

DEMOS

THE NEW DEAL

HOW TO REPAIR THE BROKEN
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE
AND CITIZEN

POLLY CURTIS



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DEMOS

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. Our mission is an upgraded democracy, with a new deal to mend the broken relationships between the state, institutions, and citizens.

This paper sets out the need for this new deal to end the current democratic doom loop through practical reforms to how democracy is practised. Four further papers will follow, setting out more on the new deal for **Everyday Democracy**, **Public Service Reform**, the **Citizen Economy** and **Resilient Information Ecosystems**.

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INTRODUCTION


The most consequential historic shifts unfold both very gradually, and in a turn of events. They happen too slowly for today's news cycles to record but too fast for academics to assess. This is the nature of democratic decline today: widely felt, frequently discussed; everybody knows it's happening, but we still might miss the moment to act.

For over two decades, analysts and institutions - including Demos - have warned of a deepening democratic crisis.¹ Early signs emerged in the early 2000s in falling participation rates, intensified after the 2008 financial crisis, and crystallised in the political shocks of 2016: Brexit in the UK and Donald Trump's first presidency in the US. The long slow crisis is now accelerating, with polarisation increasing around the world.

But when does a crisis become an emergency or a moment of collapse? Trump's second term in the US has been marked by the destruction of institutions, rules and of checks and balances on his power: the free press, independent civil society and universities have all come under attack, and international conventions broken. Arguably this has gone past a point of no return - democracy is so much easier to dismantle than rebuild, once its institutions have been eroded.²

Here in the UK I'd argue we've reached the tipping point from democratic crisis to democratic emergency. There is still time to act, but it is dwindling fast. What's more, we might not even realise until it's too late.

The core issue is not electoral fragmentation or the decline of traditional party systems. These are symptoms, not causes. It's not the way elections work, which are among the most trusted in the world. The deeper problem is a loss of faith in the way democracy is experienced everyday.



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¹ Bentley, T. Everyday Democracy: Why We Get the Politicians We Deserve. Demos, 2005. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/everydaydemocracy.pdf>

² Bianchi, M., Cheesman, N. and Cyr, J. The Myth of Democratic Resilience. Journal of Democracy, Vol. 36, issue 3, Jul 2025, pp. 33-46. Available at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-myth-of-democratic-resilience/>

There are three broad drivers of this distrust: the failure to deliver for people - to give them better public services, tangible improvements in their fortunes, policies they can feel; a lack of integrity among political actors; and a sense that ordinary people are not heard, represented or reflected in decision-making.^{3,4} This is not simply dissatisfaction with policy or democratic moments; it is disillusionment with the nature and conduct of the system. As a result, 38% of people now, to some extent, think “just let them burn” about our institutions.⁵

This disillusionment creates space for new movements that offer something traditional politics often fails to provide: a sense of purpose and hope. I saw that both at the 2025 Reform conference, where many people were coming to political events for the first time in their lives; and in the resurgence of the Green party moving a new generation of voters. New or insurgent parties can mobilise disengaged citizens not only through policy positions, but by offering affirmation, belonging and agency. The challenge is that established parties have largely failed to respond with an equally moving vision.

Democracy cannot survive on procedural legitimacy alone. If it is not renewed, it will gradually lose both effectiveness and legitimacy. If the underlying principles of representative democracy are to survive, together we need to find new ways to practice it, to earn back the trust and create a new deal between state and citizen.

3 Goss, D., Husband-Thompson, B. and Curtis, P. Trustwatch 2024: A Playbook to Rebuild Trust in Politics. Demos, 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Trustwatch-2024_Report_October.pdf

4 Trust in government. OECD, 2024. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/trust-in-government.html>

5 Tyril, L. et al. Shattered Britain. Making Sense of What Britons Want in a Country that Feels Broken. More in Common, 2025, p. 63. Available at https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/gh3prchb/shattered-britain-full-report_compressed.pdf

FROM CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE TO CRISIS OF CONNECTION

The democratic emergency is not merely the result of a crisis of trust and confidence - it is also a crisis of connection. The British state has become highly centralised, risk averse, procedurally complex and emotionally remote. At the same time, citizens are more diverse, more digitally informed and more expectant of participation. The demand for a dynamic state has arguably never been greater and its failure to deliver more keenly felt. State and citizens are not aligned.

