

UK democracy ‘in crisis’, say experts

Stephen Lambert argues that urgent action is needed to restore public trust and confidence.

All schools, colleges and apprenticeships are required to teach British Values, including democracy and ‘understanding of how citizens can influence decision-making through the democratic process’.

Yet low turnout in general elections and participation in politics, as well as surveys, reveal that less than half our young people believe this. Research conducted by the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme shows that just four out of ten 18-24 year-olds are likely to vote on July 4th. Youth turnout in the UK is the lowest of 15 members of the EU. In Sweden people under 24 vote at double the rate of their peers in Britain. Two-thirds of those aged 18 to 34 feel that they know little about parliament, our core political institution, compared to just under half of those aged over 55.

Class divide

There’s a class divide too. Three-quarters of the socio-economic group DE - the unskilled working class - claim little knowledge, compared to just over a third of the ABs - the professional middle classes.

An important recent report, co-authored by Professor John Curtis, ‘Damaged Politics’, reveals that there is now a record low level of trust and confidence in the UK’s system of governance. 45 per cent of the public ‘almost never trusts British government to place the nation’s needs above party interests, with a staggering 79 per cent believing

that the current system of governing needs “significant improvement”’. For Curtis and his colleagues, events like Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, ‘party-gate’ and ongoing economic problems have eroded trust, whilst unhappiness with NHS waiting lists and financial hardship have further undermined confidence in national government. As Curtis, Britain’s leading polling expert, argues: ‘The public is as doubtful as it has ever been about the trustworthiness and efficacy of the country’s system of governance and the people who comprise it’.

Throughout the nation there has been a sharp drop in political engagement. Fewer people now actively support a political party; even fewer belong to one, and a significant number express little interest in politics or civic affairs. Political scientists believe this year’s voters are more volatile than ever, in an age of ‘partisan and class dealignment’. Extreme populist parties and movements of the radical right, manifested in the rapid rise of Nigel Farage’s Reform UK and the radical left Workers Party led by George Galloway, all pose real challenges to the health of British democracy.

For Curtis ‘Democracy is in crisis and urgent action is needed to restore public trust and confidence’.

Faith

Yet faith in politics and public affairs matters. If citizens don’t take part, government from local to national level loses touch and legitimacy. This can

lead to poor decision-making, instability and weak governance. Learning for democracy matters more than ever before. That's why it's vital that central government restores citizenship classes from primary to tertiary level in schools and colleges.

You can't take a car on the road without learning to drive, or pick the captain of Newcastle United without knowing anything about the game. Yet in the third decade of the 21st century we ask people to drive the political process and choose the next prime minister without learning how the democratic system works.

Demanding

Politics in a liberal democracy like Britain is hard and demanding. It requires commitment, skills, civic knowledge and tenacity. If citizens don't understand how democratic processes and institutions function, or how to participate, too often they expect instant solutions to problems, lose faith or trust, and may become alienated all together. Pluralism is eroded, with a sense that the system works for the few and not the many.

As Titus Alexander, of the campaigning group Democracy Matters, notes, the most tricky problems facing a post-modern society like the UK are political, not technical or economic. Issues as diverse as child poverty, the cost of living crisis, climate change, housing shortages and rent increases need political application to create solutions which balance conflicting interests and priorities.

Civic education can help increase people's ability to help resolve problems at any level and promote model citizens for the present and future.

The next parliament after July 4th will be dominated by talk and policies to address economic instability, securing green jobs for the future alongside rebuilding the NHS and tackling a broken adult care system. Of course, central government won't be able to tackle all the issues we as a nation face. Recent devolution has a key role to play, with support for English devolution at an all time high according to Curtis's report.

Devolved combined authorities and the two elected mayors for the North East and Tees Valley now have a meaningful budget and greater responsibilities for economic development, employment and transport in their respective regions.

This makes it even more important to renew our democracy and give people the support, skills, know-how and confidence to engage in civic life. To reverse low levels of trust and involvement in the democratic process we need a high level of commitment from the next elected government.

CAFAS Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards

- ◆ **campaigns against the decline in standards**
- ◆ **defends individuals against victimisation**
- ◆ **gives moral support and legal advice**
- ◆ **investigates malpractice and publishes findings**
- ◆ **seeks to develop a support network with unions and other organisations.**

For further information, contact the Secretary:

Kirit Patel

19 Greenhill Road

Middx HA1 1LD

CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk