The General Rejection?
Political Disengagement, Disaffected Democrats and ‘Doing Politics’ Differently

In the run up to the 2015 General Election Douglas Carswell, the former Conservative MP who defected to UKIP in 2014, reflected on the growth of anti-politics and argued that British political parties seemed to resemble ‘Kodak parties’. He drew from arguments made in his book The End of Politics and the Birth of Democracy that identified the need for an ‘old politics’ to keep pace with a ‘new politics’ that was being driven by exactly those processes of social, economic and technical change that have been identified as ‘liquid modernity’. Carswell’s argument is that the Kodak brand was once synonymous with cameras and from the moment George Eastman launched the first Kodak camera in 1888 Kodak had a dominant market share. By the 1970s, more than 90% of camera film products sold in the USA were made by Kodak to the extent that people even spoke of taking family photographs as capturing that ‘Kodak moment’. Then came digital cameras and in 2012 Kodak filed for bankruptcy. Political parties were once synonymous with democratic politics but their social position and role has clearly changed from the mass-based organisations of the twentieth century. Carswell diagnoses a failure of British political institutions to keep pace with the expectations and demands of an increasingly diverse society and that exists to some extent beyond the reach of the public—the demos. It is in this context that this chapter reflects on the 2015
General Election through a focus on political disengagement and the development of five inter-related arguments.

(1) The 2015 General Election took place in a context that was arguably unique in British political history due to the explicit debate concerning ‘anti-politics’ and disengagement.

(2) This ‘anti-political’ climate dovetailed with academic research about ‘disaffected democrats’. It was promoted by a number of influential social commentators and it fuelled the rise of the ‘insurgent’ parties.

(3) A more accurate interpretation of the views of the public, the social commentators and the ‘insurgent’ parties is that they were more ‘anti-establishment’ than ‘anti-politics’.

(4) At the core of the frustration with conventional British representative democracy was a pro-political stance and a desire to ‘do politics differently’.

(5) The root problem for the future of democracy (in the UK and beyond) exposed by the 2015 General Election was the almost complete lack of any detailed thinking about what ‘doing politics differently’ actually means.

The argument is that the impact of ‘anti-politics’ on the General Election was undoubtedly significant, but that frustrations, anxieties and pressures that became entwined beneath the ‘anti-political’ banner were rarely, if ever, anti-politics. They were anti-establishment and pro-politics—but pro-doing politics differently’. The chapter’s first section focuses on the distinction between anti-politics and anti-establishment, the second section on how this ‘anti-something’ sentiment played itself out within the election campaign and the final section looks to the future and reflects upon the politics of ‘doing politics’ differently.

1. Anti-what?

For some commentators the 2015 General Election was the first genuinely ‘anti-political’ election but at the same time it was one in which the existence of a major debate about the nature of British democracy served to politicise huge sections of society. The surge in party membership for the Scottish National Party, for example, with over 100,000 members at the time of the election (i.e. far more members than soldiers in the whole British Army) deserves some explanation in a context dominated by the rhetoric of disenchantment and decline. One element of that explanation lies with a rejection of the term ‘anti-political’ as a useful epithet for capturing the sense of public concern about British representative democracy that undoubtedly existed and a sharper focus on the actual existence of an anti-establishment atmosphere in the run up to 7 May 2015. It was arguably an anti-establishment election (and therefore less novel from a historical position) rather than in any way anti-political.

In *The Establishment: And How They Get Away With It*, Owen Jones provided an influential account of a corrupt political system and a self-perpetuating political
elite, largely beyond democratic control. From senior civil servants to media moguls and from politicians, big business and think tanks, Jones provides a view of an insular and inter-woven privileged class and a weak veneer of cosmetic politics that needs to be demolished and rebuilt. Russell Brand, in contrast, adopted the position of a revolutionary populist with a form of celebrity politics with a streak of raw anti-elite, anti-establishment, anti-elections nihilism that was captured in his book Revolution. It is notoriously difficult to measure the public influence of celebrity interventions in elections but in the case of Jones and Brand it is difficult to deny that, although they were generally talking to quite different audiences (the former at the educated middle classes, the latter at younger and more disengaged sections of society) they were able to orchestrate a major debate about the nature of British democracy and to cultivate a sense of widespread political failure.

