Westminster model?
Lessons for Britain from the Everyday Democracy Index

Paul Skidmore

As she tumbles down, down, down the rabbit hole at the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice decides she must be getting near the centre of the earth, and wonders what Latitude or Longitude she has got to. 'Alice had no idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but thought they were nice grand words to say.'

Something similar is happening in British politics. As they tumble towards the centre-ground, political parties are starting to borrow so many 'nice grand words' from each other that it is increasingly unclear what any of them mean. Take the word 'progressive'. For the last four years, Gordon Brown has repeatedly expressed his desire to forge a 'progressive consensus' in Britain, a new conventional wisdom rooted in social-democratic values yet resilient enough to outlast the lifetime of Labour in power. But last December, two Conservative MPs declared that it was time to end Labour's monopoly on the word 'progressive', claiming it now belongs to the Tories (Clark and Hunt, 2007). Not so fast, said new Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg (2008) a month later: 'Our party will always be on the progressive side of the argument.'

Perhaps the most flagrant example of this political cross-dressing surrounds the concept of 'empowerment'. The opposition parties decided early on that power would be the stick with which they would seek to beat Gordon Brown, exploiting his reputation for centralising decision-making authority in the Treasury. Both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have sought to paint Brown, his government and indeed the left as a whole as instinctively statist, preferring to place power in the hands of the centre rather than the local, of bureaucrats rather than ordinary people, while casting their own parties as natural champions of individual and community empowerment. 'My politics is about empowering people', Conservative leader David Cameron declared at the launch of the Power Inquiry's report into the state of British democracy.

> Not in a vague sense of making them feel better. I'm talking about something much more specific. The right to make decisions about the things that affect their lives. (Cameron, 2006)

In his early speeches as party leader Nick Clegg has struck a decidedly similar note, calling on Liberal Democrats to embrace

> a wider understanding of empowerment: not just of local authorities and politicians, desirable though that is, but of pupils, patients and parents too. Individual power must

> be an everyday thing, not just reserved for the moment a vote is cast in the ballot box. (Clegg, 2008)

The result is that the fight for the centre-ground is increasingly a battle to define the terms of what might be called 'a politics of empowerment'. Drawing on new cross-national research recently published by the think-tank Demos, my purpose in this essay is to briefly sketch out how we have got to this point, why it matters, and what lessons the left in Britain can learn from abroad.

How we got here

Over the last thirty years, citizens have become increasingly disengaged from formal democratic politics and disillusioned with politicians. This is by no means a uniquely British phenomenon: it has occurred to a greater or lesser extent in virtually all advanced democracies. Britons may be less likely to vote, trust politicians, or join political parties than they were thirty years ago. But so too are Italians, Germans, Finns, Austrians and many others (Dalton, 2004).

The causes of this decline are hard to pinpoint. But the similarity across countries in the timing and the magnitude of the public's growing disenchantment with representative democracy helps to rule a few things out. In particular, it casts doubt on explanations which locate the source of the problem in specific events, crises and scandals thought to have been particularly toxic to public confidence: the Westland affair in the 1980s, 'cash for questions' in the 1990s, the David Kelly/Iraq Dossier scandal and 'cash-for-peerages' in the 2000s. Commentators in other countries reach for their own list of headline-grabbing scandals. As Dalton (2004) notes this is precisely what makes such 'proper noun' explanations unconvincing: the similarity of the cross-national trends points to cross-national causes.

The same logic appears to rule out explanations which focus too heavily on the character of particular political institutions. More proportional voting systems, more accountability of the executive to parliament, and more power devolved to local government are frequently touted as solutions to Britain's democratic malaise. Whatever arguments there may be in favour of such reforms, and there are many, there is no escaping the fact that many countries whose political systems already include such features have not escaped the problems of democratic disengagement experienced here in Britain.

A different, more plausible category of explanation locates the origins of the problem of political disengagement in widespread changes in social values associated with rising affluence and economic development in mature and maturing democracies. These changes in social values, which have been carefully documented by political scientist Ronald Inglehart and his collaborators (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005), have contributed to democratic disengagement in several ways.

