

A changing democracy: the British political tradition has never been more vulnerable

*Never before has the British political tradition been more contested, write **Matthew Hall, David Marsh and Emma Vines**. They explain that British democracy is facing three major challenges – Scottish independence, Brexit, and anti-politics – and these have the potential to force change on an otherwise stale political establishment.*



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British politics is in a state of flux; yet for all the talk of Brexit, there is a far more fundamental shift taking place. This shift presents a challenge to a political system resistant to reform and which, consequently, remains in many ways ‘premodern’. It is conservative in its understanding of responsibility, limited in its idea of representation, and offers government by, and frequently for, the elite. What we are seeing challenged, therefore, is not just Britain’s European relationship, but also a dominant British political tradition (BPT), which centralises elite control and perpetuates structured [inequalities](#).

Today, the BPT appears vulnerable and a rewriting of the rules of British democracy is perhaps not only possible, but inescapable. Here, and in [our longer piece](#), we identify three forces leading to these demands – the Scottish Question, the Europe Question, and, most fundamentally, the question of anti-politics. These are not the only issues confronting British democracy, but they are crucial challenges with the capacity to force change on a reluctant and stale political establishment.

Arguments concerning the nature of the BPT are ongoing, with contestation between [those who see fluidity in traditions](#), and those, [like us](#), who argue that there is a dominant BPT, underpinned by a limited liberal view of representation and a conservative view of responsibility. As such, British politicians have favoured strong, decisive government over responsive governance. For this elite, committed to a view that ‘government knows best’, elections every five years are quite enough to keep the rabble at bay. Today, however, the BPT, at last, stands vulnerable.

If centralised power is crucial to the BPT, then Scotland presents a serious challenge, bringing with it its own nationalist tradition, which has, over time, led to greater demands for control and home rule. At first glance, devolution seemed a victory for the nationalist tradition and a blow to the BPT. However, the BPT was in safe hands under New Labour and Tony Blair. For Blair, devolution was a means of securing the Scottish vote – something that eluded the Conservatives – while making controlled, and limited, modifications at Westminster. It was, therefore, a way in which centralised power, albeit altered, could be reaffirmed and protected.

However, there was contestation built-into the devolution settlement, in particular through moves towards greater participatory democracy, [most noticeably in the Additional Member System](#) which institutionalised a contest between a Scottish nationalist tradition and the BPT, leading at times to coalition and minority government – an anathema to the BPT’s understanding of responsible government. However, this alternative to the BPT garners far greater trust from its citizens, with the [2016 Scottish Social Attitudes Report](#) finding trust in the Scottish Government by Scottish citizens was an incredible 65%, compared to just 25% for Westminster.

Of course, it is not devolution which presents the greatest challenge to the BPT, but independence. If devolution was an attempt to mollify the nationalist spirit in Scotland, it has been a failure. Greater powers have been demanded, not least during the independence campaign. With the threat of an independent Scotland appearing a real possibility, a scared Cameron offered greater devolved powers, contra the centralisation tendency of the BPT. However, while greater devolved powers perhaps helped swing the campaign to the No vote, [Cameron’s claims that the question was settled for a generation](#) were naïve.

Britain has never truly welcomed European integration; with its violation of that most sacrosanct principle – Parliamentary Sovereignty – perhaps it never could. In Westminster, Euroscepticism is [not an ideology of the fringe](#), but is instead [deeply embedded in party competition](#). It is, as we have seen, also an ideology shared by many citizens – though of course, we must distinguish between the constituent nations of the Union, with Brexit in large part the consequence of a peculiar type of English rebellion.

Holding a referendum seems to mark a dramatic deviation from the BPT’s Burkean principles, but the two European referenda – 1975 and 2016 – were used to [diffuse intra-party contestation](#) and, as such, were a means of protecting stable government and the party system; this is what happened in [1975](#).

Brexit, alongside the rise of UKIP, reflected the growth of Euroscepticism, but as, if not more, important was the rise in alienation from politics as it is practiced, and a growing antipathy to the political elite. This phenomenon is often called anti-politics, although it is anything but non-political.

Anti-politics, and particularly antipathy to the idea that government knows best, underpins the looming threat of Scottish independence and the Brexit vote. This decoupling of citizens and authorities reflects an antipathy to the BPT as a governing strategy. [The focus on strong, rather than responsive, government distances Westminster from citizens](#). The result, is either complete detachment from the mainstream political process, often coupled with an involvement in new forms, often, particularly for the young, social media-based, or else a revolt against the elite’s wishes, as we saw in Brexit. In our view, the growth of such anti-politics demands a rethinking of the way politics is practiced and, if such disillusionment is to be addressed, the BPT needs to be changed.

The key question here is whether a remarkably resilient tradition can adapt to these challenges with minimal change, or whether the changes will be more fundamental. The outcome of Brexit negotiations (and the outcome of any second Scottish referendum) will play a role, but more important is how we address citizens’ belief that the political elite are out of touch with their concerns. The BPT has been very resilient, but it is a large part of the problem, not of the solution. Recoupling citizens with authorities is vital to a healthy democracy and the issues we have discussed show the necessity of such a step. Government needs to know what its citizens want, rather than assuming it knows best.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on LSE’s [British Politics and Policy blog](#). It draws on the authors’ [published work](#) in Policy Studies.

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