

The Strange Career of British Democracy



When the British Academy organised a discussion on the current state of British democracy on 2 March 2009, no one could have predicted the storm that was about to overwhelm the political establishment. Martin Kettle discusses how the current furore highlights some deeper failings in our democratic system.

What will be the shape and texture of the British political system and of British party politics in a generation's time? Predictions are always hazardous, particularly at a time when members of parliament are collectively in the public doghouse over their expenses and when many politicians are responding by again advocating radical political change as a means of rebuilding public trust. In spite of the current spike of public anger, though, the political system may ride out the furore of spring 2009 more or less unchanged, as it has often done before. But it is equally possible that a combination of shocks and events – economic recession and the outcome of the next general election as well as the expenses scandal – may precipitate significant institutional and cultural reform and perhaps even lead to some party political realignments.

Calls for and debates about institutional and electoral change long predated the current turmoil over MPs' expenses. One of the most striking aspects of the 2009 expenses scandal for historians, after all, has been its echo of the 'old corruption' which marked British politics in the period before parliament embarked on the long and winding road to democratic reform in 1832. Calls for reform, in other words, are always with us. Meanwhile the sense that Britain's main political parties, still significantly rooted in the industrial class divides of the late 19th century, need to adapt radically if they are to regain their dominant role within public debate, or create a new hegemony, has been a

major theme of domestic politics since at least the 1950s and continues up to the present.

Future historians should note, nevertheless, that the broad parliamentary and political culture of 2009 is characterised by a very widespread and multifarious but all too often unfocused sense that British democracy is very much unfinished business. They should note, further, that this sense of dissatisfied incompleteness distinguishes Britain from several of its developed world peers, where the national perception of constitutional, state and democratic failure, though not unknown, is less marked. And these historians would be particularly well served if they grasped the importance within this process of a book which was published in 2008 and which, for many readers, articulated an alternative taxonomy of British political history that illuminates many of the issues that have been brought to the fore by the impact of the banking crisis, the scandal over MPs' expenses and by what appears to be the dying fall of New Labour.

The book, *Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy* by Professor David Marquand FBA (published by Weidenfeld & Nicholson), is on one level a British political history of the years since the arrival of more-or-less democratic suffrage in 1918. But the book simultaneously offers a new way of looking at the dialectics of British political development over the following 90 years. Instead of seeing British history primarily in the frame of the party politics of the period – the rise of Labour, the decline of the Liberals, the postwar settlement, the pragmatic survival of the Tory party, the decline of Labourism, the radicalisation of the Tory party, and so on – Marquand tries a different way of framing these changes. He reframes his subject through the prism of a set of competing broad historical narratives of the last century.

Marquand's account proposes four such narratives. The first, which he dubs 'whig imperialism', is a narrative (in Marquand's own words) of 'evolutionary change, timely accommodation and subtle statecraft', linking the era of Gladstone with that of Macmillan – and putatively with that of David Cameron. The second, the 'tory nationalist' narrative, is predicated both on social anxiety and on the preservation of authority, property and nationhood, and stretches from Salisbury to Thatcher and her latterday Tory followers, via the ambivalent, in this context, figure of Churchill.

Marquand dubs his third narrative 'democratic collectivist'. This, broadly, is a narrative of progress, rationality and the democratic state. At its heart is the state as the weapon and guardian of progress and justice, counterposed against the unjust and cruel chaos of the free market. This narrative links the New Liberalism of Lloyd George and Keynes with the Fabianism of the Webbs and the Attlee government, and extends through the revival attempts under Wilson and, to an extent, Blair and Brown too. This leaves the fourth and final narrative, which Marquand calls the 'democratic republican', a tradition which shares the collectivists' commitment to social justice but rejects their statism, preferring instead to 'put their faith in the kinetic energy of ordinary citizens' and to promote a vigorous, independent-minded self-respect that was historically associated with English radical Protestantism. Acknowledging that this tradition is both difficult to describe and simultaneously the one in which he places most confidence, Marquand argues that it runs from Milton and Paine, through Orwell and Tawney, to some of the social movements, notably the Greens and the libertarians, of today.

Broadly speaking, argues Marquand, whig imperialism was in the ascendant for the first 20 years of the period from 1918. From World



Figure 1. Participants at the British Academy Forum in March 2009: Professor Peter Hennessy FBA (Chairman), Baroness O'Neill (President of the British Academy), and Professor David Marquand FBA.

War II until Wilson and Callaghan's defeats by the unions, the democratic collectivists ruled the roost. From 1979, Margaret Thatcher attempted to restore the tory nationalist narrative at the heart of British politics. Whatever else Tony Blair may have been – and Marquand remains mystified by the former premier's alchemical political skills – he was not a tory nationalist, although aspects of all the traditions can be detected in his politics. Marquand does not attempt to predict which of the traditions and narratives will emerge dominant in the next decade. But he insists that our politics will be shaped by their interaction in the future, just as our politics have been shaped by them in the past.

A British Academy Forum discussed Marquand's book and ideas at the beginning of March 2009. Note the date. In March, the political economy agenda was dominated by the global financial crisis, the deepening UK recession and the increasingly uphill struggle of the Brown government to rally public support behind its measures to stabilise the banks, stimulate the economy and control the spiralling level of public debt. In that sense, however, the British Academy discussion was fundamentally post-lapsarian. Marquand's ideas were viewed, by friends and critics (and indeed Marquand himself),

through the prism of the worst financial crisis and global slowdown since the Great Depression. On the other hand, though, it was pre-lapsarian, in that very little of the discussion addresses – or, given the date, could have addressed – the hurricane force hostility towards all political institutions and traditions which was unleashed when the *Daily Telegraph* began to publish details of individual MPs' expenses two months later.