Meanwhile, people are more isolated from one another, there is a loneliness epidemic and vital signals of civic strength, such as rates of volunteering, are decreasing.

Democracy is understood as a set of institutions and processes - elections, parliaments, and bureaucracies. But its hidden resilience lies in relationships: between citizens and the state, between institutions and communities, and among citizens themselves. These relationships are increasingly broken.

The result is a self-reinforcing “democratic doom loop”. When people lose trust in the system, governments struggle to build consent for difficult decisions. This leads to short-term, risk-averse policymaking, which further undermines effectiveness and trust. As frustration grows, political incentives shift toward polarisation and populism, deepening the cycle.

This is not only a normative concern, it is a practical constraint. Democracies that lack trust are less capable of making long-term decisions, managing trade-offs, or maintaining stability. Without intervention, this loop will continue to weaken both governance and legitimacy. A lack of trust is not just a symptom of decline; it becomes a cause.

The task, therefore, is not to defend democracy as it is, nor to discard it entirely, but to upgrade it - to rebuild the relationship between citizens and the state so that democracy becomes responsive, participatory, and effective again.

This paper offers some ways to upgrade democracy. It's not about the underlying machinery of representative democracy: elections, parliament and the rule of law; and the guardrail institutions - a free press, independent civil society and universities - that provide the checks and balances. But to preserve them, how democracy and its institutions show up in people's lives on a day-to-day basis needs to change. Democracy needs to be practised differently. It suggests a way to develop new practice to rebuild a political centre - to upgrade the everyday practice of democracy.⁶ **This is the only way to rebuild trust.**

⁶ Maniatis, G. Repopulating The Centre: How to Build the Practice for a New Political centre. Demos, 2026. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Repopulating-the-centre_paper_2026_march.pdf



THE ATTACK SURFACE FOR BUILDING BACK TRUST: **FOUR WAYS FORWARD**

The opportunity to rebuild trust in democracy sits at the intersection between institutions and citizens. It is in the relational moments and interactions, where trust can be earned. To diagnose the opportunity I think about the interface between state and citizen. Cyber security experts talk about the “attack surface”, the points in systems that are vulnerable to attack. I think there are four zones of attack, the spaces where state meets citizens, to repair the democratic relationship.

The first is **Everyday Democracy**, the democratic decision-making processes; the second is **Public Service Reform** to improve effectiveness and build trust; the third is the **Citizen Economy**, how the state engages with markets and the economy; and the last is **Resilient Information Ecosystems**, improving the knowledge that fuels the shared truths of democracy.

It is in these four zones that changing everyday practice and interactions can earn back trust between citizens and the state.

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

People want a say. They want to be heard. Participatory and deliberative methods improve policymaking by bringing citizens together to consider evidence, weigh trade-offs and exercise collective judgment. Used strategically, they de-risk delivery, unlock polarised debates and build consent around difficult choices. By demonstrating trust in citizens, the state can start to earn back trust. By improving outcomes, they earn back confidence in systems. It is about effectiveness as well as experience.

Demos is currently working with national, regional and local government as well as parliament on participatory democratic process on issues as wide-ranging as immigration, digital ID, planning, social care and local community planning. But this practice remains marginal in the UK because they too often have lacked political backing and are treated as experimental add ons rather than core infrastructure.

Some argue that these techniques should become a form of direct democracy, replacing parliamentary systems.⁷ I don't believe that's right. I believe in representative democracy and that to truly and effectively represent their voters politicians need to partner with the public to build consensus and support for longer-term reform. This in fact takes braver and stronger leadership, willing to share power differently in order to achieve better outcomes - while keeping the responsibility and accountability that is their mandate. But it makes for more effective delivery.

Our work focuses on how to embed participatory and deliberative methods into democratic decision-making and governance structures, redesigning institutions for these trust building ways of working. This could be in parliamentary structures via select committees, via government policymaking functions, through governance systems that anchor decision-making in the public, and running through the neighbourhood, local, regional and national structures. This is democratic abundance. Rather than snarling systems up it will empower and reinforce democratic leaders to make hard decisions well.

Part of embedding this in democratic infrastructure is redistributing power from the centre to local communities. Strong communities are essential to a healthy democracy, and indeed increasingly are shown to act as a bulwark against extremism. The strongest trust reserves sit at the hyperlocal level. Social capital is the hidden wealth of nations.⁸ But empowerment cannot mean withdrawal. The failure of the coalition government's Big Society agenda showed the limits of expecting communities to fill gaps left by the state.

Unlocking community capacity requires government to lean in differently, not step away. The public governance systems I describe above should be most powerfully implemented in local communities. In 2005 my predecessor at Demos, Tom Bentley, described something similar in a vision of public services and local governance as "platforms for self-governing communities".⁹ It's an idea that time is catching up with.

7 Hinsliff, G. Politics Without Politicians by Hélène Landemore review – could we get rid of Farage, Truss and Trump? The Guardian, 2026. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2026/feb/22/politics-without-politicians-by-helene-landemore-review-power-to-the-people>

8 Haldane, A. and Halpern, D. Social Capital 2025: The Hidden Wealth of Nations. Demos, 2025. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Social-Capital-2025_The-Hidden-Wealth-of-Nations.pdf

9 Bentley, T. Everyday Democracy: Why We Get the Politicians We Deserve. Demos, 2005. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/everydaydemocracy.pdf>



PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

Public services are where the state is most keenly felt - and where public frustration is highest. Command-and-control systems, understaffing and lasting impacts of austerity, have produced services that are impersonal, inefficient and poorly suited to the complexity of people's lives. At worst, the interface between state and citizen now feels like a fight for which citizen and public servant are constantly braced. Trust is eroded everyday.

Demos has made the case for *Liberated Public Services*: relational, preventative approaches that trust frontline judgment and work in partnership with citizens.¹⁰ It is inspired by the quiet revolution happening in bold and innovative pockets around the country. Evidence from areas such as children's social care shows this approach is more effective and more efficient.

There is a growing consensus among reformers that this is the way forward - but the agenda tends to die in Whitehall which is fine tuned against the shared power model this way of working demands.

Our focus at Demos now is on what the centre of government must change to enable this shift: a binding narrative - we have offered *The Respect Story* as a way forward; the culture, funding, accountability, and digital systems that will liberate services for reform.¹¹ Public services could be rebuilt around people's lives, from local areas up, powered by digital technologies that can help solve some of the communication and administration challenges and free up public servants to work more closely and directly with citizens in the way that they went into public service to do. If people are given clear outcome targets but more freedom about how to achieve them we will get the innovation we need. If we fund prevention and not just firefighting the results of failure, the state will work better for people and tread more lightly on their lives.

¹⁰ Glover, B. *Liberated Public Services: A New Vision for Citizens, Professionals and Policymakers*. Demos, 2024. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Taskforce-Vision-Paper_May.pdf

¹¹ Webb, T. *The Respect Story: A Political Narrative for Public Service Reform*. Demos, 2026. Available at https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/The-Respect-Story_Tom-Webb_2026.pdf



