THE POLITICS OF PERPETUAL RENEWAL: THE CHANGING ATTITUDES AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF BRITAIN

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INTRODUCTION

In just a few short weeks, Britain will go to the polls for the first time in half a decade. Following a long period of double-digit leads for the Conservative Party, the polls have tightened since the turn of the year. There is uncertainty amongst the public about all the main parties, who each have the challenge of defining themselves in the eyes of voters before election-day. In short, it's game on.

This paper, part of the Open Left project at Demos, aims to set out a picture of the country that will go to the polls this year. This forms a core part of Open Left's aim to renew the ideas and agenda of the centre-Left, over a decade after Labour was first elected. The paper considers the ways in which the British electorate has changed over the last two decades and the potential political implications of these changes. While it would be an overstatement to claim that Britain is a fundamentally different country demographically compared to the early 1990s, there have been important shifts. The British electorate is older, better educated and more diverse. Its class, occupational and household structure is more complex. There is every indication that these changes will continue in the coming years.

The political implications of these demographic changes reside in their interaction with people's attitudes, values and interests. These political attitudes have traditionally been thought to structure around a left versus right cleavage: defined principally by the balance between market and state in governing the economy. Over the last two decades, the explanatory power of this divide has become less salient. In fact, the evidence presented here suggests the electorate is segmented in far more complex and contingent ways.

In exploring this complexity, we consider a range of different potential axes that might help us better understand the 'political brain' of modern Britain[1]. For example, people's optimism or pessimism about their own lives and the world around them; their sense of power or powerlessness over their individual and collective destiny; and their enthusiasm for change relative to their sense of insecurity or nostalgia for the past. These concepts link closely to either globalist or localist identity and attachment, and people's views about personal liberty, reciprocal obligations and the potential of democratic action.

Analysing public attitudes on these issues helps to build up a more nuanced and less fixed perspective on the state of the British electorate than is often portrayed in the media and mainstream political lexicon. This dialogue remains obsessed with catchy yet meaningless mythologies: ‘Worcester woman’, ‘Basildon man’, and ‘Motorway man’ only really exist in newspaper editorial meetings. Indeed there seem to be good reasons to question the explanatory power of simple constructs like ‘core’ and ‘swing’ voters – as well as the whole concept of a fixed and identifiable ‘centre-ground’. These are clearly not meaningless labels – the electorate is not entirely free floating or promiscuous – but they narrow and caricature political debate.

One of the central lessons from the evidence presented here is that the values and interests that people bring to bear when considering political issues are non-linear and evolving. We all hold views that are often irrational and contradictory – influenced by our background and life situation, but not determined by them. So, why would we think voters at large are any different?

The challenge for political parties and movements of both left and right is to understand and become more comfortable with these paradoxes. The reward for doing so could be a new found freedom, honesty and credibility. It could allow parties and movements to feel less constrained by the perceived need to seek out a ‘mythical median voter’ on given issues.

Earlier in the year, Open Left published ‘*We Mean Power*’, a collection of essays setting out a new ideological direction for the centre-Left[2]. This agenda – driven by the goal of making people more powerful and society more reciprocal – is based on principle not pragmatism. It is based on the sort of society we want Britain to be, not an attempt to read the polls and reflect back what we think people want. There is nothing in the demographic and attitudinal data presented here that suggests this may be a forlorn task.

In developing this agenda, this paper underlines the challenge of combining a clear political identity and purpose with being rooted in, and engaged with, the people. While there are major limitations to polling-driven policy content, understanding people's values and interests is invaluable in effectively arguing, persuading and organising in support of political goals. It also, potentially, has important lessons for political style and the way in which democratic politics is conducted – both inside and outside formal party structures. Political movements and parties that are rooted in people's lives and experiences are likely to be more reflective of their values and interests – and more effective in realising their political goals.

The data and evidence presented here is drawn from a wide range of existing sources; collecting together what we know about who the British people are and what they care about. The picture presented is incomplete, with many questions left unanswered and hypotheses untested. We hope to conduct new polling to delve deeper into the underlying drivers of people's values, interests and attitudes – to better understand their political implications. Our goal is to inform an evidence-based debate about the possible routes to assembling and maintaining a coalition of support for centre-Left ideas in the generation ahead – and to do so in the spirit of optimism, realism and pluralism.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Early on in George W Bush's presidency, John Judis and Ruy Teixeira set about analysing how changes in US demographics might have a political impact on the future US political landscape.

Ever since the publication of Kevin P Phillips *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969,[3] there had been an assumption that US politics was biased in favour of Republicans. The Sun Belt, spanning from Florida to California, and the big farming states that abandoned the Democrats in the aftermath of 1960s liberalism, had given Republicans a decisive electoral advantage. In the next 40 years, Republicans controlled the White House for twenty-eight of them. By the mid 1990s, the balance of power in Congress had shifted to the right as well.

In reaction to this analysis, and the political reality that had developed, Judis and Teixeira argued that the future could be Democratic – pointing to trends in demographics, the nature of work, and geography as evidence.

