British political direction essay

The main assumption of this paper is that there must be a convergence of the socio-cultural base with the political regime in power.

If this does not exist, political legitimacy and stability will decline. In order to explain what has happened in the British political culture over the past few decades and decide what presently needs to be done, we must explain why it is that majoritarian two-party systems converge with a socio-cultural base that is mainly homogeneous and why consensus multi-party systems converge with a base that is mostly heterogeneous. A change in Britain's base has resulted in devolution in the form of regional parliaments and strong national identities. The advent of third parties destabilized the majoritarian system and produced a call for reform that will eventually move British politics towards a more convergent proportional theme. A homogeneous socio-cultural base is defined as one in which, on a left-right scale, the large majority of citizens are concentrated in the center. That is, on most issues many people will agree.

In this political culture, parties that deviate from the center will lose votes as they move left or right. As a result, parties will try to attract as many votes as possible by moving closer and closer to the center of the scale. In this system, no matter how many parties there may be, the two closest to the center will dominate theoretically. This trend is reinforced by the system of disproportional representation that is defining of majoritarian regimes. In Britain, the party with a plurality of the vote is translated into a majority of the seats or power.

This makes it impossible for any third party to gain influence in the government. You might ask how such disproportional representation allows for legitimacy in the regime. Because of such a homogeneous base and the centrist party tendencies that this fosters, the majority party will not differ that greatly with the loyal opposition. Although they may have no power to regulate government, they have a good chance at winning the next election. This is key to legitimacy in majoritarian governments.

They are not condemned to be the permanent opposition. There is a convergence over the rules of the political game and so disenchantment is not probable. On the other hand, in more heterogeneous nations the left-right scale is not as concentrated in the center. There are greater identity cleavages whether they are based on race, religion, or class. In this cultural atmosphere, legitimacy would be almost impossible for a majoritarian regime. Small pluralities would translate to large government majorities.

Thus greatly different interests would control the power at the exclusion of a large majority of the population. Disenchantment and loss of legitimacy in this situation would be highly probable. Such a heterogeneous culture is more suited to a consensus multi-party system because a disproportionably representative government would have no legitimacy. In consensus regimes, a wider variety of interests are better represented because it employs proportional representation. Although no single party has a majority, the cleavages that define this society are reproduced in that each differing interest is represented proportionally to its numbers. Thus, even though one party may have a plurality it cannot control large minorities.

They all must come to a consensus on policy direction. Legitimacy comes from inclusion rather than exclusion. Unlike in a majoritarian system, the parties differ so greatly that there is not enough trust between them to allow for a loyal opposition. As a result, the consensus model is based on the sharing of power and compromise.

The point to be made here is that both political systems work if they converge with the socio-cultural base. However, as in Britain, if the base becomes more heterogeneous and cleavages more prominent, there may be a need for change within the system so that legitimacy can be restored. During the 70's and 80's, some important changes in the socio-cultural identities of the British population allowed for the emergence of a third party with enough power to destabilize support for the Labour Party. These changes occurred specifically in the socio-economic base. The natural tendencies of state nationalization schemes to break down was beginning to be very obvious.

Government ownership tended to politicize wage negotiations and investment decisions. " (A&P, 204) Economic growth was lagging because of the underlying factor that such nationalized ventures have no true incentive or motivation to be profitable and competition simply does not exist. Due to the inefficiencies of the government in the public sector and its failure to hold promises of economic growth, state intervention in the public sector became less and less popular. There emerged a consensual theme that the market should play a more important role in directing the government. Privatization seemed to be a better alternative for stimulating economic

growth and innovation. The growth of this view was also due to the growth of certain segments of the middle class as a result of an increase in wealth.

Since they were professional business people who were not tied to the state sector, intervention was no longer as necessary or even desired. Unlike the post-WWII Labour government's socialist belief that the state is better at promoting economic growth than private enterprise, the prevailing belief now favored the opposite view. Privatization was justified in a number of ways. It was economically efficient because the market is better at determining production, prices and investment than civil servants. It represented a more conservative political ideology for smaller government. It was also obvious that private businesses are more consumer-oriented than nationalized management.