But they were not anti-political. They both promoted a different form of politics. What is also significant is that Jones and Brand—often working together and citing each other’s work (Brand declaring Jones ‘our generation’s Orwell’)—were able to politicise those sections of British society (the young, the poor, ethnic minorities, etc.) that political scientists had branded ‘disaffected democrats’. Brand’s interview with Jeremy Paxman, for the BBC’s Newsnight programme in October 2013, sparked a national debate about democracy and raised questions about why certain sections of society felt so disillusioned and disengaged from mainstream politics. Moreover, with 10 million Twitter followers and his own YouTube channel, Russell Brand enjoyed what Douglas Carswell would have termed an ‘iDemocracy’ capacity that most mainstream politicians could simply not match (Brand’s Newsnight interview with Jeremy Paxman was watched over 12 million times on YouTube). The perceived influence of Brand was certainly demonstrated in April 2015 when the Leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, allowed himself to be questioned by Brand in what became a highlight of the election—‘the Milibrand interview’. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, immediately launched a scathing attack on both Miliband and Brand: ‘Russell Brand is a joke. Ed Miliband hangs out with Russell Brand—he is a joke’. Owen Jones denounced Cameron’s intervention as yet further evidence of a smug and sneering establishment figure that was out of touch with the public. Brand responded by encouraging his Twitter followers to vote Labour on 7 May. The fact that Brand did so after spending the previous 18 months adamantly encouraging people not to vote and then only urging people to vote three days before the actual election (and long after the deadline for voter registration had passed) should not distract from the simple fact that Brand (and Jones) played a major role in setting the terms of the political debate during the General Election and the debate was firmly focused not so much on

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anti-politics but on an anti-establishment standpoint that clearly resonated with large sections of the public and endorsed ‘doing politics differently’.

This focus on ‘doing politics differently’ rather than simply ‘doing away with politics’ is important in terms of understanding the wider social context because one of the central findings of mass surveys and polling data in advanced liberal democracies around the world is a commitment to democratic principles. The public seems to have a strong normative attachment to the concept of democracy whereas ‘politics’ is viewed very much as a bad thing wrapped up with dubious practices such as sleaze and skullduggery. Support for democratic politics is therefore strong at the systemic level but weaker at the more specific level of institutions, processes and politicians. Stoker and Evans label this the ‘Democracy-Politics Paradox’ to suggest that the public crave different forms of politics.4

It was this sense of a desire for difference that forged a deep fault-line through the 2015 General Election as ‘insurgent parties’ such as UKIP and the SNP sought to expose and exploit this gap as part of their critique of the past and promises for the future, while the mainstream parties sought to close and downplay this gap through a mixture of promising limited reforms and focusing on other issues. Like similar parties and movements in the USA, Austria, Denmark, France and Italy, such parties offer a critique of what has gone before and promise new ways of ‘doing politics’. They asserted a fundamental divide between the political establishment and ‘the people’ and positioned themselves as a ‘challenger brand’ that promises to deliver democracy without the politics.5 But what exactly are these ‘insurgent’ or ‘challenger’ parties in the UK really challenging? The value of this question is that it takes us back to a more fundamental question about whether the UK is really facing a crisis of democracy and how the results of the 2015 General Election might be located within an answer to this question.