First, they have made citizens a lot more used to getting their own way. Some dismiss this as the triumph of a shallow consumerism (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005), but it reflects a deeper, and more commendable, desire for greater personal autonomy and self-expression – a desire that has been at the root of the left's emancipatory agenda for a century.

Second, as the urgency of people's immediate material needs has receded, the demands placed on government have become much more varied. While the 'pocketbook politics' issues of jobs and taxes remain important, they have been joined by a broader array of 'post-materialist' concerns for protecting the environment, securing individual rights and freedoms, and defending particular social and cultural identities. Amid this growing diversity, governments have found it harder and harder to keep everyone happy.

Third is the familiar decline in deference to traditional forms of authority. This might be less challenging if it were accompanied by a decline in public expectations about what such authority can achieve. But in fact the reverse is true: we expect more, not less, from government (Page, 2006).

Taken together, these changes point to the paradox at the heart of the current democratic malaise: people's attachment to democratic values – to the principle of self-expression, to the idea of being 'authors of their own scripts' – has never been greater, yet this is precisely what makes their disappointment with formal democratic institutions all the more likely. There is a disconnect between personal choices which seem easy, immediate, and responsive and collective choices which seem difficult, slow and convoluted. It is this combination of a greater desire for personal autonomy and greater dissatisfaction with the capacity of existing institutions to deliver it that explains why the 'politics of empowerment' is emerging as such a central issue.

Empowerment and the left

Labour ought to have been well-placed to exploit this sentiment. Clause IV famously speaks of the party's commitment to 'a community in which *power*, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not the few' [emphasis added]. More generally, there is a long left intellectual tradition of seeing democracy and socialism as essentially two sides of the same coin, with socialism 'the extension of democratic principles into spheres of life which previously escaped their influence' (see George and Wilding, 1976). Historically, of course, that tended to mean the workplace. But it speaks to the left's broader concern with the liberation of human potential from the constraints imposed by class, poverty, neighbourhood or gender, and it is not hard to see how such a narrative could also have informed an approach to public service reform.

That after almost eleven years in office Labour does not have a more compelling narrative of empowerment partly reflects the familiar criticism that the government was too timid and too rudderless for much of its first term, and only coalesced around public service reform as its 'big idea' well into its second term. But it also reflects a broader miscalculation: namely, the tendency to compartmentalise questions of empowerment, so that while it has been an aspect (in some cases, an important one) of several different policy areas, it has not been a unifying theme across them. For example, the language of empowerment has long featured in the government's neighbourhood renewal agenda (e.g. in the creation of 'community empowerment networks' in 2001) – and there are welcome signs that this rhetorical commitment is being turned into a more concrete policy programme under Hazel Blears (DCLG, 2007). But opportunities to make connections between this agenda and, say, the mainstream public service reform debate have too often been missed, despite both ostensibly sharing a concern for giving local people more control over the places they live and the local services delivered in their name. In the case of other policy areas, such as the extension of rights to parental leave, flexible working and other part of the work-life balance agenda, the disconnect has been even greater.

In recent years, a slew of thoughtful contributions, especially from the younger generation of Labour politicians (Miliband, D, 2007; Miliband, E, 2007; Purnell, 2006), have begun to make up for lost time, seeking to interpret and apply a more rounded view of empowerment to the context of contemporary Britain. In his time as Minister for Communities and Local Government, and though his portfolio made it more tricky, to some extent while he was Environment Secretary, David Miliband perhaps came closest to articulating this more compelling, holistic account of empowerment, linking structural change and the devolution of formal political authority to a new focus on individuals' lived experience of power and powerlessness:

> We live richer, freer and less constrained lives. But the evidence suggests we are no more happy. And I believe the roots are a sense of powerlessness: the pensioner worried about anti-social behaviour, the parent juggling work and family, the second generation immigrant well qualified but suffering an ethnic penalty in wages, the disabled person still struggling against low expectations, all these people are in one way or another disempowered … [W]e face a clear challenge – if we want to tackle poverty, promote equal rights, strengthen community, we need to tackle the power gap in society. (Miliband, D, 2006)

Part of the problem, as James Purnell noted in a perceptive essay in 2006, is that a more ambitious agenda for empowerment requires not only a willingness to talk and think about it differently but also to challenge Whitehall's way of organising policy development, marshalling resources, and protecting turf through processes like the Comprehensive Spending Review (Purnell, 2006).