Finally, privatization gave a short-term financial gain to the government from the sale of public assets. (A&P, 204) This socio-economic cleavage is especially significant because it is basically the only area in which the two main parties actually differed on a regular basis. The socioeconomic issue dimension is the only dimension on which the main parties clearly and consistently diverge. "(Lijphart, 8) In 1979, the result of support for privatization and market rule became evident when much of the professional middle class defected from the Labour party and Thatcher was elected. The beginning of this change occurred in the early 70's when the Conservative government tried to limit inflation by controlling wages.

This sparked a coal mining strike and a subsequent election that produced a vote of no confidence in both major parties and a doubling of the Liberal

vote. Cleavages in the cultural (national) identity of the British people also had an effect on the two party system. Devolution became more of an option with support for a Scottish parliament as more citizens of the U. K.

began to identify with their specific nation instead of Britain as a whole. As a result, Nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland began to gain small, although concentrated, support in constituencies. Unlike the Liberal party's support, which was spread throughout the country, national parties were strong regionally although unable to translate that into national power. This, in turn, pulled votes from the Labour and Conservative parties though more so from Conservatives. Because this did not hurt their national power, the Conservatives began to look like they might create an electoral dictatorship from a small plurality at the exclusion of not only the Labour party but also a formidable Liberal and Nationalist contingency.

This was reinforced by the demographic movement of conservative voters to the country and Labour voters to urban areas. As a result, due to single member district voting systems, Conservatives were given a more disproportionate number of seats compared to their popular votes. The impact of these changes in the socio-cultural base could be seen in a weakened Labour party due to the rise of support for the Liberal party. The Conservatives were then able to gain a majority of the seats even though they were only getting around 40% of the popular vote.

In turn, as the Conservatives steamrolled to victory in next four elections, the legitimacy of its power was no longer as stable. To reiterate, " the exclusion of the minority is mitigated if majorities and minorities alternate in

government-that is, if today's minority can become the majority in the next election instead of being condemned to permanent opposition. " (Lijphart, 22) The advent of third parties in British politics has undermined the key to legitimacy because it has divided the opposition enough to allow for one party to hold power for extended periods of time. This would not be much of a problem if the cultural base were very homogeneous because policy would not differ significantly between parties.

However, with the leftward movement of Labour and the increasingly heterogeneous society, the opposition loses trust in majority leadership. These fairly large minorities in majoritarian systems will not remain content when they are continually excluded from power. The move in Britain towards a more plural social base is becoming divergent with the political system of government. Undoubtedly, some reforms need to be made to the British system. However, which reforms and to what degree they need to be made is another question. The three major changes that I believe are necessary include the creation of a bill of rights, House of Commons reform, and electoral reform in order to disperse power throughout the system.

Those opposed to a bill of rights for the individual fear that it may challenge the sovereignty of Parliament even though that is point of having one in the first place. The purpose of such a document is to protect the fundamental rights of the individual against the over-reaching arm of government. Britain's record of losses at the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg can only reinforce the need for a bill of rights in the U. K. where no such protection exists at all.

It would make it far easier and convenient for British citizens to hold Parliament responsible for violations of their basic individual liberties. In a world where government has a hand in almost every part of its citizens' lives, it is necessary in order to keep the democratic ideal of consent healthy. (Britain's Const. , 64) Some may say that it would give an undemocratic power to appointed judges over the elected representative body. The problem with this argument is that it fails to recognize that democracy is based on the consent of the governed.

Such consent cannot be freely given unless certain inalienable rights are protected. Currently, judges have no power to strike down laws that they believe to have violated these rights. To appease those who fear partisan rulings, it might be wise to open the selection procedure. However, without a written constitution that redefined the roles of Parliament and the courts, judges would not be able to strike down legislation anyway.

The point of enacting a bill of rights is to place limitations on the reach of government in order to further the notion of its legal-rational authority. Although the House of Commons has never been the center of power, it has recently become helpless in the face of ministers, the cabinet and the executive. A few party leaders at the expense of democracy dictate policy and the British people are aware of it. " The public believes by a majority of almost three to one, that Parliament does not have sufficient control over what the government does.

" (Britain's Const. , 60) Even so, the methods of debate that are employed have become increasingly ill suited to the issues at hand. Modern technical

issues that need a working understanding do not get far in this system. It is the duty of the opposition to oppose; however, due to the fact that the Conservatives and Labour now agree on most issues that used to divide them, the debates may not make sense. That is why the approval of legislation should be made by select committees that consult experts and lawyers in order to make amendments.