Their argument was that if Democratic politicians were prepared to rethink the traditional political battlelines and narratives there was every opportunity for 'progressives' to dominate the coming decades of US politics. Growth in ethnic diversity, an expansion in the number of young voters, and the professionalisation of the workforce meant that Democrats could be competitive in states they had not been, under the existing political circumstances, for some time.[4] The plan was to capitalise on shifting demographics to grow the Democrats' electorate.

In the UK, shifting demographics played an important contextual role in the political changes that the Labour Party underwent from the mid-1980s. A growing middle class, deindustrialisation, and a less deferential and more diverse population were amongst the most important. Two decades later, it is time to reanalyse the demographic changes that are taking place and reconsider their political implications. While we take inspiration from the work that was done in the USA, the trends and consequences for the UK are different. And none are deterministic. Successful political movements and parties are those that are rooted in the lives and experiences of the people, but they also seek to lead not merely mimic them.

The following section sets out the headline demographic changes over the last couple of decades and the likely trends in the years ahead. A number of important shifts emerge relating to: ageing; social class, education and the nature of work; ethnicity and migration; and family and household patterns.

Many of these shifts are well known, but as they deepen, their political implications will grow in significance. Year by year they change the face of the British electorate – and the voters *through* whom political movements and parties operate and *to* whom they try to appeal.

An ageing society

There is a well-established trend towards an ageing British population, which stands in stark contrast to what is happening in the USA, where the so-called 'millennial' generation of 18-24s is exploding in size:

- By next year, the number of over 65s will outnumber the under 16s.
- The number of under-16s fell slightly between 1983 and 2008. Under 16s fell as a proportion of the population from 21 per cent to 19 per cent during the same period and is forecast to fall slightly further as a proportion between now and 2033.
- There are now 9.9 million over 65s compared to 8.4 million in 1983. By 2033 they will represent 23 per cent of the population, up from 16 per cent in 2008.
- Almost a third of this increase will come from a rise in the 'oldest old' – those aged over 85. By 2033, this group will have grown to 3.3 million, up from 0.6 million in 1983.
- There will be an extra 6.5 million over 65s by 2033 – almost equivalent to the entire population of London.[5]

The political implications of an ageing population are not clear-cut. Older people are more likely to vote and more likely to vote Conservative. Close to three quarters (73 per cent) of over 55s voted in the 2005 general election, compared with just under two-fifths (37 per cent) of 18-24s. Amongst voters aged 55-64 and 65+ the Conservatives lead Labour by eight and six percentage points respectively. This contrasts to younger voters, where Labour had a clear lead: 38 per cent compared to 28 per cent among the under 18-34s.[6]

However, it is ever more meaningless to discuss the attitudes, values and interests of 'older people', who are now such a large and heterogeneous group. While the overall political power of the over 65s will undoubtedly grow over the coming years, it is a power that is up for grabs and could be exercised in a variety of ways. Pensions and social care are clearly two issues of major salience, but it would be a major mistake to try to simplify the politics of ageing in such a one-dimensional way.

One aspect of an ageing society that is becoming increasingly debated is the question of intergenerational justice. David Willetts' book *Pinch* details the advantages that the post-war generation enjoyed, relative to those reaching adulthood today – especially in housing, education and pensions[7]. This will pose major political tensions over the coming decades which political parties and movements will have to navigate. Firstly, the costs of an ageing society are rising, at a time when the dependency ratio is growing. Secondly, the benefits of the post-war boom – free higher education, cheap housing, new middle class jobs, fully funded pensions – are far less secure for young adults today.

To illustrate this intergenerational conflict, when asked, "*On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the old?*", 70 per cent of over 55s believe that it 'definitely should be', whereas only 50 per cent of 18-34s feel the same.[8] Similarly, amongst 18-34 year olds, 31 per cent say education is their highest spending priority and 40 per cent prioritise health. By contrast, amongst the over 55s, only 19 per cent prioritise education and 50 per cent say health.[9]

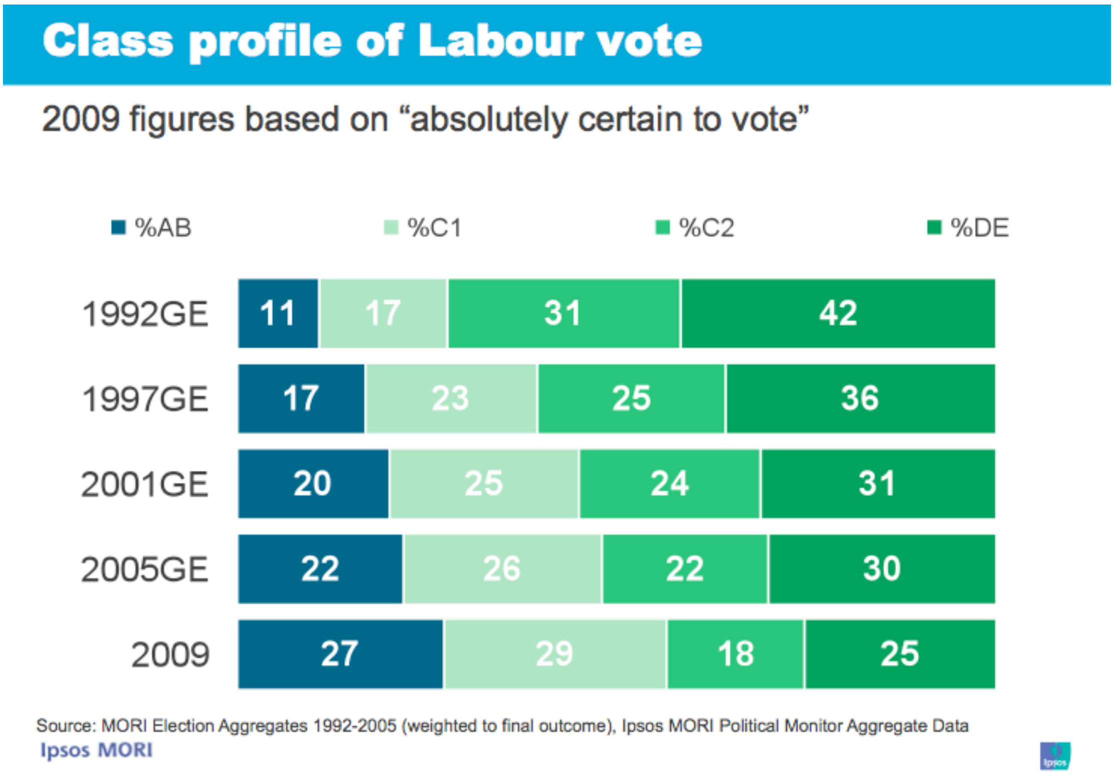
Understanding the complexity of attitudes, interests and values of the growing number of older voters – and navigating the competing claims for intergenerational justice – lie at the heart of succeeding in the politics of an increasingly ageing society.

Social class, education and the nature of work

Unlike ageing, there has been a less dramatic shift in social class trends – and their impacts on political attitudes and voting patterns – over the last two decades. Alongside the continued steady growth of middle class occupations and class de-alignment in voting patterns, there has be a significant rise in the professionalisation and education levels of women. This has been combined with the growth of 'knowledge workers' and the attendant shifts in the nature of work. The political consequences of these shifts remain up for grabs. They almost certainly mean that movements and parties can no longer rely on significant sections of the electorate voting for them instinctively.

Between 1991 and 2005 there was significantly more change in the class structure for women than for men. The proportion of women in the top two occupational classes (I and II)[10] increased from 30 per cent to 40 per cent - a more rapid growth than in the previous two decades. By contrast, the number of men in the top two occupational classes increased from 39 per cent to 43 per cent between 1991 and 2005. This is a considerably slower growth than had been the case in the previous two decades. Significantly, a greater proportion of the female workforce is now in Class II than the male workforce (though a greater proportion of the male workforce is in Class I). Part of the explanation for these trends is the greater upward mobility for women in recent decades – with a growing proportion reaching considerably higher social class groups than their parents.[11]

Alongside this combination of continuity and change in social class structures, there has been a weakening in the relationship between class and voting. Labour's support in 2005, for example, was pretty evenly distributed amongst social classes as the table below demonstrates:[12]



Class profile of Labour vote

2009 figures based on "absolutely certain to vote"

Source: MORI Election Aggregates 1992-2005 (weighted to final outcome), Ipsos MORI Political Monitor Aggregate Data

Ipsos MORI

There are on-going academic debates about the influence of class on voting. There remains a clear association between social class and where people place themselves on the traditional left/right spectrum.[13] However, this positioning has become less decisive in determining voting behaviour. In 1964, nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) of non-manual workers voted Conservative but this was barely a third (34 per cent) by 2001[14]. Labour's fall amongst manual workers has been less dramatic – from 64 per cent in 1964 to 61 per cent in 2001 – though this demographic has declined in number. Class still has a significant bearing on political attitudes and voting intentions, but it is far from the only factor. For example, one piece of analysis suggested that perceptions of leader competence may be twice as significant in explaining voting patterns as social class.[15]

Alongside changes in the class structure, there are changes in the nature of work that are likely to have important political consequences. The growth of the 'knowledge economy' is having profound implications on the structure of the economy and the way people work. The Work Foundation sees the spread of knowledge work as pervasive:

> "*It is a universal process, operating across all sectors of the economy-manufacturing and services, high tech and low tech, domestic and internationally traded, public and private, large corporation and small enterprise. In doing so the traditionally boundaries between sectors such as manufacturing and services are disappearing and previously unnoticed industries - such as the creative sector - have emerged as major employers, generators of added-value and exporters.*"[16]

The Work Foundation defines knowledge workers as those in the 'top three' occupational groups, i.e. managers, professionals and associate professionals. On this basis, they calculate that 'knowledge workers' increased from 31 per cent to 41 per cent of the workforce between 1984 and 2004, and will rise to 45 per cent by 2014. This trend is being driven by a growth in the demand, both globally and domestically, for more specialised and higher value goods and services. This encompasses both technological advances and the need for more personal and care services associated with an ageing population and higher rates of female employment.[17]

A further driver of the growth in knowledge workers – which has significant political implications – is the expansion of higher education. In 2006, 30 per cent of the workforce had been educated to degree level.[18] This will continue to expand given that 43 per cent of 18-30 year olds are in higher education. Similarly, in the decade from 1992, the proportion of boys achieving at least two A-levels increased from 16 per cent to 48 per cent. Amongst girls the growth was even greater: up from 20 per cent to 57 per cent.[19]

To understand the political implications of these shifts, it is necessary to consider the relationship between education and self-perceptions of work on the one hand and the concept of 'status' on the other. Status is concerned with someone's place in the social hierarchy. For example, a moderate income might be earned in an occupation that is highly regarded and which 'opens doors' socially or culturally. Teachers are a good example here. They arguably have a status that is more elevated than their place in the traditional social class structure would suggest.