David Marquand began the forum by setting out his main thesis. He emphasised four main points. First, he stressed that his categories were not rigid, and that individual politicians, of whom Blair was a particularly striking but in essence not untypical example, inevitably straddled more than one tradition in various ways and at different times. Second, reflecting the preoccupations of March 2009, Marquand argued that the economic crisis was of unprecedented depth, to an extent that politicians have not yet appreciated or articulated. Third, the economic crisis has ruptured, especially in the UK, the implicit postwar contract between the people and the state, under which the state guaranteed to provide security in return for the public's allegiance. And fourth, that the crisis has also ruptured what Marquand – paying homage to the late

E.P. Thompson's phrase – described as the 'moral economy' of British life, in other words the 'network of norms, understandings, conventions, which tell economic actors how they ought to behave'. In that sense, maybe, there was a connection between the ruptured moral economy represented by Sir Fred Goodwin and the bankers and the shortly to be ruptured moral economy as represented by Sir Peter Viggers MP's expectation that the taxpayer could properly be expected to pay for the 18th-century Swedish design floating island which he installed in his private pond for the benefit of his ducks.

Marquand's insistence on the flexibility of his categories became a leitmotiv in the discussion that followed. Professor Vernon Bogdanor FBA suspected that the categories were better suited to the political agenda of 2007 (when Marquand wrote his book) than to the post-credit crunch agenda in which the forum discussed them. Tony Wright MP agreed, arguing that Marquand would need to add a fifth category, nationalist republicanism – stretching from Joe Chamberlain to the British National Party perhaps. Several speakers – of whom Lord Radice was one – argued that there was more overlap between the democratic collectivist and the democratic republican traditions than Marquand allowed. Richard Reeves of Demos disagreed, insisting that the categories nevertheless did 'useful work', not least because they helped to elucidate the important difference, as he saw it, between the two. Reeves also challenged Marquand to explain why he saw the democratic republican tradition as having most to offer in 2009 when the whig imperialist tradition, as embodied by Cameron, was talking such a strong game (though Reeves was not to know it at the time, Cameron would continue to compete strongly with the democratic republicans over ownership of the post-expenses reform agenda in May).

Both Professor Tony King and Sir Christopher Foster raised more systemic questions about the usefulness of Marquand's categories to explain the particular dynamics of the present. King felt he was unclear what the democratic republican tradition actually offered in the modern political world. 'What does the way forward look like?' he asked,

with characteristic sharpness. Foster highlighted Marquand's difficulty in categorising Blair. This difficulty, Foster suggested, said more about modern politics as a whole, with its imperatives to take day-by-day stands on a whole range of issues, than it said about the particularity of Blair. Blair, Foster suspected, kept feet in all camps precisely because to do this is good tactics in modern media politics. Professor Andrew Gamble FBA took a similar view. All four categories exist in the modern political world and therefore all exist to be drawn on by politicians of all traditions or tribes. How a particular leader or party will select from among the Marquand categories will depend upon particular circumstances – Brown's response to the banking crisis or Cameron's response to the expenses furore both underline Gamble's point.

Re-reading the discussion from the far side of the river of events that has swept through Westminster politics since the British Academy Forum in March, however, it is Sir Douglas Wass's contribution that seems particularly prescient. Over the half a century during which he worked in Whitehall, Sir Douglas argued, politicians have changed. In the past, they stood for their own sense of the

public good, which they applied to the policy options before them. Today, by contrast, politicians have become professionalised. They seek high office, the higher the better, rather than following a policy-based approach, because politics is a career rather than a means to a policy end. Inevitably, therefore, politicians of today take the media and public opinion far more seriously than their predecessors did, save at election time. It therefore follows, said Sir Douglas, that the media set the political agenda to a degree that was not true in the past. The media, he implied, have reshaped British democracy and politics in ways which no minister in the 1950s could have possibly foreseen. It is doubtful whether anyone sitting round the table could possibly have realised how the events of May 2009 would push that process even further so soon, bringing the careers of dozens of MPs to their knees and raising major questions about the sustainability of Britain's unreformed political institutions. Nevertheless, everything that has happened on expenses in the intervening weeks lends weight to Wass's thesis about the role of the media in weakening the British state. And as Marquand himself said when he wound up the discussion, there will be no going back to the way things were.

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The British Academy Forum on 'The Strange Career of British Democracy' was held on 2 March 2009. An edited transcript of the discussion is available via www.britac.ac.uk/events/archive/forum-democracy.cfm

British Academy Forums are regular workshops at which senior academics, policy makers, civil servants and other practitioners, politicians, and journalists can engage in frank, informed debate – without the point scoring. They provide a neutral forum for argument based on research and evidence, to help frame the terms of public debates and clarify policy options. It gives those immersed in current issues the opportunity to exchange views with others who can bring historical perspectives or other contextual insights.

Figure 2. *Politicians at the mercy of the media.* Labour Chief Whip, Nick Brown, speaking to journalists outside Parliament, to announce that MP Elliot Morley had had his parliamentary party privileges withdrawn, 14 May 2009. Photo: Reuters/Andrew Winning.

