

The time is right for an audit of Scottish democracy

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Last year, we launched [Democratic Audit – Scotland](#) to provide meaningful, in depth, scrutiny of Scotland's democratic record. The aim of the site, explains **Paul Cairney**, is to provide a democratic audit, to examine the effectiveness of its political system, a democratic dashboard, to help members of the public make an informed choice when they participate in Scottish elections, and regular blog posts, to report on current developments in areas such as elections and representation, political parties, accountability, and human rights.



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It is now 20 years since the publication of the Scottish Constitutional Convention's *Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right*. The SCC brought together political parties, local government, third sector organisations, and trade unions, to make the case for Scottish devolution and *major political reform*. The Consultative Steering Group (CSG) took forward this agenda by establishing key principles for the Scottish Parliament to uphold: 'the sharing of power' between government, parliament and 'the people'; accountability of government to parliament and the people; accessibility; and, equal opportunity

The Scottish Parliament was established in 1999 as a beacon for new forms of democracy. Sold as an alternative to 'old Westminster', 'new Scottish politics' summed up high expectations for progress on new forms of participatory and deliberative democracy. These aims were established in a combination of formal institutional arrangements and an expectation that political parties would foster a new culture of politics. The initiatives included:

- A mixed-member proportional electoral system, with a strong likelihood of coalition and bargaining between parties, to replace Westminster's first-past-the-post system which exaggerates majorities and generally ensures that a single party dominates proceedings.
- A consensual style of politics, with an enhanced role for business-like committees, and a reduced role for party conflict in plenary, to replace Westminster's adversarial style of politics with a charged partisan atmosphere.
- 'Power-sharing' to address the problem of executive dominance in a system where power is concentrated within government.
- Closer links between state and 'civic society' through parliament – e.g. with a focus on the right to petition

parliament, a new civic forum and a new committee role to oblige the executive to consult widely – to reflect a Scottish system with a tradition of civic democracy and the diffusion of power.

- An expectation for greater equality in the selection of candidates, as part of a wider move away from the idea of ‘professional politicians’ with little experience outside of the closed world of politics.

Two key themes arise from this discussion. First, there is a large gap between expectation and democratic outcomes. The electoral system had a marked effect on the party system, producing coalition and minority government from 1999-2011 (as did the new STV elections from 2007), but the powerful role of the Scottish Parliament – at least as an institution which can be separated from the role of its political parties – never materialised. There has been some progress towards greater gender representation, particularly among Scottish Labour MSPs, but the profile of the Scottish Parliament’s ‘political class’ is not much different from that of Westminster. The political culture is also rather adversarial, and the Scottish Parliament has not fostered, successfully, important new forms of deliberation and participation beyond the ballot box.

Perhaps curiously, the exception to a lack of public participation came during the referendum on Scottish independence, despite the fact that a new debate on further constitutional change did not prompt the same desire to revisit political reform. Instead, participation has taken on a divided feel, with each side often engaged in discussions with itself rather than collectively through well-established Scottish institutions.

Second, during the delivery of Scottish devolution, many important political institutions were not targeted as important areas of reform. Scotland retained a Westminster-style sense of democratic accountability of minister to the public via Parliament. The role of the civil service, and key public bodies such as the police, health, and education authorities, received almost no attention during debates on democratic renewal. The same can be said of issues such as the rule of law and the protection of human rights. Nor did political parties take the chance to adapt their organisations to the new demands of devolution, electoral reform, and ‘new politics’. Overall, in their desire to be different from Westminster, many of the architects of devolution failed to give the same critical scrutiny to already-established Scottish institutions.

We explore both of these themes in a series of posts which consider issues such as representation and governance, accountability, the rule of law, parties and politics, democratic representation, equality and equalities, and economic and social rights amongst others. So far, the site has covered the democratic effectiveness of the Scottish Parliament at holding Holyrood to account, the impact of the [lowered voting age](#) in Scotland, lingering sectarianism in the West of Scotland, [Scottish Labour’s decision](#) to seek greater independence from Westminster, the [SNP’s rhetoric](#) around Scottish independence, ‘[Stop and Search](#)’ in Scotland, and even Donald Trump’s [democratic credentials](#) in a Scottish context.

It is on issues like these that Democratic Audit – Scotland seeks to make a unique contribution to the thriving Scottish political blogosphere.

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