



# Westminster's Brexit Paradox: The contingency of the 'old' versus 'new' politics

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**Westminster's Brexit Paradox: the contingency of the 'old' versus 'new' politics**

## **WESTMINSTER'S BREXIT PARADOX: THE CONTINGENCY OF THE 'OLD' VERSUS 'NEW' POLITICS**

*The embedded nature of the British Political Tradition (BPT) has created a series of pathologies about the way politics in Westminster is conducted. The endurance of the BPT emanates from its resilience to pressures for reform. Yet the rising anti-politics tide, the expression of which was vented in the 2016 EU referendum, presents a critical challenge to the BPT. Given the political instability resulting from Brexit, this article maps the fate of previous attempts to reform the way politics is conducted in Britain. It identifies two waves of 'new politics' that have defined themselves against the 'old politics' of the BPT: the first, a series of demands for reform during the 1970s; the second, a sustained call for political reform from the 1990s onwards. The subsequent analysis reveals a link between both waves in demands for a less 'elitist' and more participatory style of democracy, but at the same time, a failure to dislodge the core tenets of the BPT. Given the current state of British politics, the article considers whether calls for a new form of politics in response to the climate of anti-politics, and the need for a post-Brexit settlement, will suffer a similar fate.*

**Key words: British Political Tradition; Westminster Model; anti-politics; new politics; Brexit; political reform**

*Our political traditions are different. Unlike other European countries, we have no written constitution, but the principle of Parliamentary Sovereignty is the basis of our unwritten constitutional settlement. We have only a recent history of devolved governance – though it has rapidly embedded itself – and we have little history of coalition government.*

Theresa May, January 2017

## **Introduction**

This article analyses the various demands over the last three decades for what can be labelled a ‘new politics’ in the United Kingdom. The salience of the theme of a new politics is brought into sharp relief by the immediate challenge facing Britain in the aftermath of the decision in June 2016 to leave the European Union (EU), accompanied by long-term anti-politics pressures highlighting the need for a remodelled governance settlement.

The context for this debate is the repeated calls over the last 30 years within Westminster’s political class for what is, rather vaguely, termed ‘a new politics’. As Moss *et al* (2016) note, appeals for a new way of doing politics are by no means novel in British politics. What characterises more recent calls is the context in which they are framed: a rising tide of ‘anti-politics’ is straining the BPT’s emphasis on elite accountability. Demands for reform tend to advocate more participatory, pluralistic and deliberative approaches. Yet, as the article reveals, to date change has been limited given the reluctance of the incumbent parties of government to enact far-reaching reforms.

The article highlights the persistence across time of the ‘old politics’ associated with the British Political Tradition (BPT) and the Westminster model (WM). The relevance of the debate between what we frame as ‘old versus new politics’ arises from a growing climate of populist, anti-elitist, anti-politics and anti-Westminster sentiments distilled through the 2016 vote to leave the EU. The article sets out the ‘first’ and ‘second’ wave of appeals for a new politics, each challenging the assumptions of the BPT. The subsequent analysis reveals that what binds the two waves together is the deeply embedded and path-dependent nature of the BPT and its capacity to resist reform.

The analysis in turn feeds into current approaches to understanding the dilemmas and contingencies surrounding the emergence of a post-Brexit governance settlement. While it should be recognised that the BPT has never been uncontested, the approach in this paper compliments other studies (Marsh & Hall, 2007; Diamond, 2013; Flinders et. al., 2018) in underlining the cultural and institutional dominance of the BPT. Indeed, the May government’s mantra of ‘taking back control’ is shaped by the reassertion of the old, centralising politics associated with the BPT, rather than the development of a new politics emphasising a more de-centralised and participatory approach. In so doing, the contingency of a ‘BPT effect’ on Brexit reveals a deep paradox:

- The BPT is organised round the centralising politics of the WM;
- The process of de-centring associated with the ‘new politics’ calls for a less elitist, more devolved and responsive model as the antidote to anti-politics;
- Yet the post-Brexit debate and a commitment to ‘take back control’ have the potential to lead to the revival of a Westminster-style re-centred governance settlement, exacerbating the very anti-politics discontents that motivated many of those voting for Brexit.

The article concludes by arguing that efforts to re-impose the principle of parliamentary sovereignty through the old politics of the WM and appeals to what Weale (2016) refers to as the sense of ‘democratic nostalgia’ will merely exacerbate pathologies associated with anti-politics. The article is organised into three parts:

- Part one defines and establishes the salience of the debate surrounding the new politics, locating the discussion in the context of an emergent paradox stemming from the decision to vote to leave the EU in 2016.
- Part two then maps the wide-ranging calls for reform to the UK’s democratic and governance settlement, identified through two separate waves. The first is understood as a disparate wave of calls for reform leading up to and including the 1970s, and the perceived unfolding of a crisis of the state and the subsequent Thatcherite response.
- Part three analyses a second wave of calls for a new politics emerging from the early 1990s onwards. What is presented for the first time is an in-depth exploration of demands for a new politics. The analysis sheds fresh light on the response of the Westminster political class. The approach involves the interrogation of rhetorical claims from the 1970s to the present about the need for a new politics; a comprehensive survey of the manifesto commitments during this period relating to reforms associated with the new politics; and detailed analysis of the reforms actually delivered by incumbent governments.

## **II. Framing the Brexit Paradox - the politics of ‘old’ and ‘new’ politics**

Throughout the EU referendum, the Leave campaign was organised round the mantra of ‘taking back control’. For Leave voters, their: ‘...decision was based on sovereignty: they agreed with the principle that the UK should be able to take its own decisions’ (Menon & Salter, 2016). What was largely left unsaid was how to deliver on this goal. Most contributions were pitched at a level that went little beyond unrefined notions of a zero-sum claw back in sovereignty (Yuratich, 2016). Following the referendum, the rhetoric of the May Government presented Brexit as a process of reasserting parliamentary sovereignty. In the context of Brexit, two elements in the literature on sovereignty ought to be highlighted:

- Sovereignty is essentially a mythical concept, which Foucault referred to as ‘imagined sovereignty’ (Brown, 2006: 68) given that no state has complete control over its territory. As Krasner (1999: 40) observes: ‘Both international legal and Westphalian sovereignty are best conceptualised as organized hypocrisy’;
- Walker (2003: 7) observes that sovereignty’s plausibility depends on its ‘authenticity and credibility’. It may be possible to have myths with no relationship to reality, but in the long-term, they are hard to sustain. Indeed, one of the reasons for the current contestation of notions of sovereignty in Britain can be explained by the view that modern state sovereignty bears little relationship to the conditions of the nineteenth century when Parliamentary sovereignty was established.

Implicit in both elements is an illustration of the relevance of the WM to the conception of sovereignty in the context of a post-Brexit settlement (Rhodes, 2017). The model shapes the perceptions of British politics among both elites and many citizens. It provides a normative view of the nature of political power in the UK which came to the fore during the E.U. referendum.

In the campaign, arguments that Parliament should be sovereign led leave campaigners to call for the repatriation of powers to Westminster. Such a view accords both with the BPT (see: Greenleaf, 1983, 1987; Tant, 1993; Richards, 2014; Hall et. al., 2018) and the WM’s characterisation of sovereignty. It is an approach that, de facto, is dependent on Whitehall centralisation and executive prerogative within a weak participatory tradition. The re-assertion of sovereignty emphasises:

- a limited, liberal notion of representative democracy, encapsulating the view that it is the executive that governs in the interests of the nation and power should therefore rest with the government;
- and, a conservative notion of responsibility prioritising top-down accountability at the expense of alternative, more bottom-up, participatory approaches.

Proponents claim the virtues of the BPT lie in the delivery of strong, stable, majoritarian government, even at the expense of wider engagement and deliberation.

The Brexit negotiations focused on first order issues over the single market, the customs union and the free movement of people. These themes fed into wider discussions about Britain’s future relationship with both the EU and other trading nations and blocs. Yet if we broaden the lens of what is meant by a post-Brexit settlement, the extent to which the referendum has exposed a crucial dilemma should not be overlooked. Will a post-Brexit settlement lead to the grafting on of reform to Britain’s existing model of politics, often referred to as the WM, through the re-centring of power to Whitehall; or given the persistence of long-term pressures for greater devolution and democratic renewal does the UK require a distinctive type of post-Westminster settlement?

It is in the context of that dilemma that the salience of the debate over ‘old’ versus ‘new’ politics is revealed. The next section considers what we identify as ‘first wave’ calls for a new politics in Britain.

### **III. The contingency of ‘First Wave’ calls for a new politics**

Demands for a new politics set against the British model of democracy have, of course, been an enduring feature of twentieth century British political life. As the examples below illustrate, the range of groups and actors calling for reform have been wide-ranging in nature:

- *Political movements*: in the early twentieth century, the pluralistic thrust of the Syndicalist and Co-operative movements sought to challenge the centralising tendencies of the WM (Butler, 1986).
- *Westminster’s political class*: Westminster politicians expressed disdain towards Britain’s democratic settlement. As early as 1939, the Labour politician Richard Crossman’s book *How Britain is Governed* was deeply critical of the: ‘...alternating party dictatorship’ and ‘authoritarian’ character of British Democracy. Crossman returned to that theme in his diaries referring to, ‘...the secret operations of government, which are concealed by the thick masses of foliage which we call the myth of democracy’ and the ‘...noble lie that is British democracy’ (Crossman, 1975: 11). In similar vein, the Conservative grandee Lord Hailsham spoke of the British model as little more than an ‘elective dictatorship’ when delivering the 1976 BBC Dimpleby Lecture.
- *Academia*: the scale of contributions here is sizeable, though Hall (2011) offers a useful overview of the ‘critical wave’ of the BPT. Illustratively, we focus on a notable *volte-face* by one of the original proponents of the BPT. Beer (1965) identified changes in British society, including a decline in deference and trust that was leading to the emergence of a ‘new populism’ emphasising individualism, popular engagement, and de-centralisation. Beer’s critique sensitises us to the emerging perception of crisis unfolding during the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

The portrayal of the UK as ‘ungovernable’ is an indelible feature of the landscape of British politics in the 1970s, both real and constructed. One of the most prominent approaches was that of a crisis of expectations and the ‘overload thesis’ (Crozier, 1975). The thesis argued that following the turn to statist programmes adopted by advanced liberal democracies in the aftermath of the Second World War, there was an identifiable increase in public expectations of what governments should provide. The conclusion was that failure to deliver on many of these expectations resulted in a serious decline of confidence in the state (Moss et. al., 2016; Birch, 1964). One important consequence was the Wilson Government’s decision to hold a referendum in 1975 on British membership of the European Community. Rival conceptions of sovereignty played an important role in the 1975 campaign. The

slogan of those opposed to the UK entering the Common Market was ‘the right to rule ourselves’ (Saunders, 2018).

Different elements of the overload critique were embraced by the Left alongside the emergent New Right in proclaiming a wider crisis of the state (Dorey, 1995; Hay 1996). From the late 1970s, the Conservative leadership rhetorically appealed to a sense of crisis in justifying a programme to cut back the over-extended state. Thatcherism showed little interest in reforming the existing political settlement. The extensive powers offered by the WM were perceived as crucial in rolling out the reforms, hence the constitutionally conservative nature of Thatcherism. The Thatcher and Major Governments displayed a lack of reforming zeal in areas such as the constitution and governance, much to the chagrin of some on the New Right (Hoskyns, 2000). Both embraced a Burkeian position, remaining committed to parliamentary conservatism, an unwritten constitution, and the existing model of representative democracy. Consequently, there was never an attempt to forge a specifically New Right model of politics to challenge the contours of the British parliamentary state. An alternative to the WM was neither sought nor developed during the 1979-1997 Conservative administrations.

#### **IV. The ‘second wave’ calls for a ‘new politics’**

The ‘second wave’ of demands for a new politics emerged in the early 1990s in the shadow of a rising climate of ‘anti-politics’. The literature on anti-politics highlights it is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon throwing-up numerous pathologies concerning power, democracy, legitimacy, participation, and accountability (see Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007; Riddell, 2011; Flinders, 2012; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Richards et. al., 2014; Moran, 2017). Its growth is evidenced through increasing public disengagement with traditional forms of ‘arena politics’ or ‘duty norms’ (Bang, 2011), expressed in long-term trends: declining electoral turnout, party membership and wider political participation in mainstream politics. In a similar vein, there is the depiction of so-called ‘left behind’ communities, alienated from the established way of doing politics; those who are, ‘on the wrong side of social change, are struggling on stagnant incomes, feel threatened by the way their communities and country are changing, and are furious at an established politics that appears not to understand or even care about their concerns’ (Ford & Goodwin, 2014: 48).

Survey evidence on the nature and demographics of those voting to leave the EU identify a major driver as that of a populist, anti-establishment protest vote against ‘out-of-touch political elites’ (Goodwin & Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016; Menon & Salter, 2016; Clarke et. al., 2017; Evans & Menon 2017). The rise of what is referred to as the ‘new populism’ is, of course, not unique to the UK (Weyland, 2001; Barr, 2009; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Rooduijn et. al., 2014; Muller, 2016). In this context, Mudde (2013) defines populism as: ‘a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt



elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people’.

Mudde and Kaltwasser’s (2012) study of the rise of populism in Europe and America identifies a growing trend of electors (often voting for the first-time) to support an increasing number of ‘insurgent’ or ‘populist’ parties offering an alternative to a ‘corrupt elite’ and the associated failings of traditional mainstream politics. In the US, a key feature of Donald Trump’s successful electoral campaign, mirrored somewhat in the strategy adopted by Brexiters in the EU referendum, was the effective use of populist and anti-establishment rhetoric (Warren, 2016, Banks, 2017, Shipman, 2017). Illustratively, Arron Banks, a major Vote Leave financial donor echoed Donald Trump’s call for the need ‘to drain the swamp in Washington’ in the context of Westminster (Coates, 2016). Elsewhere in the campaign, there was the demonization of ‘experts’, with voters being encouraged to ‘trust ordinary common sense’. Vote Leave’s campaign strategy was to portray itself as the voice of ‘ordinary people’ standing up to disconnected, out-of-touch, self-interested and self-serving elites, operating in their own bubble and incapable of listening to the everyday concerns of those who they purported to represent (Crines, 2016; Martin, 2016; Evans & Menon 2017).

What then emerges in the wake of the referendum is a paradox: the leave campaign invoked populist rhetoric to demonise political elites, but at the same time pitched its campaign round the call to ‘take back control’ and, in so doing, repatriate power to the very set of ‘self-styled elites’ it railed against. To give context to this paradox, in the UK both anti-politics and populism are by no means a new phenomenon (Moss et. al., 2016). Westminster’s political class has not been immune to these forces, given the reliance on claims to democratic legitimacy as the lodestone of the representative process. Since the early 1990s, what has evolved is a pattern of leaders of opposition parties responding to anti-politics pressures by rhetorically appealing to the need for a new politics (see Table 1 below):

**Table 1: Party leaders’ second wave calls for a new politics**

- Tony Blair (1997) argued his government: ‘...will govern in the interests of all our people...and restore trust in politics in this country. That cleans it up, that decentralizes it, that gives people hope once again that politics is and always should be about the service of the public.’
- David Cameron (2010) observed that the electorate had been: ‘...betrayed by a generation of politicians, by an elite that thinks it knows best. People have lost control. The politicians have forgotten, the public are the master, we are the servant. That’s what needs to change in our system...Blow apart the old system. Overthrow the old ways. Put people in the driving seat.’
- His Coalition partner Nick Clegg (2010) argued: ‘This government is going to transform our politics so the state has far less control over you, and you have far more control over the state,...break up concentrations of power and hand power back to people...This government is going to persuade you to put your faith in politics once again.’
- Jeremy Corbyn (2015) characterised his elevation to Leader of the Opposition as: ‘...a vote for change in the way we do politics...Kinder, more inclusive. Bottom up, not top down. In every community and workplace, not just at Westminster...Something new and invigorating, popular and authentic, has exploded.’
- Theresa May (2016) on becoming Prime Minister promised: ‘...We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives. When we take the big calls, we’ll think not of the powerful, but you. When we pass new laws, we’ll listen not to the mighty but to you... As we leave the European Union, we will forge a bold new positive role for ourselves in the world, and we will make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us.’

What binds the leaders’ appeals together is that they are implicitly seeking a position not wholly removed from what Mudde (2013) frames as a populist platform, despite ostensibly being establishment politicians. There is a commitment to taking on vested interests, challenging the status quo, and changing the way politics is conducted. The promise is of a more devolved, deliberative and participatory approach, of listening and being receptive to the electorate. There is no coincidence that these calls for a new politics occur in a climate of rising anti-politics. It is ostensibly a search by Westminster’s governing class for a new contract of renewal and re-legitimation. Yet the evidence presented in this paper reveals a persistent pattern of failing to make good on promises made in opposition.

#### **V: From the Ideational to the Material: Mapping Manifesto Commitments and Policy Outcomes**

What is crucial in assessing the new politics is mapping the shift from ideational claims to outcomes. The following section examines the relationship between new politics pledges, in terms of the rhetoric of political campaigning and manifestos, against actual delivery on reform in office. Below is a textual

analysis of the manifestos of the Conservative and Labour parties throughout the second wave. The research reveals a clear link between calls for a new politics following the rise of anti-politics with the manifesto commitments of parties responding to pressures for reform. But these calls amount to little in the context of the material reality of government within Westminster and Whitehall, and the deeply embedded practice of executive power-hoarding in accordance with the BPT. That the political context elicits calls for a new politics, and that this rhetoric might be more electorally expedient when in opposition, is perhaps not unsurprising. But the disconnect between rhetorical appeals for a new politics, and piecemeal and constrained action once in government, indicates the continuation of a dominant BPT acting as an obstacle to mainstream political actors disrupting the status quo.

### *5.1 The Labour party, 1997-2005*

The 1997 Labour manifesto was clear in its diagnosis of British politics. Citizens were: ‘cynical about politics and distrustful of political promises’ (Labour Party, 1997: 346). The Conservative Party, ‘afflicted by sleaze ... seem(ed) opposed to the very idea of democracy’ (Labour Party, 1997: 374). Labour offered a series of reforms designed to ‘clean up politics’ including: House of Lords reform - abandoning the hereditary principle; reform of party funding to end ‘sleaze’; increased independence and accountability for local government; a commitment to a referendum on electoral reform; devolution to Scotland and Wales; an elected mayor with strategic authority over London; and freedom of information legislation. At face-value, it was an ambitious reform programme seeking to overturn the dominant modalities of politics associated with the BPT. The call to: ‘...learn from our history, not be chained to it’ suggests a desire for substantive reform of outdated Westminster institutions (Labour Party, 1997: 346). Blair’s party signalled a move away from the centralising social and economic policies which had defined the ‘overloaded’ polity in the 1970s; while affirming previous Labour government’s efforts at wide-reaching expansion of the state without increased democratic purchase and decentralisation (Evans, 2003; Diamond, 2013).

In government, New Labour’s retreat from many of these strands of reform is perhaps unsurprising. Its 1997 manifesto described: ‘...not the politics of a revolution, but of a fresh start’ (Labour Party, 1997: 346). New Labour appeared to offer a politics of constitutional adaptation, accommodation and continuity. The concepts of modernisation and renewal were potentially useful rhetorical ways of circumnavigating the: ‘...bitter political struggles of left and right that have torn our country apart for too many decades’ (Labour Party, 1997: 346). The explicit commitment to ten relatively limited political reforms which: ‘...form our bond of trust with the people’ was an explicit reinforcement of a conservative notion of responsibility and a focus on consistency and prudence that characterise elite perceptions of the BPT (Labour Party, 1997: 346). Given the Administration’s focus on effective implementation, it is striking that only the final two commitments on devolution and

freedom of information were actually delivered (Flinders, 2005; Marsh & Hall, 2007).

In both cases, the reforms reflected an accommodation with the BPT, rather than presenting a radical challenge to the old politics. Devolution promised a far-reaching alteration of the governing structures of the UK. For example, the Scottish Parliament (and with it the electoral success of the SNP) established a separate form of authority that evolved as a significant source of political influence within the British political system. It was the cumulative result of contingent pressure within the Scottish Labour Party, with influential advocates (not least Blair's predecessor, John Smith) calling for reform. Blair, however, sought to underplay the significance of these changes and, in the 1997 election, compared the prospective Scottish parliament to an English parish council (Tonge, 2010: 29). Freedom of Information legislation was a process spearheaded by the then Lord Chancellor Derry Irvine, but was a development Blair (2010: 250) later regretted as: '...utterly undermining of sensible government', a view echoed by his Cabinet Secretary, Gus O'Donnell. Both argued that effective governance required governments to have a space unencumbered by public intrusion to allow for meaningful deliberation, a view that replicates text-book accounts of the WM and the argument for strong, but responsible government (Birch, 1964; Beer, 1965). Elsewhere, the degree to which New Labour stepped back from a commitment to put the findings of the Jenkins Report on the electoral system to a referendum was emblematic of how flagship reforms of the BPT were jettisoned (Ashdown, 2001; Jenkins, 1998).

From the outset, there was doubt over Tony Blair's leadership commitment to radical changes in governance. The question posed by Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, was whether Blair was a 'pluralist' or a 'control freak' (Rawnsley, 2001)? The 'Blair Paradox', which Marquand outlined in 1998, was that he was both at once. Radical constitutional commitments were made and delivered without a driving belief in their necessity. Faced with the dilemma of Labour's perceived problems of electability and the need to recognise the electorate's desire for change, the leadership of New Labour agreed to a raft of constitutional reforms without understanding the diagnosis underpinning them. The working assumption was that radical changes committed to in the early years of government could beget a loosening of New Labour's centralizing ethos, generating: '...a dynamic of its own, carrying the transformation further than its authors intended or expected' (Marquand, 1998: 15). Marquand (1999: 1) argued: '...the architecture of British democracy ... the web of understandings and assumptions that tell its managers who they are and how they ought to behave, are back on the agenda'.

By 2001, there was a retreat from the rhetoric of a new politics within the sphere of constitutional reform. Whether the BPT had reached a point of elasticity – and certainly Blair argued, in private, that the British public's appetite for constitutional change had been satiated (Ashdown, 2001) – Labour's commitments to flagship reform declined in prominence after their first term in government. There was some introspection in elite Labour circles. One Cabinet minister, David Blunkett noted that: '...the general election turnout reflected a wider malaise in our formal democracy... a stark warning to

anybody who is concerned about the legitimacy and the effectiveness of public institutions’ (Blunkett, 2001: 1). But the 2001 manifesto was much lighter on reforming zeal than the 1997 document. A commitment to following up on the ‘first step’ of House of Lords reform suggested a continuing incremental approach to removing the remaining hereditary peers, along with calls to reform procedures to improve ‘effectiveness’ (Labour Party, 2001: 44). By the 2005 election, the momentum on constitutional change had stalled completely. One area in which there was movement was the guarantee of a referendum on treaty change in the European Union, labelled a ‘common sense’ approach to European integration. The manifesto pledge on a referendum amounted to an accommodation with anti-politics sentiment rather than any fundamental shift towards a new political settlement.

While calls for reform in 1997 intertwined with the electoral imperative to embody political change and act as a vehicle for the new politics, Labour’s priority from 2001 was to project governing competence. That is not to say that the discourse used in both the 2001 and 2005 manifestos was not ‘radical’; but the focus on reform of public services was not matched by the development of mechanisms that could cut through the centralising tendencies of the BPT. The 2001 and 2005 manifestos in areas such as health provision offered commitments that proposed significant decentralisation, promising power to: ‘...the patient, the parent and the citizen’ (Labour Party, 2005: 9). The shallowness of the reforms, dogged by insufficient clarity of purpose and lacking real mechanisms for citizens to effect change, meant they were little more than an effort to legitimise the central state (Peckham et. al., 2005). The 2005 manifesto promised a commitment to: ‘...bridge the chasm between government and governed’ by: ‘...embedding a culture of devolved government at the centre and self-government in our communities’ (Labour Party, 2005: 103). The principal focus of these reforms was arguably less democratisation, more a process of depoliticisation and ‘blame shifting’ (Burnham, 2001; Diamond, 2015). What the changes lacked was the sense of a sustained, joined-up approach that linked reform in public provision to empowerment for citizens [see Table 1].

**Table 2: Labour Party – Manifesto pledges on a new politics, and subsequent impact on British Political Tradition, 1997-2010**

Broad Proposed Reform	Legislative Outcomes	Policy Impact on BPT
Reform of the House of Lords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House of Lords Act (1999)</li> <li>• Royal Commission on House of Lords Reform (2001)</li> <li>• Free votes in House of Commons (2003, 2006)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No elected House of Lords.</li> <li>• Hereditary peers reduced from 750 to 92.</li> <li>• Defeats on House of Commons votes to create an elected House of Lords</li> </ul>

Reform of party funding to end sleaze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000</li> <li>• Creation of Electoral Commission (2000)</li> <li>• Electoral Commission Review (2004)</li> <li>• Philip Inquiry (2006)</li> <li>• The Political Parties and Elections Act (2009)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No change to party funding rules.</li> <li>• Series of scandals – notably Ecclestone Affair (1998), ‘Cash for Honours’ (2006)</li> </ul>
A referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jenkins Commission on Electoral Reform (1998)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No referendum on electoral reform</li> </ul>
Devolve power to Scotland and Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scotland Act (1998)</li> <li>• Government of Wales Act (1998)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.</li> </ul>
More independent but accountable local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Government Act (2000)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of directly elected mayors.</li> </ul>
Open Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom of Information Act (2000)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal challenge to BPT: Act substantially weakened from original proposals.</li> </ul>
An Effective House of Commons		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal challenge to BPT: reform delayed and stalled, significant action only following Wright Commission (2009)</li> </ul>

## 5.2 Conservative party, 1997-2005

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the Conservative Party’s adaptation to prevailing calls for a new politics and political change were slow and incremental. The approach was unusual for a party which had, throughout the twentieth century, demonstrated a capacity to adapt to shifting moods and sentiments within the British electorate (Bale, 2016). The Conservatives displayed limited ambition in response to Labour’s calls for reform. Their 1997 manifesto railed against ‘unnecessary and dangerous

change' that threatened to 'unravel a constitution that binds our nation together and the institutions that bring us stability' (Conservative Party, 1997: 457). Each defensive critique of the proposals was informed by a classic defence of the WM: proportional representation would lead to: '...unstable, coalition governments that are unable to provide effective leadership'; devolution would 'create a new layer of government which would be hungry for power', suggesting the redistribution of power was a zero-sum game, in which Westminster and Whitehall were set to 'loose out'; fundamental change to the House of Lords was 'not fully thought through', reflecting a conservative notion of responsibility that resisted popular calls to reform (Conservative Party, 1997: 457). There was an unwillingness to engage with the case for a new politics.

In 2001 and 2005, the Conservative Party began to adopt tropes that are familiar in the anti-politics discourse. There was an appeal to 'common sense' forms of responsibility, and the idea that 'in the real world, if you say you're going to do something, you do it. And if you fail, you can lose your job' (Conservative Party, 2005: 21). An articulation of the belief that the House of Commons had been 'steadily undermined' led to calls to re-democratise, by reclaiming powers for Parliament that had been lost both to 'unelected and remote bodies' and 'unaccountable ministers' (Conservative Party, 2005: 21). The Conservatives sought to argue that depoliticisation disrupted the flow of accountability through Parliament. There were the first stirrings of adaptation, with no attempt to row back devolution and an acceptance, by 2005, of a 'substantially elected' House of Lords (Conservative Party, 2005: 21; Hayton, 2012: 81-101). Calls in both manifestos for English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) legislation, eventually enacted in 2015, acted as both a response to the perceived rise of English identity and, in allowing English MPs to retain power, were a classic example of grafting reform on to the WM, while claiming that constitutionally, nothing had changed (Conservative Party, 2001; 2005; Mycock, 2016).

### *5.3 Conservative party, 2010-2015: – big promises and the 'Big Society'*

Under the leadership of David Cameron in 2010, the Conservatives' demands for a new politics carried through many of these same strands of reform, emphasising the lack of accountability and, '...restor(ing) the balance between the government and Parliament', as well as railing against depoliticisation and 'the quango state' (Conservative Party, 2001: 67, 69). While Labour's reforms sought to address growing public support for a modest expansion of the state (Whiteley, 2012), Cameron's Conservatism was a conduit for an expansion of personal liberty and the rolling-back of the state. It tapped into growing public discontent with the political system, exacerbated by the parliamentary expenses scandal (2009) to call for a cutting of the size and cost of parliament, promising to:

Act rapidly to push through far reaching reforms to restore ethics to politics and revive the electorate’s faith in politicians. It will take nothing less than a deep clean of the political system in Westminster to root out the sleaze and dispel suspicion. (Conservative Party, 2010: 65)

The manifesto argued dissatisfaction with the parliamentary system was: ‘...merely the trigger for a deeper sense of frustration’ and promised to use ‘decentralisation, accountability and transparency’ to ‘weaken the old political elites, give people power, fix our broken politics and restore people’s faith’ (Conservative Party, 2010: 65). It coupled discontent with an outmoded political system and a call for empowerment through an expansion of civil society. The Big Society was an attempt to fill the gap between the market and the state, while claiming citizens should be given an increased stake in decision-making. The Big Society drew comparisons with New Labour’s desire to promote social capital through the co-production of public services delivered by partnership with the voluntary sector.

The Big Society agenda had some prominent advocates within the Conservative Party, yet there was always the potential that the rhetorical use of ‘people power’ was primarily a means of justifying the cutting back of the state (Kerr et. al., 2011). Where the New Right had been criticised for offering little in terms of how civic society interacted with the state, the Big Society presented possibilities. But there was a contradiction; Cameron’s claims to a ‘new politics’ were premised on empowerment downwards; but the centralised imposition of democratic reforms appeared to be a substitute for genuine efforts to promote bottom-up, civic participation. Direct democracy did lead to the creation of urban mayors. But the mayoral agenda translated into an ad hoc, centrally controlled, top-down approach driven by the Treasury that did not foster public support or use constitutional change as a mechanism to revitalise and re-energise the political process (Hayton, 2017). Again, mayoral devolution appeared more as a tactical concession than any real desire to grapple with the drivers of disillusionment with the formal arena politics of Westminster: ‘...relegating citizens to the polling booth’ rather than promoting active and engaged citizenship and communities (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012: 29). It was little surprise that of the 10 cities given the option of an elected mayor through referenda held in May 2012, only Bristol – by a slim margin – supported the concept of a directly elected mayor. Elsewhere, a 2015 audit of the Big Society found that Britain: ‘still has one of the most centralised political systems in the world’ (Civil Exchange, 2015: 8). As Table 2 highlights, the underlying problem was a lack of genuine engagement with civil society and citizens, and an ad hoc and top down approach mediated by the BPT.

**Table 3: Conservative Party – Manifesto pledges on a new politics, and subsequent impact on British Political Tradition, 2010-2017**

Broad Proposed Reform	Legislative Outcomes	Policy Impact on BPT
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Clean up politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act (2014)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited impact on BPT</li> <li>• Parliamentary privilege rules unreformed, despite manifesto.</li> <li>• Lobbying register ineffectual</li> </ul>
Give citizens direct control over what goes on in Westminster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of online petitions mechanism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal impact on BPT:</li> <li>• Debates, principally held in Westminster Hall, gain little political traction. Power of ‘recall’ to ‘kick out’ MPs abandoned</li> </ul>
Reduce the influence of money on politics, and cap individual donations		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No impact: no significant legislation on donations and funding</li> </ul>
Make politics more local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Localism Act (2011)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of Metro Mayors</li> <li>• Treasury prescribed austerity measures significantly reduce size of local government by c. 40% 2010-2015</li> </ul>
Make politics more transparent		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plans to make government datasets public scrapped</li> <li>• Reducing ‘unaccountable quangos’ a driven by austerity, not transparency.</li> <li>• Limited traction re. the supposed ‘bonfire of the quangos’.</li> </ul>

#### 5.4. 2017 Conservative party: back to the future with a reaffirmation of the BPT

The 2017 General Election with Brexit as the backdrop was portrayed as one of the most crucial elections in a generation. It brought into sharp focus the debate about the future shape of British politics. The unexpected outcome of a minority Conservative Government underlined the volatility and turbulence that has become a fixture of UK politics. What the two main party manifestos reveal is an

increasing gap in the ideas, and in turn the policy commitments, of both parties, no more so than in their contrasting appeals to a new politics.

For the Conservatives, there are striking parallels between their 1979 and 2017 manifestos, with both offering a strident defence of parliamentary sovereignty. The 1979 manifesto pledged to restore, ‘the supremacy of parliament’, weakened by ‘the growth of government’ and the increased power of interest groups (Conservative Party, 1979: 19). The 2017’s headline grabbing mantra was the need for: ‘...strong and stable leadership’ (Conservative Party, 2017: 2). If ever there was a political sound bite to encapsulate the BPT and the WM – a top-down, elite-based approach prioritising the notion of responsible government (Birch, 1964) – that was it. Yet beyond the slogan, what is revealing is the vision for the future shape of British politics contained within the 2017 manifesto. It provides a robust defence both of the Union and the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, in the face of the dislocation posed by Brexit:

We believe in the good that government can do...We will need a state that is strong and strategic, nimble and responsive to the needs of people. While it is never true that government has all the answers, government can and should be a force for good. (Conservative Party, 2017: 11)

The 2017 Conservative manifesto was much less reticent about the role of the state, insisting that governments have a crucial role in protecting citizens from economic and social upheaval. When it comes to the English question, the manifesto attests rather ambiguously: ‘...we would consolidate our approach’ (Conservative Party, 2017: 34-5). More notable is the pronouncement over the issue of a second Scottish referendum:

The United Kingdom has voted to leave the European Union but some would disrupt our attempts to get the best deal for Scotland and the United Kingdom with calls for a divisive referendum that the people of Scotland do not want. We have been very clear that now is not the time for another referendum on independence (Conservative Party, 2017: 34).

In further echoes of the 1979 manifesto, there is a whole section entitled ‘The Home of Democracy and the Rule of Law’. What follows is a revivalist’s credo for the WM:

This election will decide the composition of our parliament, the oldest of all large democracies...This unequalled democracy and legal system is our greatest national

inheritance. However, collective faith in our democratic institutions and our justice system has declined in the past two decades. It is the purpose of this Conservative Party to re-establish faith in our democracy, and in our democratic and legal institutions (Conservative Party, 2017: 34).

To achieve that objective, a series of measures reaffirm the commitment to the core ideas underpinning the BPT:

...retaining the first past the post system of voting for parliamentary elections and extend this system to police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections. We will retain the current franchise to vote in parliamentary elections at eighteen. We will repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act...We will legislate to ensure that a form of identification must be presented before voting...We will retain the traditional method of voting by pencil and paper. We will ensure that the House of Lords continues to fulfil its constitutional role as a revising and scrutinising chamber which respects the primacy of the House of Commons (Conservative Party, 2017: 45).

The implication of the manifesto and the rhetoric suffusing the Conservative claim to government is that the British tradition of democracy is fundamentally sound. That tradition needs to be recovered from decades of interference by Brussels, as well as unnecessary constitutional tinkering by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. What is offered is a stout defence of the old politics, an appeal to what Weale (2015: 352) refers to as ‘democratic nostalgia’. Nostalgia, in this context, refers to a particular view of Britain’s past, the invoking of a Halcyon-like view of the WM and with it a: ‘...desire to turn the clock back’ (Weale, 2015: 352).

### *5.5 2017 Labour party: reform at the edges, but the strong centre still holds*

For Labour, in the midst of what had been a turbulent period in its history, the leadership under Jeremy Corbyn presented a manifesto that was imbued with the rhetoric of the new politics. Corbyn traded heavily on his ‘outsider’ status, an insurgent from within seeking to challenge the dominant features of the status quo maintained by his own party. Throughout, there are populist-informed references to the need for a new politics to overhaul the existing order. There is for example, a whole section on ‘Extending Democracy’ wherein a critique of the WM looms large:

Just as many felt that power was too centralised and unaccountable in Brussels, so many feel that about Westminster. A Labour government will establish a

Constitutional Convention to examine and advise on reforming of the way Britain works at a fundamental level (Labour Party, 2017: 102).

Specific commitments from Labour were less clear. As in 2010, the Party opted for a Constitutional Convention to flesh out the major issues that ought to inform the next wave of reforms to the British polity, the highlights of which include:

- a democratically elected House of Lords
- extending the Freedom of Information Act to private companies that run public services
- reducing the voting age to 16
- repealing the Lobbying Act
- creating a Minister for England.

At the same time, however, Labour explicitly opposed a second Scottish referendum. Elsewhere, it called for a major expansion in the powers and fiscal capacities of the central British state, including wholesale nationalisation and public ownership of rail and the utilities. As with previous Labour governments, despite alternative devolutionary approaches associated with the syndicalist and co-operative traditions, the Party still views the central state as the critical agent of reform. Elsewhere in the manifesto, Labour's rhetoric on Brexit was ambiguous; there was an effort to convince voters that the party would not oppose Brexit in principle, and that it accepted the 2016 result. Leading figures in the party including Corbyn and the Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, appeared comfortable with the implication that a new project of 'nation-state socialism' would be required once the UK had exited the EU. Their position underlines the point that there has always been a deep attachment to the operating codes and rules of the game bequeathed by the BPT on the Left in British politics. There is form of democratic-centralism based on a belief that the WM can deliver socialist policies, for which Tony Benn's tenure as Secretary of State for Industry and Energy in the 1970s was the inspiration. The appeal to the new politics in Labour's 2017 manifesto needs to be placed alongside a powerful countervailing force in the shape of a commitment to the ideas of the BPT.

## **VI. Conclusion: A Post-Brexit Settlement and Resolving the Paradox of the old vs new politics**

This article identifies what are referred to as two distinct, but not mutually exclusive, waves of 'new politics' in the UK. Each wave sought to offer an alternative to the deeply embedded set of ideas about democracy and governance presented by the BPT – ideas that have in turn moulded the UK's political institutions and processes. The drivers behind each wave somewhat differed: the 1970s wave was presented as a broader crisis of the state stressing concerns over ungovernability and government

overload. The wave emerging from the 1990s onwards emphasised a set of pathologies related to the perceived escalation of anti-politics. Both were linked in the way they expressed a 'crisis of expectations' between voters and governing elites. As importantly, this article reveals that despite calls for reform, the BPT has remained essentially intact. Crucially, the detailed study of the relationship between manifesto commitments and outcomes identifies a familiar pattern emerging throughout the second wave: of political leaders when in opposition calling for systemic change, yet when in government, failing to follow through on earlier commitments.

The current approach adopted by the Conservative Administration led by Theresa May invites parallels with Margaret Thatcher's Government in 1979. Both prime ministers claimed to have a radical project, yet for different reasons, each sought to entrench the existing constitutional and political settlement. Thatcher used the powers afforded by the core executive to impose policies on recalcitrant sections of British society. To date, the approach of the May Government indicates a reassertion of the centralising, power-hoarding tendencies associated with the BPT that are deemed necessary to 'deliver' Brexit. The Administration's approach is clearly framed within the contours of the BPT's notion of elite accountability, delivering on the referendum's commitment to 'take back control' from the EU. There is a reluctance to acknowledge that absolute sovereignty and executive political control are 'legitimising myths' bequeathed by the WM.

In the context of the paradox set out here, it is very possible that any Brexit settlement will fail to take seriously the issues raised by the 'second wave' of calls for a new politics, exacerbating the very pathologies that contributed to the EU referendum vote. There is clearly a risk this situation will lead to further disaffection and disillusionment among citizens. As Marsh (2018: 80) observes: 'Brexit is likely to make the situation much worse because it was offered as a simple solution to complex problems, problems which clearly it won't 'solve'...As such, an increase in anti-politics is highly likely'. The Brexit vote was partly a revolt against an 'out of touch' governing class. The evidence presented in this article highlights that the clawing back of sovereignty through appeals to a misplaced sense of democratic nostalgia risks further exacerbating political disengagement from the traditional arena politics offered by the WM. Such an outcome would lead almost inevitably to a much deeper crisis of legitimation in the UK political system.

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