It could be argued that what is being challenged is a certain understanding of a British political tradition that is institutionally expressed within a constitutional configuration that is essentially elitist, power hoarding and majoritarian.6 Students of comparative politics will recognise this interpretation from the seminal scholarship of Arendt Lijphart while recent analyses of British politics have revealed a process of ‘majoritarian modification’ in the UK since 1997 that has sought to implement reforms in response to widespread concern about the over-centralised nature of the British polity.7 But these reforms have been limited and enacted

very much within the confines of the Westminster Model. For Richards and Smith it is this British political tradition, and the ‘Westminster Model’ and notably the failure of obsolete political institutions to adapt to the ‘information age’. They start from the assumption that Britain is facing a number of institutional crises that seriously affect the legitimacy of the political system. Although Richards and Smith never use the term ‘crisis of democracy’ they argue that the problem of decreasing political engagement is a ‘supply-side’ issue that arises from a failure of decision-makers to properly take into account the electorate’s interests and wishes. In this regard they reveal an anti-establishment rather than anti-political position and their recommendations, in terms of increasing transparency and accountability, offer a modest recipe for how politics might be ‘done differently’. The core insight is that the anti-political sentiment that was so prevalent around the 2015 General Election was set against a powerful critique of a very specific model of democracy and complaints regarding:

1. The manner in which this model perpetuated an elite group (i.e. the anti-establishment of Brand and Jones), and
2. That it had failed to keep pace with societal demands and expectations (i.e. the reformist critiques of Carswell, Richards and Smith).

The question then becomes one of exactly how these complaints affected the 2015 General Election in terms of turnout, inequality and the party system.

2. A general rejection?

The themes and issues that have so far formed the focus of this chapter are hardly new. They form the backdrop for important works such as that of the Trilateral Commission on ‘The Crisis of Democracy’ in 1974, through to Anthony Sampson’s studies of the British ruling class and William Greenleaf’s magisterial three-volume The British Political Tradition; through to the more recent work of scholars such as Peter Hennessy, Anthony King and Vernon Bogdanor on British constitutional history, culture and change. But what was significant about the 2015 General Election was that both populist and anti-political (or, as has been argued, anti-establishment, pro-‘doing politics differently’) debate formed the backdrop to the election. This section explores how this backdrop influenced both the campaign

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9Richards and Smith, ‘In Defence of British Politics Against the British Political Tradition’, p. 42.

and results and places these findings against interpretations of crisis and discussions about the future of British democracy. Assessing the impact of ‘anti-politics’ is difficult due to the simple fact that this umbrella term captures a range of arguments and attitudinal positions and is likely to impact upon different institutions in very different ways. Nevertheless, an argument can be made that the ‘anti-political’ climate affected the General Election in a number of ways and as such a process of beginning to identify some of these affects and reflecting upon their significance can form the basis for future analyses when more fine-grained data are available. The section is structured around three questions which each in their own ways raise issues and themes that were mentioned in the previous section.

2.1 Did the 2015 General Election suggest a crisis of democracy?

It seems almost inevitable to begin any analysis of the 2015 General Election with the evidence that it provides as to whether Britain is facing a crisis of democracy. But before even beginning to explore this issue it is necessary to state the simple fact that ‘crisis’ is a very strong and emotive term. It is possibly the most over-used word in the political lexicon and although there is certainly an argument to be made about the problem with democracy or the rise of disenchantment amongst specific social groups, to talk about a ‘crisis’ vis-à-vis British democracy is something quite different.11 As Negrine argues ‘in carelessly over-using the word “crisis” ... we may be devaluing its true meaning and change-shifting priorities’.12

The 2015 General Election provided little evidence of a polity on the verge of collapse or in which a significant level of systemic support did not exist. There were not accusations of widespread vote rigging or electoral abuse, there were no violent street protests, order did not break down and a smooth transition in power took place. Over two-thirds of those eligible to vote (66.1%, 30.69 million people) engaged in the election, the highest figure for nearly 20 years and just months after 84.6% of Scottish voters voted in the independence referendum.

The argument is not that serious problems and challenges for British democracy do not exist but it is one that is circumspect about the value of narratives of crisis when it comes to understanding both the ‘life and death’ of democracy.13 There was no general ‘rejection’ of representative politics in 2015, but there was evidence of a partial rejection by specific social groups and therefore the real insights offered by recent events are more nuanced and subtle than crude debates that attempt to

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link specific scandals to the existence of a broader crisis can ever expose. If anything the 2015 General Election revealed how the nature of the relationships (note the plural) between the governors and the governed are changing and how re-connecting with those currently disconnected elements of society demand that we re-think, re-imagine, re-conceptualise and re-design how we ‘do’ politics. This, in turn, demands that we drill-down and examine what the 2015 General Election suggests about the nature of democratic inequality in Britain.