This distinction between class and status can have significant implications for political attitudes. Research has shown that while views on the appropriate degree of government intervention and regulation in the market are related to *class,* attitudes towards the balance between liberty and authority are associated more to *status.*[20] A more professionalised and educated electorate could create a political demand for a more liberal, open politics. This is an area where the intersection between demographics and attitudes needs further investigation.

Ethnicity and migration

The growing number of Hispanic voters is one of the most significant demographic changes reshaping the US electorate and its politics. Growing diversity in the ethnic composition of British voters is nowhere near as large – or as uniform in nature – but it is important nonetheless.

- In 2008, around one in seven (16.2 per cent) of the population was non-white British. Just over one in ten (11 per cent) was foreign born, an increase from one in twenty (6 per cent) in 1981.

- The UK's ethnic population is very diverse. The largest single group is Indians who comprise 2.1 per cent of the population followed by Pakistanis (1.7 per cent), Black Africans (1.4 per cent) and Black Caribbeans (1.1 per cent). 'Other White' and White Irish together comprise 5.2 per cent of the population.

- A number of ethnic groups have a young age distribution and so are likely to grow in population size over the coming years. These include mixed race Britons, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African and 'Other Black' ethnic minority groups. However, these 'younger than average groups' together comprise only around 1 in 20 (5.9 per cent) of the whole population.[21]

The UK electorate will become more ethnically and nationally diverse over the next decade. The geographic spread of these trends is not uniform, so they will have differential impacts in different areas of the country. These will be concentrated in urban areas, such as Birmingham, Leicester and some inner London Boroughs. Recent forecasts have suggested that Leicester will become such a city in the next 12 years and Birmingham could follow by 2024.[22] The challenge for the centre-Left in these trends lies in maintaining bonds of solidarity and reciprocity, alongside celebrating the benefits of a more diverse society.

Changing family and household formation

Arguably the most dramatic demographic change over the last two decades, which shows no sign of abating, is the shift in how and with whom the British people live and form relationships. More people are living on their own; fewer are getting married and are doing so later, while more are cohabiting (and entering civil partnerships):

- The UK population grew by 9 per cent, from 56.3 million to 61.4 million between 1983 and 2008. Yet, during this period, the number of households rose by 25 per cent to 25.7 million.[23]

- Between 1981 and 2008 the number of single person households rose by 73 per cent from 4.3 million to 7.5 million. Around half of people living on their own are people over the state pension age – down from two-thirds in 1981. The major growth has been due to working age people living alone.

- The number of households is forecast to rise to 30 million by 2021. This is partly driven by the ageing society but is more a reflection of the increasing propensity of people to get married later, separate, or indeed never marry or cohabit at all. By 2021 single person households will account for a third of all households.

- Fewer people are getting married. The number of marriages in 1976 was 406,000, declining to 270,000 by 2007. The number of divorces is falling also. There were 173,500 divorces in 1991 but just 144,300 in 2007.

- Alongside fewer and later marriages, the number of cohabiting couples has increased from 1.8 million to 2.7 million between 1998 and 2008. There were 34,000 civil partnerships formed by the end of 2008 (civil partnerships became legal in 2005).[24]

This combination of trends – alongside increasing female employment – means that the notion of the nuclear family, based on a married couple of one male earner and one female carer, is now a shrinking minority. This means that there is no single or simple political appeal to the interests of 'the family' (if there ever was). The political challenge is to speak to the needs and experiences of modern families in all their diversity – especially the importance of strong relationships that underpin them all at their best.

The opportunities and challenges of shifting demographics

In many ways post war British society was more straightforward for political movements and parties of both right and left. There was a more clearly divided class structure, the population was more homogenous, and family structures were more stable. In the 1951 election 97 per cent of the electorate voted for either the Labour or Conservative party – and those votes were more predictably patterned, often mirroring people's class or occupation. By 2005 the proportion voting for the main two parties had fallen to 69 per cent and was much more fractured in terms of social class or work type and heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and lifestyle. The breakdown of this more certain and stable political climate was one of the factors which required the Labour Party to change from the mid-1980s – to reflect changes that had occurred in British society.

As the data presented here shows, the trends towards greater complexity and diversity have continued. While the demographic changes over the last two decades are arguably not as marked as in the 1970s and 1980s (and certainly are not as seismic as those taking place in the USA), they remain the shifting backdrop to British politics. Political movements and parties can no longer rely on the support of certain sections of the populations, many of which are becoming more heterogeneous themselves. Having said that, Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats retain strength among particular groups – and the notion of entirely promiscuous and free floating swing voters is sometimes overplayed.

