have only limited impact.

There is no silver bullet for tackling public distrust and disengagement with politics. However, engendering a greater familiarity with politics, politicians and Parliament, and building on the more positive views people already have of their local experiences may offer the best chance of success. To support this there remains much research work still to be done. We need a far better understanding of public attitudes to ethics in the political arena, to the conduct of politicians and the meeting of standards in public life. The role and function of MPs is an under-explored area of work. Should MPs focus so much effort on local issues – does it really pay off and if so how? Given that MPs are more locally focused than ever before why is it that they are deemed more out of touch than their predecessors? If they should focus on local matters then how can this work be better integrated with responsibilities at Westminster? What impact does the nature of representation – in terms of gender and social class etc – have on public perceptions of the efficacy and relevance of politics, if any? Why is it that Parliament is a more effective body than in the past but is deemed less relevant by the public? How can this be addressed?

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APPENDIX: Attendees at working group seminar

Dr Sarah Birch, Reader in Politics, Department of Government, Essex University

Gabrielle Bourke, Research Assistant, Constitution Unit

Professor Philip Cowley, Professor of Parliamentary Government, Department of Politics, Nottingham University

Iain Dale, Publisher, Total Politics; blogger (www.iaindale.co.uk) and columnist, Daily Telegraph

Mark D'Arcy, BBC Radio 4: 'Yesterday in Parliament' and 'Today in Parliament'; BBC Parliament: BOOKtalk

Dr Ruth Fox, Director, Parliament and Government Programme, Hansard Society

Oonagh Gay, Head, Parliament and Constitution Centre, House of Commons; Chair, Study of Parliament Group

Professor Paul Heywood, Sir Francis Hill Professor of European Politics and Head of School, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nottingham

Professor David Judge, Head, Department of Government, University of Strathclyde

Dr Alexandra Kelso, Lecturer in British Politics & Public Policy, University of Southampton

Professor the Lord Norton of Louth, Professor of Government, Department of Politics & International Studies, University

of Hull

Professor Vicki Randall, Department of Government, University of Essex; Chair, Political Studies Association

Dr Meg Russell, Reader in British and Comparative Politics & Deputy Director, The Constitution Unit, University College London

Professor Gerry Stoker, Professor of Politics and Governance and Director, Centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance, University of Southampton

Lord Tyler of Linkinhorne, Liberal Democracy Spokesperson for Constitutional Affairs, House of Lords; former MP for Bodmin, and North Cornwall

Dr Tony Wright MP, MP for Cannock Chase; Chair, Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons; and Chair, Public Administration Committee

Dr Ben Worthy, Research Associate, Constitution Unit

Politicians on trust...

I do not trust Governments either of my own persuasion or of the other political persuasion when they say, "Trust me" - Iain Duncan Smith, HC Debates 3 March 2008, col. 1531.

I believe very strongly that if people's trust in Parliament and in Members of Parliament is to be restored, it is vital that those Members of Parliament reassert their authority - Baroness Perry of Southward, HL Debates, 8 July 2009, col. 713.

Ultimately, public confidence is best ensured by people knowing that they can kick out those in charge - Simon Hughes, HC Debates 5 December 2007, col. 872.

It is broken promises that are the cause of broken trust - David Cameron, HC Debates 3 July 2007, col. 821.

If the political class as a whole does not display a trust in the people, how can we expect the people to trust us? - Nigel Dodds, HC Debates 26 February 2010, cols 623-624.

The public's anger [is] entirely justified, entirely understandable and entirely right over the expenses scandal - Baroness Royall of Blaisdon, HL Debates 8 July 2009, col. 674.

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