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HAS CONSTITUTIONAL

REFORM 'RECONNECTED'

VOTERS WITH THEIR

GOVERNMENT?

'his Briefing examines what impact Labour's programme of constitutional reform has had on attitudes towards the political system. It asks whether the reforms have, as their jesigners hoped, 'reconnected' citizens with their government. To answer this question, we draw on various questions asked as part of the British Social Attitudes and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys in summer 2000.

Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd

Introduction

For many years, critics have argued that Britain's democratic system is atrophying. They have claimed that citizens are able to exert only weak control over a system of government that finds it difficult to meet popular needs and demands because of its centralised nature. But in 1997, the Conservative government, whose leader, John Major, had enthused about the traditions and institutions of British life, was replaced by a Labour administration which embraced calls for the reform of many of those same institutions. For example, less than a year before becoming Prime Minister, Tony Blair argued:

"Changing the way we govern, and not just changing our government,
is no longer an optional extra for Britain. So low is public esteem

This Briefing examines what impact this programme of

are governed. And our own previous work also gave reason to believe that the reform programme might have a favourable impact on political trust. This is because throughout the 1990s, those with lower levels of political
trust were, for the most part, more likely to
have a favourable view about constitutional
reform than those with higher levels of trust
(Curtice and Jowell, 1995,1997). We therefore
surmised that perhaps their trust would be
w, restored should constitutional reform be implemented.

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But of course implementing constitutional
reform could only help restore public
confidence in Britain's system of government if
people actually welcome its impact in practice.

Table 1 shows what impact people think four examples of constitutional reform have of gove cnfParlia

Our second way of examining the impact of constitutional reform on political trust is to compare what has happened in a part of Great Britain that has experienced high profile constitutional change with another part that has not. As we have already suggested, the most obvious example is devolution; introduced to a significant extent in Scotland but not in England. If devolution has restored confidence in government, we should find more favourable trends in trust in Scotland than in England. But, as Table 3 reveals, trends in trust have almost been identical in

Scotland and England over the course of the last three years.

So it appears that Labour's programme of constitutional reform has indeed done little or nothing so far to increase people's confidence in how they are governed. But these figures should not necessarily be regarded as the public's final word on the reforms. After all, advocates of reform might reasonably argue that it will take time for its benefits to become apparent. Indeed, the UK government's freedom of information legislation had not even come into force by the time of our survey.

Alternatively, advocates of reform might be tempted to argue that its inability to increase people's confidence in government reflects its failure to go far enough. In particular, some point to the fact that Labour has failed to implement the one piece of its constitutional programme that they see as having the most potential impact on the way Britain is governed;

Moreover, if it is the case that the current low level of trust and efficacy reflects a feeling that constitutional reform has not been sufficiently extensive, then we should find that trust has fallen more over the last four years amongst the one third or so who say they are in favour of changing the electoral system than it has amongst those who say they want to keep the system as it is. However, if anything the opposite is the case. For example, the percentage willing to trust governments at least most of the time fell by just three points between 1996 and 2000 among those in favour of electoral reform but by eight points amongst those wanting to keep the existing system.

Thus far, our analysis of the impact of constitutional change on public attitudes has proceeded largely by

Constitutional reform does not appear to have been the right remedy for the recent decline in confidence in government. But that does not mean that there is no remedy at all. In order to understand recent trends in confidence and participation we probably have to look at other political developments in recent years. Do governments deliver on their promises? Do politicians avoid accusations of sleaze? And does there seem to be much to choose between the parties? Arguably the answers to those questions has been 'no' for too many voters under both the Conservative and Labour administrations in recent years to encourage voters to go to the polls or to have much confidence in how they are governed. If so, the future health of Britain's democracy probably depends on whether or not this must always be so.

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Surridge, Paula (2001), 'Society and Democracy: The New Scotland', in John Curtice et a1 (eds.), New Scotland, New Society? Are Social an Political Tiesfragmenting? Edinburgh: Polygon.

Further details

The research reported here is part of a wider programme of enquiry into public attitudes towards government and the impact of constitutional reform on the links between citizens and their government. For further details, interested readers might consult:

Catherine Bromley, John Curtice and Ben Seyd, 'Political Engagement, Trust and Constitutional Reform', in Alison Park et al, eds, British Social Attitudes: The 18"' Report, London: Sage, 2001.

John Curtice, 'Devolution and Democracy: New Trust or Old Cynicism?', in John Curtice et al, eds, New Scotland, New Society? Are Social and Political Ties Fragmenting? Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

Social Research Council (grant no. L215252032) as part of its 'Democracy and Participation' Programme.

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