The consequences of recent demographic trends for the politics of the centre-Left (and the centre-Right) remain uncertain:

- As the population of older people increases and becomes more diverse, is it meaningful to discuss the attitudes or interests of ‘older voters’?
- How might the growing political power of older people be manifested, particularly given the likely tussle over intergenerational justice that is ahead?
- What will be the political salience of social class and social status in the years ahead – in shaping political attitudes, party loyalty and propensity to vote?
- How will the growing education and mobility of women play out politically, especially in the context of the growth of the ‘knowledge economy’?
- Will greater ethnic and cultural diversity, alongside likely increases in migration flows, lead to political benefits for the Left or Right?
- How will more complex patterns of relationships and household formation affect the politics of the family?

Demography is not determinism, but it shapes the electoral playing field on which democratic politics is contested. The critical question is the extent to which political attitudes, values and interests are structured by demographic factors. To answer this question we need to consider how those attitudes have shifted in recent years – and the political implications of those shifts. It is to that question that we now turn.

ATTITUDINAL CHANGE

Successful political movements and parties are rooted in the lives and experiences of the people. They also provide a vehicle for the expression of their interests and values. This involves a process of both leading and listening. Or, put another way, both shaping political attitudes and channelling them. In his fascinating book about Barack Obama's run for the presidency, David Plouffe explained how the campaign used voter research, in this case, focus groups:

> *"We did not use them to make policy decisions. We used them to gauge how the arguments in the campaign were being received and digested. It was about communication, not content."*[25]

A strict distinction was drawn between deciding what the campaign thought was the right thing to do and understanding how best to argue for and persuade people to support those positions – and to buy into the 'spirit' of the movement. Coupled with a powerful grassroots organisation, this enabled the Obama campaign to maintain clarity of message and identity while also being rooted in the experiences and concerns of the people. This was a balance that Labour struck effectively in 1997 and sustained sufficiently to win again in 2001 and 2005 (while the Conservatives failed to do either).

The outcome of the forthcoming election remains up for grabs. Success for all parties over the coming months, and years, will depend on their ability to listen and lead. This requires political parties and movements to understand where the people are and what they think – but not to simply follow that, or become imprisoned by it. Part of the solution to this potential paradox is to organise and operate in ways that break down the chasm that has developed between the political class and the voting public. But it is also about challenging and re-thinking some of the tired ways in which political analysts have come to characterise and segment the electorate.

Based on analysis of a range of public attitudes datasets, the following section of this paper considers a number of issues, or axes, which seem to explain a lot about the interests and values of today's electorate. Perhaps even as much as the traditional left/right paradigm. At the moment, these are hypothesis for debate – which we want to test further through in-depth primary polling. However, if our contention is correct, it would suggest that the established ways of thinking about the electorate – for instance distinguishing between 'core' and 'swing' voters and the whole notion of a fixed 'centre-ground' – might be less powerful or accurate than has been thought. The political implications of this could be profound: related both to the space for policy innovation and the very practice of modern politics.

Optimism v pessimism

People bring perceptions of optimism or pessimism about their own lives and the world around them into the political world. These can drive political choices. Polling carried out around the time of the last European elections suggests that this divide plays a significant role in understanding the difference between voters who have stuck with Labour since 2005 and those who have not.

While there was virtually no difference between 'stickers' and 'deserters' in respect of their basic demographics, those who had left Labour were significantly less optimistic about the future. For example, only 35 per cent of lost Labour voters felt that their 'family will have the opportunities to prosper in the years ahead' compared to 60 per cent among the voters that Labour had kept. Similarly, 45 per cent of Labour's lost voters believed that their financial situation would change for the worse over the following 12 months compared to 29 per cent of the voters that Labour had kept.[26]

Separate polling suggests a majority (52 per cent) do not believe that their family will have opportunities to prosper in the years ahead.[27] It is not clear yet how far these views are linked to the recession, or are indicative of more enduring and underlying trends. There is also a fairly widespread sense of dissatisfaction about whether ordinary people can realise their expectations: 58 per cent see a large gap between 'what people like me expect out of life and what we actually get.'[28]

Perceptions about future prospects link closely to attitudes towards change. However empirically inaccurate, the Conservative Party's 'broken Britain' narrative is effective[29] because it taps into a sense of nostalgia and unease with aspects of modernity. A recent survey found that 64 per cent of people think that Britain is heading in the wrong direction.[30]

The proportion of people agreeing with the statement "I would like Britain to be the way it used to be," has risen from 46 per cent in 1999 to 61 per cent in 2008.[31] This includes 55 per cent of Labour voters and 66 per cent of Conservative voters. The proportion of people agreeing that 'Young people don't have respect for traditional British values' rose from 63 per cent in 1997 to 77 per cent in 2007 – though concern about the latest generation of youth is not a new phenomenon.[32]

Paradoxically, there is a degree of optimism when people are asked to comment on the future of the country as opposed to their own prospects. A recent Populus poll found that 60 per cent look to the future for the country with optimism against 38 per cent who look to it with anxiety. Half (50 per cent) see that our best years are ahead against less than half (45 per cent) who see them as already passed[33].

