

Labour has a problem that is rooted in the blatant weaknesses of Britain's democratic system

Olaf Cramme explains how the UK's democratic system is cracking up. The deeper the rot goes, the emptier Labour's noble promises will become. The party must urgently start giving more serious thought to how Britain's representative democracy can be strengthened and confidence in government action be restored.



Labour has a problem: it wants to be the party of radical political, social and economic change, but it lacks the effective regulatory and institutional levers necessary to translate this vision into actions – be they at the local, national, or indeed, European level. Labour's problem is rooted in the blatant weaknesses of Britain's democratic system. Far more sceptical than most Europeans, British voters have dramatically lost confidence in the central pillars of governance and government, and most notably in the national parliament. Compared to their European counterparts, turnout is worryingly low in almost any kind of election. This crisis of politics hits the left hardest, because social democrats have always espoused collective action through public institutions. But if representative democracy erodes, so does the legitimacy of politically induced change.

In recent years, at least four events have had a direct impact on the state of British democracy: first, the Westminster expenses scandals surrounding politicians of all the three major parties; second, the rejection of the Alternative Vote (AV) referendum, putting an end to all hopes for swift and substantial changes in the voting system; third, the disclosure of a rotten culture in some of Britain's national media; and fourth, the rejection of directly elected mayors in 9 out of 10 British cities, including all major cities north of London. Although disparate in nature and salience, together these occurrences have revealed, and fostered, a deep mistrust among the British people for the ruling classes.

For the Coalition partners, each of these four events brought some form of political despair: David Cameron moved quickly to correct the wrongdoings in parliament but then appeared hesitant in drawing the real lessons; his party remains caught up in the controversy surrounding the Murdoch empire and its relationship with political power; his government was deeply split on the AV referendum, a split which has caused lasting tensions; and it has suffered a severe setback in its own localism agenda, which is unlikely to be transformed by some elected police commissioners.

Labour, by contrast, has largely stepped up to the challenge: it was Ed Miliband who understood best the popular dissatisfaction with the country's political elite. It was also Ed Miliband who bravely took on the might of Britain's aggressive and intrusive tabloid press. Both actions deservedly brought him a lot of praise and strengthened his mission to champion a new model of practicing politics.

Alas, on their own these actions are unlikely to deliver lasting political dividends. For this to happen, Labour does not need a convincing response to misguided parliamentary and media practices, but to the worrying lack of trust in all forms of representative democracy from which shared decision-making derives its legitimacy. The consequences of the rejection of AV and directly-elected mayors should therefore be taken much more seriously because it has reinforced the unsatisfactory constitutional status quo. As it stands, neither the local, the national, nor the European level boasts a compelling dimension and capacity for collective-problem-solving.

Take the local level for example: In England, out of the nine regional authorities, only London is equipped with a democratic assembly which holds some notable powers. All other regions consist of an unelected board of local authority leaders, now supported by Regional Growth Funds which replaced the more ambitious Regional Development Agencies. What remains then is a hodgepodge of administrative responsibilities leading to rather weak local and micro government.

While there are good arguments for a localism agenda that tries to enhance local accountability and encourage stronger local leadership, in particular concerning economic development objectives, this agenda hardly amounts to a strategy suitable for making “decisions of scale” which can have a qualitative impact on wide-ranging areas and affect all its societal groups. To achieve this, serious regional democracy, say of the magnitude of the German *Bundesländer* or the Spanish *comunidades autónomas*, is a prerequisite.

Take the national level: While the first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all Westminster model offered some real advantages for 20th century policymaking in which doctrinal disputes mostly remained binary, it has become a severe obstacle to capturing the multiple and often contradictory interests which dominate politics in times of ideological uncertainty.

Scoring some 35 per cent of the popular vote with a 65 per cent turnout does not provide a meaningful or clear mandate for far-reaching change. Yet afraid of building lasting consensus, all mainstream parties still behave as if it does. No wonder then that a third of the British public “almost never” trust the British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party. Again, policy fragmentation and incoherence tend to prevail.

Or take the European level: By implementing a ‘sovereignty clause’, the Coalition government has chosen to unilaterally restrict its political room for maneuver. Of course, many would argue that this step was somewhat inevitable given the widespread and deep-rooted skepticism in Britain towards the EU and its institutions. But for a leading liberal democracy to essentially lock itself out to any form of future policy experimentation at a time when the global is squeezing the national remains quite extraordinary.

To libertarians and neo-liberals, this surely represents a welcome development. To anyone who believes in the power of political design, however, this resembles a foolish act borne out of desperation. Instead of helping to make the EU more democratic and efficient, the government is fighting a hopeless rear guard battle.

Labour’s response to these weak governance structures has essentially been to take refuge in moral politics. Empathy with any sort of grievance is today’s winning formula. Where both the state and the market fail to deliver, a new community spirit and civic revival is supposed to step in and fill the void. There is a lot of merit in taking this approach, but it leaves the big questions of our age unanswered.

History has shown that for the capitalist settlement to undergo fundamental change macro-democratic solutions are indispensable. In fact, nothing else will do. This is all the more true in a 21st century dominated by global capital and international supply chains, irresistible migratory pressures and multiple security challenges. Labour, as the party of the democratic left, cannot satisfactorily tackle these issues without powerful levers of governance at the local/regional, national and European level. It must urgently start giving more serious thought to how Britain’s representative democracy can be strengthened and confidence in government action be restored.

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