2.2 What did the election suggest about democratic inequality in Britain?

The previous section argued that the real insights offered by the 2015 General Election are arguably more concerned with enhancing our understanding of the extent of disengagement and its changing nature rather than with any definitive statement about systemic collapse. In this regard the Hansard Society’s twelfth ‘Audit of Political Engagement’, published in March 2015, provides an invaluable glimpse into the changing nature of political attitudes and political behaviour and how they did (or did not) read across into the General Election results (Table 15.1).

These findings do not point to the existence of a crisis but do highlight a number of worrying trends, particularly in relation to a sharp social division between certain sections of society and a focus on the generational and economic components of anti-politics in Britain. This is confirmed by the IPPR’s Divided Democracy report of November 2013 that revealed an increasing polarisation, which, put simply, means that younger and/or poorer people are far less likely to vote than older and/or wealthy people with just 10% of those aged 18–25 stating that they were certain to vote in the 2015 General Election. ¹⁴ This gap matters for at least three reasons: first, there is increasing evidence of a ‘cohort effect’ meaning young people do not get into participatory habits; second, there is a ‘policy effect’ meaning that politicians cater for those who are most like to vote (the older and wealthier); and, third, those from the most deprived and disengaged communities feel little commitment to broader society, let alone any aspiration to become involved in politics.

Turnout at the 2015 General Election was higher than might have been expected from the results of the Hansard Society’s 2015 audit, although the audit was correct in its suggestion that the electorate in Scotland was more likely to vote than other parts of the UK. Turnout was 71.1% in Scotland with two constituencies seeing turnout rise well above 80%. Post-election analysis by polling company Ipsos MORI suggests that overall patterns of turnout remained relatively unchanged with no significant increase in turnout among young people as 18–24s were almost half as likely to vote as those aged over 65 (43–78%). ¹⁵ Turnout was

significantly lower among the working classes, people renting their homes, and Black and Minority Ethnic communities. The question this leaves us with is how this pattern of (dis)engagement affected and was reflected in the party system.

2.3 What was the impact of anti-politics on the party system?

This question really gets to the heart of this chapter and to a focus on the practical impact and implications of the strong ‘anti-political’, ‘anti-establishment’, pro-‘doing politics differently’ context discussed in previous sections. It is possible to distinguish between the impact on mainstream established political parties and on newer or ‘insurgent’ parties.

For the three mainstream parties (Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats) the available data suggest that the General Election result can be summarised
as: the Conservatives did well with voters that turned out while Labour tended to draw its support from low-turnout sections of society. Ipsos MORI polling suggests that 80% of those who had voted Conservative in 2010 did so again in 2015.\textsuperscript{16} Amongst voters aged over 65 (the highest turnout group, 78%), the Conservatives saw a 5.5% swing from Labour since 2010. Among AB social groups (the social class with the highest turnout, 75%) they registered a three-point swing from Labour. Amongst those aged 65 and over the Conservatives won 47% of the vote to Labour’s 23%; with ABs the Tories captured 45% of the vote, Labour just 26%; in both cases a far greater margin than the overall election result (38–31%). Meanwhile, Labour were only able to secure a substantial swing in their favour among young people—a 7.5% swing from the Conservatives among 18–24 year olds, and a four-point swing among 25–34 year olds and those in rented accommodation.