Globalist v localist

The traditional divide on the role of markets between Labour and the Conservatives has become much less sharp over the past two decades. In government, Labour has strongly defended open markets and argued for the benefits of globalisation. This has both shaped and reflected a shift against economic command and control. However, public concern about globalisation – and market forces more broadly – has not gone away, its focus has simply changed.

The question now is about power and where it resides. Can Britain chart its own course as a nation, or is it subject to economic forces beyond its control? Do we have to accept the market outcome or can democratic politics challenge and shape those that are unjust or unacceptable? Are people able to make a good life for themselves – get a good job, be respected at work, build a career and earn a decent wage? Can bonds of community resist the overbearing power of the market?

- Nearly two-fifths (39 per cent) agree that 'the ability of banks and companies to move money across borders seriously undermines the British Government's ability to manage the economy.' Just 14 per cent disagree.

- The same proportion (39 per cent) believe that 'big international companies are a threat to democratic government in Britain,' against 26 per cent who disagree.

- Corporate power and global economic forces are also seen as a concern. Over four-fifths (82 per cent) are concerned about the loss of British jobs to countries overseas.[34]

- In 2007 – before the credit crunch and recession – two-fifths (40 per cent) saw business and industry as having 'far too much' or 'too much power', up from 32 per cent in 1996.[35]

Alongside these views about the power of global economic forces in particular, and market power in general, are strong feelings of local attachment:

- Three-quarters (75 per cent) report strong feelings of attachment to their neighbourhood – emphasising the importance of place.
- Two-thirds (66 per cent) of people say that the friends and associations they have with other people in their neighbourhood 'mean a lot to them'. Just one in ten (10 per cent) disagree.
- Nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) say they regularly stop to talk to people in their neighbourhood.[36]
- Well over three-quarters (82 per cent) see their community as cohesive, with people from different backgrounds getting on.[37]

There are starkly divergent attitudes towards the implications of global economic forces and the importance of local attachments (which link to views on continuity, nostalgia and change). If the centre-Left wants to defend open markets and an internationalist outlook, it must take seriously the concerns of those who either do less well out of the globalised economic deal or feel it corrodes values and institutions that they hold dear. This suggests power and security are crucial themes – the ability of people, communities and the nation to shape their destiny and be resilient in the face of change. People's attachments are local but they have strong feelings of powerlessness towards global forces.

The paradox of immigration

The issue of immigration goes to the heart of the complex relationship between public attitudes and politics. It is an issue that has risen up the list of public concerns over the last 15 years. The reaction from some politicians, from across the spectrum, has largely been to try to evade it or exploit it. The challenge is to engage with people's views towards immigration – and the issues that underlie them – while being comfortable with their paradoxes.

- In May 1997 just 5 per cent of people saw immigration as one of the main issues facing Britain. By 2006, following a large rise in net immigration, over 40 per cent did.
- Significantly, while over three-quarters (76 per cent) see it as a problem for the country, fewer than a fifth (18 per cent) see it as a problem in their area.
- Over half (52 per cent) of the voters Labour has lost since 2005 see immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country compared with only a third (34 per cent) amongst those it has kept.
- In a similar vein, 45 per cent of lost Labour voters think that the Labour Party most wants to help 'immigrants and non-white Britons', when prompted to select two to three groups from a wide list (the largest choice). Just 15 per cent of the voters that Labour has kept agree.

However, despite these hostile views towards newcomers to Britain, there is also a degree of comfort and embrace for diversity – alongside intolerance towards intolerance:

- Nearly three-fifths (58 per cent) of voters disagree with the statement that they 'would rather live in an area where people are from the same ethnic background as me.' A higher proportion (63 per cent) of Labour voters agreed with this statement.
- Only one person in twenty (6 per cent) disagree that the spread of radio, TV, and the Internet worldwide exposes people in Britain to 'many good ideas from other cultures.'
- More people agree that 'multiculturalism makes Britain a better place to live' than disagree (46 per cent to 38 per cent.)
- Only a small minority (15 per cent) believe that employers should favour 'white applicants over non-white' applicants.

This combination of perspectives might initially seem contradictory, but only through a simplistic political lens. People's attitudes are not defined by single issues and we are all capable of having paradoxical views (often even on the same issue). Hostility to immigration can be rooted in racism or xenophobia, but it also cuts across attitudes to change, perceptions about fairness, and more practical issues like public service provision. Developing an effective political response requires understanding and embracing the complexity of people's attitudes and values.

Fairness and reciprocity

Public attitudes towards responsibility for solving economic and social problems suggest a desire for a balance between the collective (often the state) and the individual. A clear majority wants to see unfair market outcomes challenged, especially given the gap between rich and poor. However, there are clear expectations of the behaviour expected from people receiving state support.

Professor John Curtice has identified two parallel processes that occur in public opinion towards the level of taxation/expenditure and welfare support: the *thermostat* and the *weathervane*.[38] On the one hand, voters feel that there is a right 'temperature' of taxation and expenditure. As it increases, support for further tax and spend tends to decline. For example, in 1997, 62 per cent wanted to see more tax and spend. By 2008, following a period of sustained increases in public spending; this had fallen to 39 per cent. Less than one in ten (9 per cent) wanted to see tax and spending *reduced* in that year.[39] Moreover, there still seems to be resistance to cutting public spending even given the scale of the deficit. Ipsos MORI, on behalf of the 2020 Public Services Trust, found that only half of people think that public services have to be cut, with three-quarters believing that efficiency savings alone can avoid the need for cuts.[40]

On welfare and social policy Professor Curtice argues that public attitudes have shifted in response to government policy (the *weathervane* effect). His argument is that as the Labour government shifted its ground to more active and reciprocal welfare policies, voters have changed their views. It is certainly true that, in certain areas, attitudes towards people in receipt of welfare have hardened. In 2000, nearly six in ten (59 per cent) agreed that ‘cutting welfare benefits would damage too many people’s lives’. This fell to just over four in ten (43 per cent) by 2007. The proportion of people agreeing that if ‘welfare benefits weren’t so generous people would learn to stand on their own two feet’ has risen from a third (33 per cent) to just over a half (53 per cent) between 1996 and 2007.[41]

Professor Curtice’s weathervane theory is one explanation. Another might be that in a period of economic growth and wide employment opportunities, people felt that those in receipt of welfare should take greater responsibility for securing their own income without relying on the state. The gap between Conservative and Labour supporters on the question of whether ‘many welfare recipients don’t deserve help’ has declined from a 25 per cent difference in 1996 to a 15 per cent difference in 2007.[42]

There is broad support for government smoothing out market generated income differentials. Over three-fifths (64 per cent) disagree that ‘ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation’s wealth.’[43]. Over two-thirds (67 per cent) believe that it is the government’s responsibility to reduce income differences.[44] This suggests that Labour’s redistributive agenda has resonated with public perceptions of fairness – though only 39 per cent actively support ‘redistribution’ (as opposed to narrowing ‘income differentials’, suggesting a definitional issue).[45] It’s also true to say that support for welfare is context and contribution specific.

For example, in 2004, fewer than a fifth (18 per cent) believed that a single mother with a child under the age of five had a ‘duty to work’. In fact, a quarter (25 per cent) felt they had a duty to stay at home. By contrast, nearly half (47 per cent) believed that once a child is aged over five their parent should work. For single parents in work there is strong support for them receiving help with childcare costs: nearly three-fifths (58 per cent) in the case of a child over five and three-quarters (75 per cent) where the child is under five.[46] Fairness is a contested concept – and in the context of debates about welfare, reciprocity is central.

The power and possibilities of politics

The controversy surrounding the abuse of MPs expenses reinforced the declining trust in the political class. However, there remains strong attachment to core democratic ideals – and the potential of politics to be a vehicle for change.

Almost half of people (47 per cent) disagree with the statement that there is 'nothing more to democracy than giving people the right to vote in free elections' (27 per cent agree.). Nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) agree that 'in a true democracy, people not only vote, they can influence important decisions affecting their daily lives.' This suggests that despite a low degree of trust in politicians there remains a residual faith in the political process and belief that by getting involved people can make difference. Two-thirds (66 per cent) reject the notion that engaging in politics is 'a waste of time.'[47]

A recent report by the Hansard Society placed voters in 'tribes' in accordance with their engagement and trust in British politics. It found that nearly six in ten people could be placed in the following tribes: alienated/hostile (9 per cent), disengaged/mistrustful (24 per cent), bored/apathetic (8 per cent) or detached cynics (17 per cent).[48] This suggests that many people's hopes that through politics they can influence the decisions that affect their lives go disappointed.

The public reputation of politicians could hardly be lower. This is partly a consequence of the MPs' expenses scandal, but also a wider chasm that has developed between the political class and the people. This has eroded public trust and confidence in the efficacy of the political system as a vehicle for the expression of people's interests and values.

This paradox of latent hope in the potential of politics and current disillusionment with the practice of politics poses a challenge for all political parties and movements, but it is an even bigger problem for people who rely on democratic politics to achieve things that they cannot achieve alone. Politics is a route to power for the powerless.

Parties and movements on the centre-Left must recognise the need to share the task of solving society's problems with the people. That requires combining leadership with a more open, plural and emancipatory political project – where people genuinely see their potential to help them realise their goals.

Personal liberty and social tolerance

Over recent decades the British tradition of liberty and non-conformism has strengthened – and has been encouraged by Labour's agenda of social liberalism. Hostility to the state – or civil society – telling people what to do, can, in some ways, be seen as the corollary of concern about overbearing economic and unaccountable democratic power.

There is little doubt that the UK has become much more tolerant of difference over the last decade. This can be seen most obviously in shifting attitudes towards homosexuality. In 1996, 40 per cent disagreed with the statement that 'homosexual relations are always wrong' (34 per cent neither agreed or disagreed). By 2006 this had increased to 52 per cent (with 29 per cent neither agreeing nor disagreeing). There is a generational effect at play here, with only one in ten (11 per cent) of 18-34 year olds believing that homosexuality is wrong compared to over a quarter (28 per cent) of over 55s.[49] Support for gay marriage has increased from 46 per cent to 68 per cent between 2000 to 2007, suggesting that equality legislation can play an important part in shifting cultural norms.[50] More broadly, fewer than 1 in 5 (17 per cent) disagree that 'people in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lifestyles.'[51]

The shift towards greater social liberalism is also reflected in views towards marriage, which show significant generational differences. Well over 8 in 10 people (84 per cent) aged over 65 believe that 'marriage is the best kind of relationship' compared to less than four in ten (38 per cent) of those aged 18-34.[52] People in modern

Britain increasingly have a 'live and let live' attitude and do not expect to be told how to live their lives by the state or society.