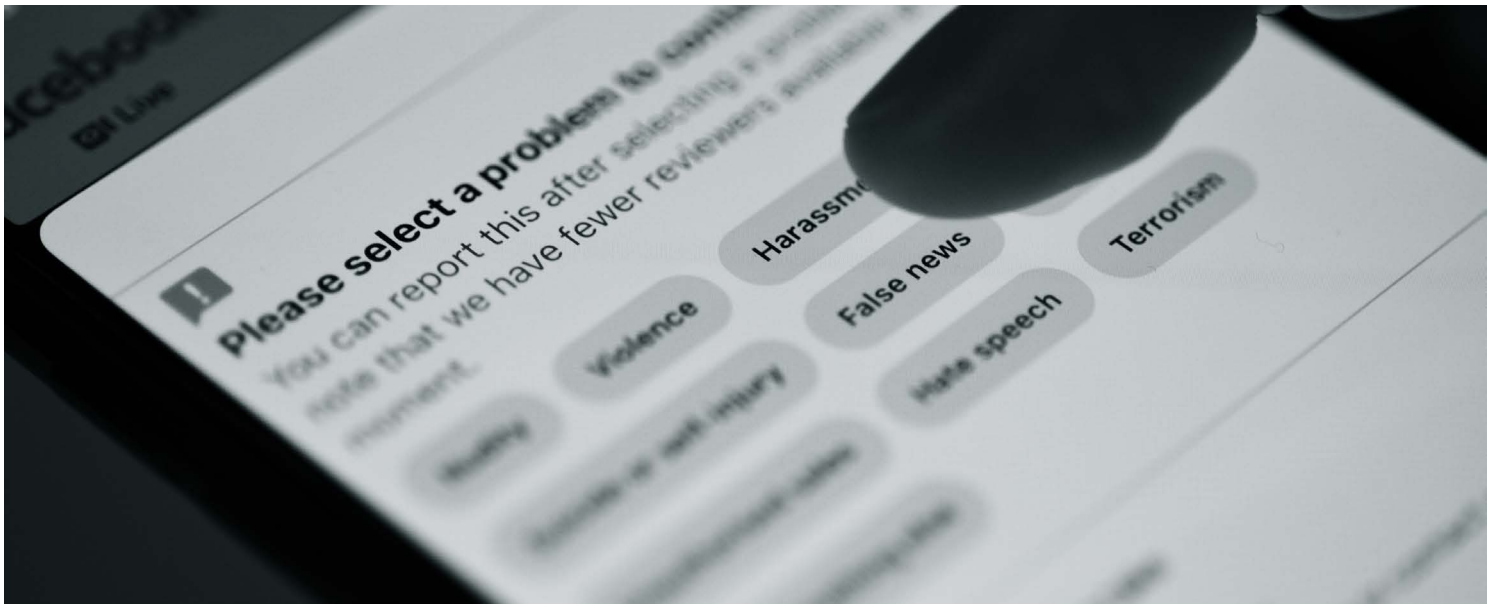
CITIZEN ECONOMY

There is no credible answer to the democratic doom loop without offering **credible answers to economic improvements**. Increasing inequality and rising poverty goes hand in hand with the rejection of the status quo and becomes a precursor to populism and authoritarianism.

The economy is stuck: it's struggling to grow, productivity is falling and people are suffering as a result. Our living standards haven't improved in years, while we can see wealth and power accumulating elsewhere, and we don't believe the government can help. The results are patently unfair to people: post-Crash precarity, intergenerational unfairness, the threat of AI especially to new entrants to the job market, the impact on inequality of soaring asset prices alongside stagnant pay. The list goes on.

The underexamined problem is that Britain's economic settlement has been designed around people as passive 'consumers' or disempowered workers rather than active 'citizens' - that is, complex political and moral agents with community ties and a national identity. By relegating citizens to passive beneficiaries of or contributors to the economy, consecutive governments have operated without the democratic legitimacy to navigate hard economic trade-offs.

To rebuild trust between citizens and state, Demos is working to design a new economic deal, focusing on transforming the role people play across each of the economy's core pillars: labour, capital, markets, and fiscal transfers. Not tinkering at the edges, but systematically redesigning each component, securing national prosperity according to parameters set by citizens themselves.



RESILIENT INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS

Democracy depends on the quality of its information environment, which is increasingly polluted. Foreign interference, weakened journalism and polarising platforms have undermined trust and shared understanding. This is an integral part of the democratic doom loop, disrupting relationships between state and citizen and hastening decline.

Too much of the conversation about improving information environments has focused on fake news and mis- and disinformation - how to stop the “bad stuff”. Not enough has been focused on how to get high quality, trusted information to people when they need it - the “good stuff”. How can a free and fair press be more sustainable - particularly at a local level? How might algorithms be used to better distribute vital information when it’s needed? How can people be engaged as active citizens in how they engage and share information?

Without shared narratives, shared truths, society can’t make decisions together, can’t navigate elections, and can’t trust its own democracy. We can’t have a democracy without shared knowledge.