The timidity of the 2006 Local Government White Paper was a case in point (DCLG, 2006). 63 pages of Annexes designed to show how its proposals for local government reform gelled with the rest of the Government's programme in areas like public safety and health tended instead to reinforce the opposite conclusion: that a parallel vocabulary to describe empowerment, a parallel institutional architecture to govern it, and a parallel set of methods to deliver it, had been allowed to take root in different policy areas, and would not easily be dismantled.

Why it matters: lessons from Europe

To understand why developing a clearer politics of empowerment is so important, we can look to the results of a new study recently published by the think-tank Demos. The '*Everyday Democracy Index*' measures and compares twenty-five European countries on the degree of empowerment they afford their citizens. From the relatively traditional end of electoral and procedural rights, civic activism and democratic deliberation to the less traditional domains of family life, workplaces, and public services, it offers a comprehensive picture of the 'everyday', lived experience of empowerment in these countries (Skidmore and Bound, 2008). The preliminary results (summarised in Figure 1) make for striking reading.

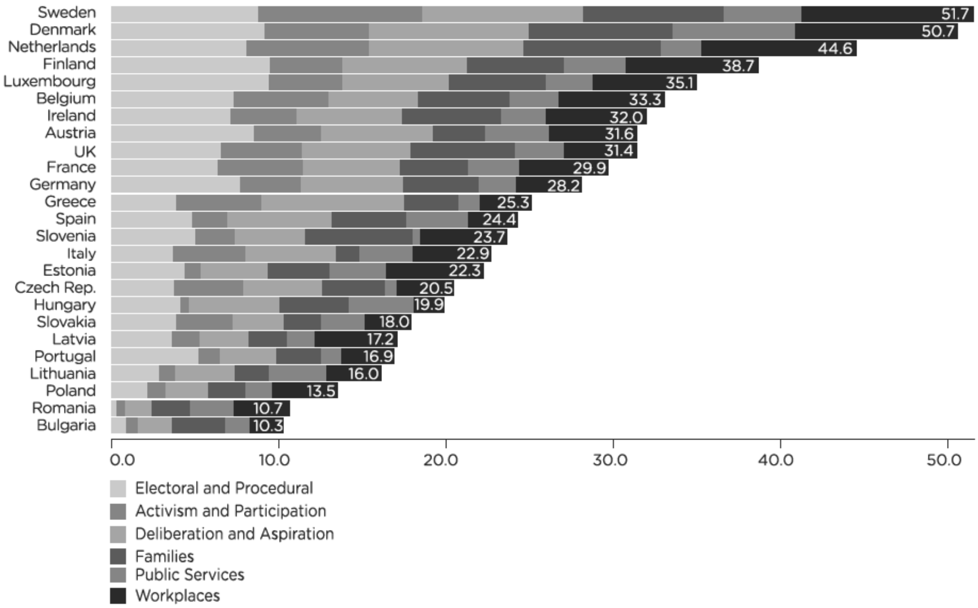


Figure 1: The everyday democracy index

First, there seems to be a very high level of consistency in how countries perform on these different dimensions, so that the countries with the highest levels of empowerment in informal settings like families and workplaces, such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, also tend to be those that have the healthiest levels of formal political engagement. In that sense, Clegg, Cameron and Miliband are all right to have drawn attention to the idea of empowerment as an ‘everyday’ experience, because people’s experience of empowerment within different, ostensibly very disconnected spheres of public and private life does appear to be mutually supportive.