Respect for difference does not, however, equate to tolerance of people infringing the ability of others to go about their daily life in peace and freedom. For instance, over half (52 per cent) of the public disagree that 'convicted criminals need to be rehabilitated rather than punished.[53] Over a quarter (26 per cent) believe that they should be rehabilitated rather than punished. There are similar concerns about anti-social behaviour: nearly nine in ten (88 per cent) agree "there are particular groups of people in Britain who tend to treat others with a lack of respect and consideration in public."[54]

However, there is strong support for proactive measures to prevent anti-social behaviour. Nearly half (45 per cent) say 'activities for teenagers' is one of the factors that most needs to be improved in their local area (the highest category).[55] The challenge for the centre-Left is to combine a politics of personal liberty with a set of reciprocal values about the way people treat each other – and the shared responsibility to uphold those values. People want to give others a decent chance but sympathy declines once crime or anti-social behaviour has occurred.

The opportunities and challenges of shifting attitudes

Political attitudes – rooted in people's values and interests – are complex and contingent. While it would be wrong to argue that there is no such thing as 'right' or 'left' in modern politics, this principal cleavage is more complex than simply attitudes towards the role of market and state in the economy. From the snap shot of data presented here, it is clear that there are a range of important dynamics at play in understanding people's political attitudes: optimism versus pessimism; change, security and nostalgia; globalist versus localist; power and powerlessness (in politics and the economy); fairness, reciprocity and welfare; and freedom, liberty and tolerance.

So what are the political implications of this more complex picture of the core themes underpinning public attitudes? At this stage, we put forward the following reflections and hypothesis for debate and further testing:

- Political attitudes are not fixed. Over recent decades, the so-called ‘mainstream’ view about a whole range of issues has shifted considerably over the last two decades. It is difficult to determine the causes of these changes, including the role of politicians and political movements, but voters’ values and interests undoubtedly evolve.

- People are paradoxical. Political analysis that assumes people hold neat, linear or patterned views on any given issue or set of issues are probably mistaken. People do not fit into simple categories, where a view on one issue determines their view on another. As the immigration example shows, people can hold complex views on a single issue.

- The traditional left/right axis arguably has much less explanatory value than political analysis often assumes. This is partly linked to demographics and class de-alignment, but is also due to the more complex nature of ideological divides, beyond simply the role of market and state. People’s perceptions of power and their degree of optimism seem to be particularly important.

Each of these contentions requires much further investigation. However, from the evidence already available it seems reasonable to question whether the crude segmentation of the electorate into ‘core voters’ and ‘swing voters’ is really that meaningful. People hold a range of political views, which can contradict one another and which shift over time. This also suggests that the concept of the political ‘centre ground’ is more complex and dynamic than is often assumed.

None of this suggests that there are not parameters within which political action takes place – nor that values and interests are entirely randomly distributed. The task for political parties and movements is to strike the right balance: articulating a clear identity and definition, essential to persuading people of its case, and being expressive of the interests and values of a majority of the people, keeping it in the political mainstream.

To test these insights and deepen our understanding of the British electorate, Open Left plans to conduct primary polling to investigate the underlying drivers of political attitudes. In particular, we want to investigate four core themes.

1. People's hopes and fears for the future; exploring their sense of optimism or pessimism.
2. People's perceptions of their power and control over their lives and the world around them, both individually and acting alongside others to bring about change or realise their goals.
3. People's expectations about the role of government and politics (broadly conceived) to help them in bringing about change and realising their goals – and their experiences of this in practice.
4. People's views about political parties and movements – their perceptions of them, interactions with them, and hopes for them.

We will use the findings from this research to consider how the centre-Left should best argue, persuade and organise for its political beliefs and goals in light of the changing dynamics of British society. We believe this process should be informed by a sense of *optimism* that the goals of the British people and the values of the centre-Left are not antithetical; *realism* in basing its approach on where people are and what they care about, not as they simply imagine or hope them to be; and *pluralism* in understanding that there is no monopoly of wisdom and a need for a more open politics. This is the route to building an enduring and transformational centre-Left coalition over the next generation.

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NOTES

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[2] *We mean power: ideas for the future of the Left, edited by James Purnell and Graeme Cooke, Open Left/Demos, 2010.*

[3] *Kevin Phillips, The Emerging Republican Majority, University of Michigan 1969*

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[10] Class I is 'professionals and managers- higher grade; large employers. Class II is 'professionals and managers- lower grade.'

[11] Unpublished analysis by Professor John Goldthorpe.

[12] There are a number of different schema for attributing class. The most robust and comprehensive are the Goldthorpe schema and the ONS' NS-SEC categorisation. Those used by polling organisations have certain limitations, such as masking the behaviour of certain groups such as the self-employed. However, these limitations are not necessarily fatal and, in this example, are certainly not.

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