Labour did have a clear lead over the Tories among voters in social classes D and E (i.e. unskilled and semi-skilled manual occupations, the unemployed, lowest grade occupations) and among black, Asian and minority ethnic voters but turnout for these groups was lower than the overall level of turnout. The democratic inequality that had been identified before the election in a number of surveys therefore affected the mainstream parties differently with the Tories retaining the support of those groups that tend to vote most. But beyond the actual voting patterns two broader issues demand brief comment. First and foremost, neither the Conservatives nor Labour seemed able to cope with the nature and strength of those public frustrations that became entwined in the ‘anti-politics’ debate in terms of offering a response or vision of what ‘doing politics’ might look like. This may reflect that both parties have historically been wedded—for very different reasons—to the traditional Westminster Model, which may, in turn, explain the lack of vision.\textsuperscript{17}

The second point, however, is the manner in which the ‘anti-political’ climate arguably closed-down political debate and discussion and encouraged negative campaigning. It was easier and safer to attack opponents than attempt to defend your own agenda. Debates were to be avoided and replaced by an almost surreal game of fantasy pledges as each of the main parties took turns trying to convince a sceptical electorate that they really could offer ‘more for less’. Tax cuts were accompanied by increased spending and the protection of budgets; more teachers, more nurses, more childcare. It was fantasy politics where the figures simply did not stack up. A veteran analyst of political disengagement noted that: ‘there is something surreal about the way in which British politicians comport themselves at the moment. Few . . . are liars but most of them are

\textsuperscript{16}Ipsos MORI (2015) \textit{How Britain Voted in 2015: Who voted for whom?}

\textsuperscript{17}Flinders, \textit{Democratic Drift}. 
living a lie? Jennings and Stoker suggest that ‘Debates about the deficit, austerity and public spending at the core of the General Election are replete with distortions, half-truths and fail to give citizens a sense of the choices they face.’

There was also a more understated response by the mainstream party leaders in the sense that Labour and the Lib Democrats did at least seek to project a more anti-elitist and engaged image while the Conservatives adopted a more distant ‘statesmanlike’ approach that defined the ‘anti-political’ surge as a threat. This was, for example, the first ‘selfie election’ as all of the main leaders, with the exception of David Cameron, followed a trend first started by Nicola Sturgeon in Scotland to be snapped by supporters at every opportunity. While the 2015 General Election also saw the ‘celebrity-as-interviewer’ emerge with greater prominence with, for example, reality TV star Joey Essex ‘interviewing’ Nick Clegg, Nigel Farage and Ed Miliband. Laudably, Cameron refused to be interviewed by Joey Essex, ridiculed Russell Brand and dismissed the selfie culture as ‘frustrating’ and as making ‘the process of politics quite difficult’. The Conservative response to the rise of the insurgent parties was to label them as a threat and then attach that threat to the Labour Party with, for example, a campaign poster depicting Ed Miliband in Alex Salmond’s pocket to scare voters about parties that might form an alliance with Labour in the event of a hung Parliament.

A distinctive feature of the ‘insurgent’ parties was that they did seem to offer a choice. For the Greens it was a choice focused on sustainability, for the SNP it was anti-austerity platform and for UKIP on taking back ‘control’. The Lib Democrats had traditionally played this role but became a lightning rod for anti-political sentiment and was decimated at the polls. The biggest drop for the Liberal Democrats was amongst voters aged below 34.

Taken together the mainstream parties seemed to reinforce a view of Carswell’s ‘Kodak parties’ as out of touch and unable to acknowledge or respond to public frustrations. In their different ways, UKIP, the Greens and notably the SNP thrived against a backdrop of anti-politics. That political parties can thrive in an ‘anti-political climate’ underlines the main argument of this chapter that the context was one of anti-establishment and ‘pro-new politics’ rather than being anti-political in any nihilistic or anarchic sense. And yet there is no way of avoiding the conclusion that, to some extent, it was by harvesting disillusioned voters that the ‘insurgent’ parties were able to break through. But even here blanket statements must be replaced with a more specific account of how the different parties deployed anti-political narratives and the challenges they faced in doing so. More


fundamentally the Greens, SNP and UKIP had to tread a careful line between, on the one hand, rejecting the actually existing model of politics while, on the other hand, promoting a deeper conviction that democratic politics is not futile, i.e. to nurture systemic support while decrying the existing model. This was arguably more problematic for the SNP who were at one-and-the-same-time a governing party (in Scotland) and challenger party (in Westminster). However, all the insurgent parties profited from the politicisation of anti-political sentiment based around a condemnation of the Westminster elite, their adoption of ‘outsider status’ and doses of populism. None of the three mainstream UK parties could offer a convincing response.

