

REVITALISING POLITICS

CONFERENCE REPORT

5 November 2008

Plenary session: Discussion of Conference position paper 'Revitalising Politics: Have we lost the plot?' by Colin Hay, Gerry Stoker and Andy Williamson

Following exposition by Colin Hay on the content of the position paper¹, the discussion focused on two broad issues:

De-politicisation

There was broad agreement that there has been a growing trend towards de-politicisation of many areas of decision-making.

The global financial crisis and subsequent revival of interest in politics generally, and Gordon Brown's popularity specifically, was mentioned as a cause for optimism in revitalising politics. It was suggested that if this marked the death knell (or at least a diminishment) of neo-liberal market economics then this could lead to reinvigorated trust and involvement by state institutions, and therefore politics and politicians.

However this optimistic perspective was challenged under the expected moves to de-politicise the economic crises, with the anticipated creation of a private body to oversee the government's relationship with the banks the public now have a large stake in. This de-politicised and arms length regulation could lead to further dissatisfaction with the political situation under the model suggested.

A counter perspective on de-politicisation was presented, suggesting that in some areas politicisation has increased and this trend was not desirable. The examples cited were the political involvement in the increased use of targets in policing and education. De-politicisation in these areas might be welcomed.

¹ This paper is available for download at www.revitalisingpolitics.org.

A lack of trust and failing engagement

The conference also discussed the extent to which the trouble of our system is centred on the unravelling of trust; both the citizens losing faith in politicians and less trust in citizen by politicians. This made (re-)establishing the vital two way process of engagement difficult.

One participant drew on experience of canvassing to suggest that socio-demographic trends were evident, pointing to the end of the 'duty to vote' generation and its replacement with a minority of voters who take pride in announcing that they do not vote. It was also suggested that people have not become more cynical than they previously were, but that politics and methods used by the political parties are becoming outdated, suggesting a supply and demand model of political engagement shows a failure of politicians to keep up with the demand of the people.

Another contributor suggested that academics were contributing to fatalism around the subject – that by increasing awareness of disengagement the problem, or at least the perception of it, grows. In responding, the panel accepted that academics had an important role and suggested that by increasing political deliberative transparency academics will respond with an increase in faith in the political system.

The need for genuine deliberative engagement was stressed by the authors of the paper. One example cited from the floor of deliberative politics in action was select committee meetings, though it was noted that it has proved difficult to communicate the successful characteristics and outcomes of these processes to the public. The role of the media in this respect is of significant importance.

It was noted that individual politicians are still respected, as research has found that the public had a much more positive view of their MP than of politicians in general. This analogy was extended to the public's views on public services, such as healthcare, where they tend to report significantly better personal experiences from their views on the system as a whole.

The conference agreed that the experiences of the UK in political disengagement are shared throughout western liberal democratic states and that while the UK has a specific problem it is not unique in having to confront the issues of declining political engagement and participation.

Many attendees drew solace from comparisons to the mass mobilisation of the campaign of Barack Obama, suggesting that a revitalisation is possible and that people will make a decision to participate in certain circumstances.

For more information on Revitalising Politics and to join the discussion, visit www.revitalisingpolitics.org.