This would foster a better atmosphere in which to understand legislation while remaining in its traditional role of keeping the executive in check. (Britain's Const. , 61)The House of Commons as it currently works encourages public disdain for ministers and civil officials. Hard party lines need to soften and MPs need to voice their individual opinions rather than regurgitating party clichi?? s. For it is altogether possible that MPs wield more power in the face of the executive than they do at the present.

This would require that they adopt a far less partisan attitude. Thus, in order to restore the Commons as a place for national debate, change in the constitution is not as important as the role of MPs. Electoral reform is the third main reform that needed to be made in 1995. The first-past-the-post system has become increasingly problematic with the advent of third parties such as the Liberal Democrats. Seats can be won with only a minority of the vote, which can then translate into a majority in Parliament.

This, in turn, vastly under-represents minority parties in Parliament. Supporters of FPTP say that it guarantees a party majority that is stable and efficient. However, this is no longer as true due to demographic changes

among voters. It allows for concentrated regional seats with no real power except that they drain the majority of valuable seats.

The simple fact that it is possible to have a majority at Whitehall without even a plurality of the popular vote undermines legitimacy. (Britain's Const. , 69) However, we must realize that it is the MPs themselves that will vote to accept any electoral reforms. Their jobs may not seem so guaranteed under a new voting system. As a result, we must realize the reluctance that comes with voting yourself out of office.

The fact is that most members of the House of Commons have no interest in changing the current system. In the end, the less radical the changes are, the more likely they will be passed. Proportional representation, then, is definitely not a practical option. According to the Economist article, additional member system (AMS) gives the fairest results; while the alternative vote (AV) would have the smallest effect. The single transferable vote (STV) falls in the middle.

Thus, the alternative vote is what reformers should choose. It will make it harder to translate minority votes into a majority of seats while at the same time retaining many characteristics of the current system. Individual MPs will still represent individual constituencies. Basically, it is the only option that really has any chance of succeeding, but is still a step in the right direction. (Britain's Const.

, 70) Under Tony Blair's New Labour Government power is being decentralized in a number of ways. Devolution in the form of a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh is one way in which power is trickling down from

Westminster. In a way, this helps solve the problem of disproportional representation for National parties. As I have said before, legitimacy becomes a problem when minority interests are eternally condemned to opposition with no real chance of having influence in government. Even though Scotland is now in charge of many of its own policy directives, it does not have true autonomy in fiscal policy.

In time, the SNP is bound to gain the majority and will try to show that devolution is not equal to independence. Whether the Scottish people will agree is up for grabs. Scotland's bid for independence is also contingent on the European Union. Without full membership, it would not be able to stand alone. Mr. Blair's devolution is thus paving the way for the SNP to make a strong argument to become autonomous full members of the EU.

With the empire gone, the EU now gives the Scots an opportunity to dissolve the partnership with England and strike a new one with the EU. " (Undoing Britain, 18) However, it was necessary in order to give Scottish, Welsh and Irish minorities reassurance that they are represented in government and it gives New Labour the support necessary to obtain a majority. The latter is the reason for Conservatives to squeeze any political advantage that they might get from English resentment. Devolution is likely to change party politics into the formation of internal nationalist factions. Mr.

Blair will not be able to control his party in such a centralized manner without distancing them at the same time. (Undoing Britain, 11) Relations between England and the rest of Britain are also affected by changes made to the central government at Westminster. Labour has proposed to ban

Scottish votes on laws that directly affect England. This would mean that a government with a national majority might not be able to pass its English legislation. This does not bode well for New Labour due to their dependence on Scottish votes. Regional parliaments and a move to create an elected Senate have also been put into effect.

The latter is definitely an improvement to the hereditary seating in the House of Lords. Such undemocratic rule by hereditary members compromises legitimacy and makes it a prime target for reform. The main effect of New Labour's reforms is that it has moved the spotlight from left-right issues to Britain-Europe issues. Government in Britain is beginning to move farther away from the centralized notion that once defined it. Changes in the socio-cultural base have been reproduced by spreading power away from Westminster through devolution, regional parliaments and the prospect of the European Union.

There is no question that this will take time and is contingent upon some accidental results of reform. However, growing national and regional identities, as well as a " growing source of law, authority and political legitimacy across the water in Strasbourg and Brussels" will take British politics farther and farther from its long-standing model of democracy. (Undoing Britain, 19)