Jennings and Stoker highlight the extent of this link between insurgent parties and political disaffection by exploring the determinants of UKIP and Green Party support. Using both the BES Continuous Monitoring Survey (2009–2013) and Internet Panel Study (2014) they reveal that distrust of politicians was almost as big a factor for Greens as for UKIP supporters. The odds of someone intending to vote Green or UKIP were two-and-a-half times higher (and at a minimum 50% higher) if they expressed distrust in politicians. People who intended to vote for UKIP and the Greens were also more dissatisfied with British democracy, disliked both David Cameron and Ed Miliband, and were more likely to agree that ‘politicians don’t care what people like me think’. Interestingly, Green Party supporters were more likely to accept the view that ‘it is difficult to understand government and politics’, whereas UKIP supporters disagreed—for them politics was not as complicated as politicians might like to suggest.

One of the most interesting underlying results of the 2015 General Election is that UKIP came second in more constituencies than any other party (120) and achieved nearly four million votes. This may suggest the existence of a latent pool of discontent that was not under the current simple plurality electoral system vented or expressed by the election. UKIP’s vote-to-seat ratio was the highest of any party whereas the SNP won 56 seats with just 1.5 million votes—one of the most disproportionate election results in British history. Labour, in contrast, saw their share of the popular vote increase by nearly 1.5% but made a net loss of 26 seats. It may well be, therefore, that the 2015 General Election has fuelled political disaffection and that how Britain votes in 2020 might be quite different.

3. Conclusion

The 2015 General Election took place in a context that was arguably unique in British political history due to the explicit debate concerning ‘anti-politics’ and disengagement. This ‘anti-political’ climate dovetailed with academic research about
‘disaffected democrats’. It was promoted by a number of influential social commentators and it fuelled the rise of the insurgent parties. And yet a more accurate interpretation of the views of the public, the social commentators and the insurgent parties is possibly that they were more anti-establishment, than ‘anti-politics’. This has been the central argument of this chapter—at the core of the frustration with conventional British representative democracy is a pro-political stance and a desire to ‘do politics differently’. In this regard it could be suggested that British politics is by no means unique. ‘The problems Britain faces today are not very different’ Gianfranco Baldini argues ‘from those of most advanced democracies, regardless of their respective institutional structures’.21 But this leaves us with the question of what might be distinctive—either comparatively or historically—about how Britain voted in 2015. In answer to this question at least three issues deserve brief comment and all converge to focus attention on what ‘doing politics differently’ actually means.

First and foremost, if the 2015 General Election was dominated by a form of ‘anti-politics’ in which ‘insurgent’ parties could harvest support by framing themselves as somehow beyond conventional mainstream parties then what is striking is the failure of all the parties to specify in any level of detail what ‘doing politics differently’ would actually look like. Indeed the ‘mood of the moment’ that allowed the challenger brand parties to cultivate their critique was rarely—if-ever-matched by any specific vision of what a re-defined, re-imagined or re-connected political system might look like. Where reforms were promised they tended to be modest, pedestrian and piecemeal rather than offer a coherent vision of how a globalised market economy that was interpreted as running amok in terms of environmental degradation and economic inequality might be restrained. This was equally true of academic prescriptions for change. Richards and Smith, for example, recommend remedies that are either vague, naïve or built on an apparent faith in some form of ‘digital democracy’ for which little evidence exists.22 They seem to forget the inconvenient existence of ‘stealth democrats’ who support democracy but have no interest in getting involved themselves.23 The participatory assumptions of those who would promote ‘doing politics differently’ therefore requires interrogation.

This flows into a second deeper point about the relationship between democracy and populism. The insurgent ‘challenger’ parties in the UK, like many populist anti-establishment parties around the world, are making significant progress on the basis of a simple narrative about a different brand of democratic politics. For

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22 Richards and Smith, ‘In Defence of British Politics Against the British Political Tradition’.
these parties the traditional institutional frameworks of representative politics are slow, cumbersome, inefficient and tend to benefit a small elite. The anxiety created by this narrative is that although there is no doubt that a different political system could be more equitable and redistributive it is less true that it could be faster, more agile and efficient for the simple reason that democratically politics is inevitably messy. This was Bernard Crick’s argument in his classic book In Defence of Politics and was more recently captured in Gerry Stoker’s definition of democratic politics as ‘the tough process of squeezing collective decisions out of multiple and competing interests and opinions’. Democratic politics will grate and grind. It must achieve a delicate equilibrium between democratic participation and governing capacity—too much accountability can be as problematic as too little. Richards and Smith’s plea for ‘a real era of hyper-democracy’ therefore overlooks not only a significant literature on the pathologies of hyper-democracy but also Crick’s longer-standing focus on balance and the management of public expectations—‘politics cannot make all sad hearts glad’.

But hyper-democracy is not synonymous with ‘doing politics differently’, and this brings us to a third and final point and a focus on the nexus. Research by political scientists on democratic participation and engagement suggests not that the public ‘hate’ politics but that they are increasingly adopting a different repertoire of political activities in order to express themselves. These involve on-line and off-line activities that tend to be more specific and fluid and that chime with Henrik Bang’s work on the ‘expert citizen’ and ‘everyday maker’ that is typified not only by collective action through individualised modes of behaviour but also through the creation of bottom-up democratic innovations that are captured in the contemporary focus on ‘DIY’ or ‘Pop Up’ democracy which reflect a drift away from mainstream democratic processes. What is missing from the manifestos of any of the British political parties is a way of channelling and drawing this democratic energy into the Westminster model in anything other than a tokenistic way. It’s the link between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ politics—the nexus—that offers a new way of thinking about and ‘doing’ politics in Britain, and beyond.

This brings this chapter full circle and back to the core focus on interpreting ‘anti-politics’ as more concerned with being ‘anti-establishment’ than being anti-politics. The risk of an ‘anti-establishment’ narrative is that it focuses on the existence of individuals and specific social groups to the detriment of any greater reflection on the manner in which the established way of governing perpetuates

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25Richards and Smith, ‘In Defence of British Politics Against the British Political Tradition’.

the existence of an elite. The obvious risk is that an anti-establishment reform pro-
gramme may simply replace one elite with another, unless it also establishes a quite
different institutional structure in terms of institutions, processes and cultures.
This is, of course, where the British political tradition enjoys such an entrenched
and embedded position. But there are signs that the traditional malleability of
the British constitution has been exhausted or, as Andrew Marr recently put it,
‘the centre cannot hold’.\textsuperscript{27} Such arguments have institutional elements in the
sense of the centrifugal forces of devolution (i.e. the ‘Untied Kingdom’ argument)
or the shift from a political to a judicial constitution, but these are symptoms of a
deeper issue concerning the values and principles that underpin democracy in
Britain. That is, the grand political narrative about the benefits of a majoritarian
power-hoarding democracy no longer works and a multitude of differing \textit{populisms}
have been unleashed in its place. Many of these are antagonistic and imbued with a
desire to attach ‘the blame’ to a specific social group—‘foreigners’, ‘bankers’,
bureaucrats’, ‘immigrants’, ‘politicians’, ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’. But this instability
and flux also creates a huge opportunity for any political party with the capacity to
see \textit{outside} or \textit{beyond} the established way of ‘doing politics’, to offer a new political
framework or philosophy and through this offer not hyper-democracy but a
post-tribal democracy that can close the gap that appears to have grown between
the governors and large sections of the governed.

\textsuperscript{27}Marr, A. ‘The Centre Cannot Hold’, \textit{New Statesman}, 23 March 2015.