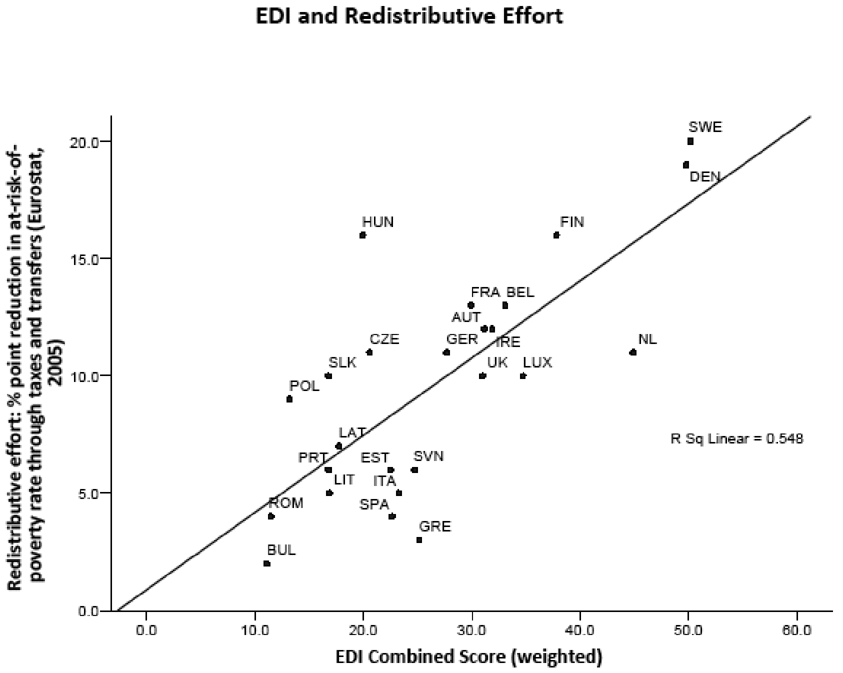
Second, this consistency manifests itself in a clear geographical pattern, with the Scandinavian countries generally near the top, followed by Northern Europe, Mediterranean Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe in approximately that order.

Third, this pattern provides *a priori* evidence against the claim, advanced by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, that bigger government is in itself antithetical to individual and community empowerment, since some of the best performing countries also have the largest government sectors. Indeed, our most direct measure of the vibrancy of civic life is actually closely correlated with the size of government. Our research does not allow us to do more than speculate on the causal mechanism here, but it is likely to present a chicken-and-egg problem. On the one hand, a bigger state clearly needs larger numbers of empowered citizens who feel mobilised and committed to defending it; on the other hand, a more activist state may be what contributes to this sense of empowerment in the first place. It is also possible that there are ‘third variable’ explanations too, such as trade unions: given the role that trade unions have historically played both in mobilising social movements and in securing political support for government programmes, it is probably not coincidental that countries with higher levels of trade union density tend to do better on our measure of empowerment. Whatever the explanation, the key lesson is that shrinking government is no panacea for empowerment; on the contrary, an enabling state can promote, not inhibit, citizens' sense of personal and collective possibility.

Finally, there is a very strong statistical connection between countries' scores on the *Everyday Democracy Index* and other indicators of national success. For example, at an individual level, there is a well-observed relationship between happiness and what psychologists call 'locus of control' – whether individuals believe events are within their control or determined by external forces – and something very similar also seems to be true at the national level, with empowerment as measured by our Index closely correlated with aggregate levels of life satisfaction.

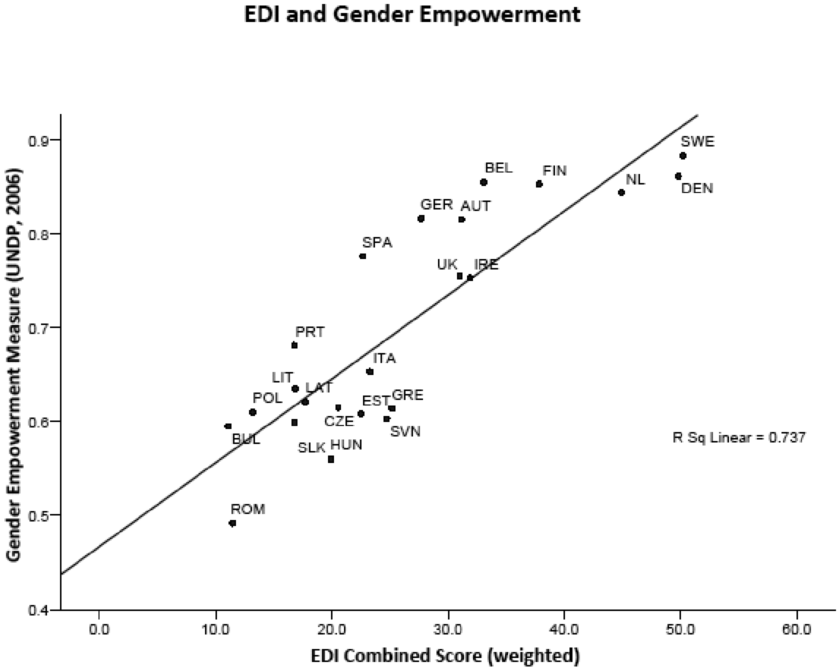
Perhaps most intriguingly, there is also a close relationship between our Index and measures of social and gender equality. Figure 2 plots countries' *Everyday Democracy Index* score against a measure of redistributive effort – that is, the amount of market income poverty that government manages to address through taxes and transfers. Figure 3 plots this score against the UN's measure of Gender Empowerment. In both cases, there is a clear positive relationship. Again, whether this is cause or effect, or a bit of both, remains to be seen. Given that we also know that, contrary to the predictions of median voter theory, more egalitarian societies end up being more supportive of redistribution than less equal ones, it is likely that equality and empowerment are at least partly mutually reinforcing. The key point is that everyday experiences of empowerment and the enlargement of the scope for collective do seem to go together.

Figure 2: Everyday democracy and redistribution



EDI and Redistributive Effort

Figure 3: Everyday democracy and gender empowerment



What the left can learn

Of all the challenges facing the Labour government after nearly eleven years in power, changing the way people feel about the possibilities of collective action is among the most difficult. One of the perils of incumbency is that dissatisfaction with the system becomes harder to blame on someone else. Yet my argument in this article has been that transforming people's perceptions of democratic empowerment – as they experience it in their everyday lives – is vitally important to the achievement of many of the goals the left holds dear. Gordon Brown has acknowledged as much: 'We will not build a progressive consensus,' he said several years ago, 'unless we address this disaffection from our current political system' (Brown, 2004). In an attempt to be true to his word, one of his first acts as Prime Minister was to publish an impressive and wide-ranging Green Paper on 'The Governance of Britain', promising to complete and extend the constitutional reform agenda that Labour has inconsistently pursued. But however laudable these efforts, it would be a mistake to think that institutional fixes alone are enough. In the long-term, the goal must be to marry this restructuring of formal political institutions to a broader agenda for empowering individuals in the everyday domains in which they actually live their lives.

The challenge facing Labour is not that it is short of ideas about what such an agenda might look like, both from within and outside government: from plans to roll out participatory budgeting processes in local authorities (DCLG, 2007) to tax and benefit reforms to benefit the working poor (Cooke and Lawton, 2008) to greater use across public services of the personal budgets pioneered by 'in Control' in social care (see

Leadbeater et al, 2008). The key issues instead relate to ambition, coherence, and politics.

By *ambition*, I mean both retaining its level of ambition in some areas, such as the child poverty target, and increasing it in others. For example, research consistently shows that employees' sense of empowerment within the workplace has a massive influence not just on how much they enjoy their job but even how healthy they are (Coats, 2007). Yet for all its achievements in improving the availability of jobs, the government has not made the *quality* of work a political or policy priority.

By *coherence*, I mean both doing a better job of articulating a vision of empowerment that connects the dots across policy areas, and of confronting the bureaucratic obstacles to realising such a vision. Gordon Brown should not just stand his ground in the fight that David Cameron and Nick Clegg have chosen to pick; he should demand a more collaborative effort from his government in helping him to win it.

By *politics*, I mean that Labour has to be absolutely clear about the practical and philosophical dividing lines that separate its approach to empowerment from that on offer elsewhere. James Purnell's formulation – that empowerment 'doesn't just mean being free to do, it means having the power to do' – seems a good place to start (Purnell, 2006). The argument has to be won that, under the right conditions, the state can be a means to enhance personal freedom *and* collective possibility, not simply a choice between the two. The cross-national evidence I have briefly described here may make some small contribution to building that case. This is fast becoming the fundamental division in British politics: the language of empowerment may increasingly be the same, but the politics behind the grand words are very different.

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