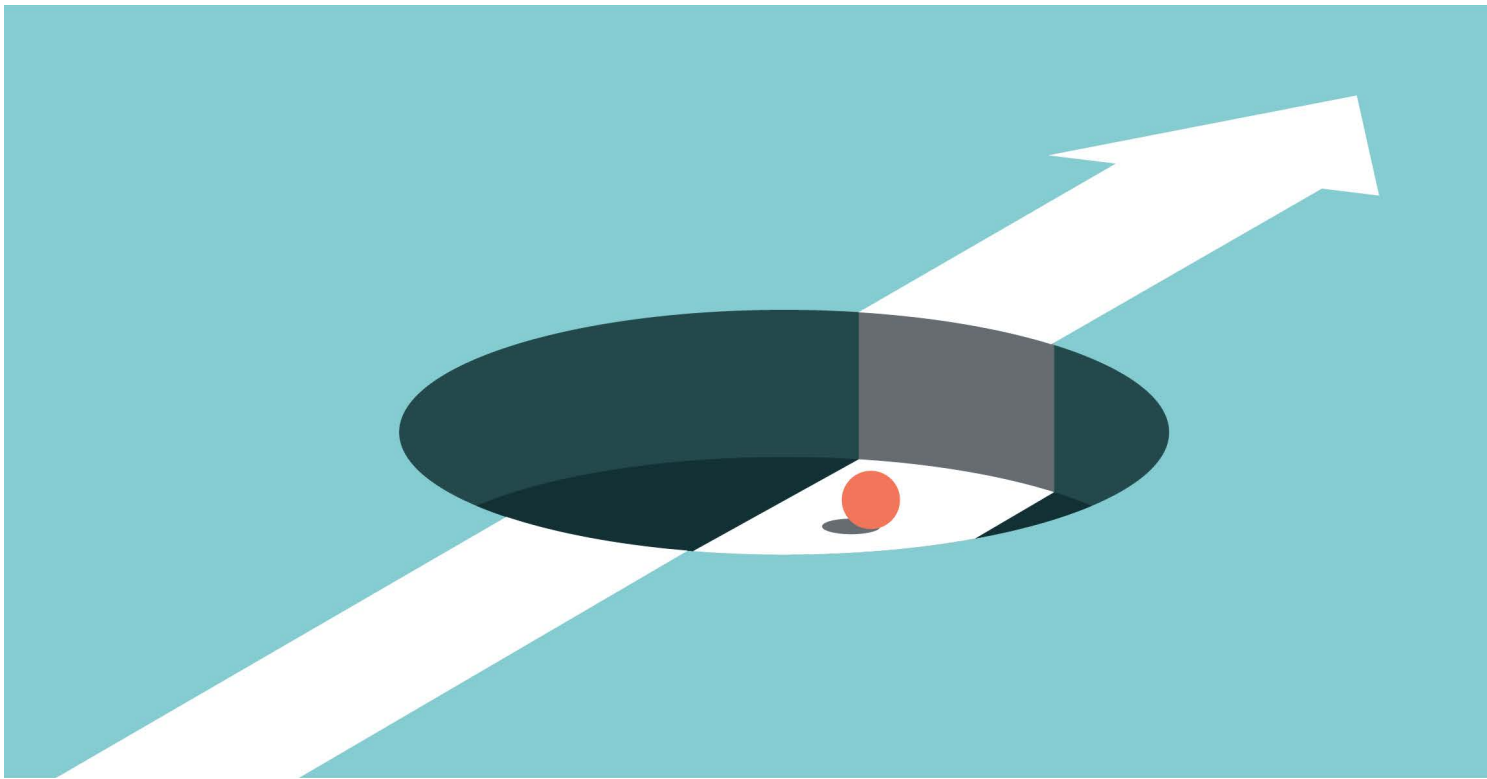
Beyond tackling mis- and disinformation, the government must strengthen what Demos calls epistemic security: the knowledge supply chains that democratic resilience relies on. Information security is now national security.

Demos is working to design and advocate for more resilient information supply chains that are transparent and accountable and enable citizens to effectively deliberate and fairly hold power to account. We evidence and design practical policy, regulation and practice to strengthen the information ecosystem. This spans from advocating for public service media, the sustainability of local news and the prominence of reliable information in algorithms; to protecting against mis- and disinformation and online harassment during elections, such as deepfakes, bots and harmful foreign interference.

UPGRADING DEMOCRACY: **A STRATEGY**

These four zones of attack I outline above are not exhaustive. Others will argue for electoral reform, new rules to tackle the appalling decline in ethics and standards in recent years, for party funding and who buys influence in politics needs addressing. They are right. But Demos's unique contribution is to focus on the everyday practice of democracy to rebuild trust. It is about rebuilding the relationships that make democracy work.

Upgrading democracy requires recognising that partnering with citizens is not a threat to effective government - it is a condition of it. Improving the listening and involvement of people in our democratic institutions, driving more relational and effective public services, a citizen-centred economy, and fuelling it with better information supply chains, offers people a different experience of the state. It will help build the social capital and civic strength that a healthy democracy craves. In each of the four zones there is recognition of the problems and occasional or partial attempts to address them. But these ways of working must be embedded as the new normal practice of democracy, not occasional processes. Together, they demand a strategy.



WHAT'S THE THEORY OF CHANGE?

In civil society people worry a lot about theories of change - how you can achieve your organisation's goals. The theory of change was born of too many organisations pursuing admirable goals, with no route to achieving them because they are beyond the current system's ability to change. This is the key risk to democratic renewal. It seemingly demands a long termism that politics seems incapable of, and an altruism that is too often compromised. Who are the actors who can drive it? Politicians are conflicted by the fact that their survival depends on the current rules of the game, so the closer they get to electoral moments the less altruistic they can be.

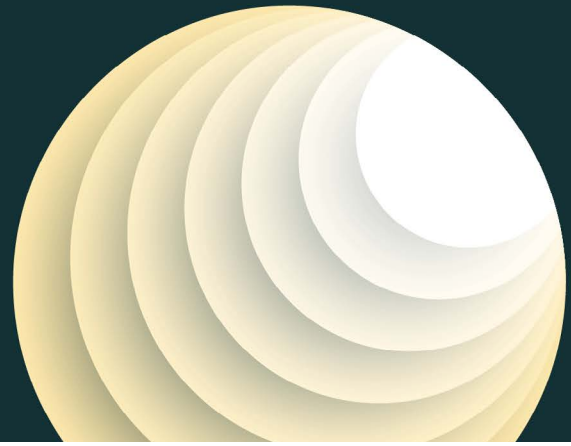
Politicians and institutions will only start to reform if the public demand is overwhelming. Citizens hold the trump card for legitimacy. I would say that all of the signs the public are sending - the disillusionment, the declining participation, the rising polarisation and declining social cohesion, and the despair they show - cannot be ignored for a moment longer.

So there is no democracy god to fix this for us. There are two potential routes to respond to this public dissatisfaction. First there could be a political solution for democracy. Reform and the Greens both claim to have a political answer. But they are at different extremes of politics, and neither shows much interest in uniting the country. Plaid and the SNP have their own answers, but in national contexts. But the political centre - Labour, Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats - does not appear to have any answer to the problem of repairing democracy at the moment.

Mainstream political parties need to contest this space. They need to level with the public and make a new deal to win back trust in which they truly practice democracy differently. It might feel like a side issue, but this country knows the democratic system isn't working. They feel it. A new democratic deal is an offer to treat people with respect, to listen to them and build a new future together. It is a political proposition.

The second route is that we continue in this era of democratic decline, the doom loop deepens, and we experience a new crisis - war, civil discontent or a collapse of vital services, perhaps. This is where democratic renewal might be born of a crisis. The "too late" scenario in which people suffer the consequences of a failure to act before the system can be reborn.

I'm still hoping for route one. Demos's agenda is for route one. Democracy is our cause, politics is the method and route to securing it.



EARNING TRUST WITH **A NEW DEMOCRATIC DEAL**

At its core, upgrading democracy requires a new deal between citizens and the state.

For citizens, this means more than the right to vote. It means genuine opportunities to participate, to influence decisions, and to shape the policies, services and economic forces that affect our lives. It means having the means to understand what is happening that affects our lives. It means being listened to. But it also means reasserting our responsibilities as citizens. We need to have an honest conversation about what responsibility we bear as citizens to take part, to be informed, to engage in public services responsibly or to make a fair contribution to the economy.

For the state, it requires a shift from control to collaboration. Governing must involve not only delivery, but also facilitation and trust. Expertise and leadership remain essential, but they must be combined with openness and humility. And it means being truly accountable when things go wrong.

Britain faces a clear choice. One path leads to a thinner democracy - lower trust, weaker participation, and increasing reliance on top-down authority - that is weak and ineffective. It leads to more instability, declining trust, and even long-term damage to democracy that is being seen elsewhere in the world.

The alternative is a deeper democracy - one that shares power, expands participation, and treats citizens as partners. This path is more demanding, requiring political courage and institutional change. But it offers something essential: renewed legitimacy that will make the state strong again. The mission of upgrading democracy feels dizzyingly big, hard and remote. But it is achievable through practical changes to how we practice democracy.

This country is not in a steady state. The world is showing us the pattern. We are in a doom loop. But democracy has always evolved. The question is whether it can do so now when it is most needed, or whether the moment will be missed. If it does, it can repair the relationship between citizens and the state and build a system fit for the future. **This is the hopeloop.**

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DEMOS

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At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

Demos is an independent, educational charity, registered in England and Wales. (Charity Registration no. 1042046)

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