



# How Democratic is the UK?

## The 2012 Audit

Executive summary



Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Andrew Blick,  
Stephen Crone



## About Democratic Audit

Democratic Audit is an independent research organisation that carries out research into the quality of democracy in the UK.



The Audit's methodology for auditing and assessing democracy has won international acclaim. It is widely copied across the world, having been employed in at least 21 nations by governments, international bodies such as the UNDP and the Open Society Institute, universities and research institutes. Democratic Audit has published four major successive democratic audits of the UK, using the methodology, and many path-breaking reports on specific aspects of the UK's political life from a clearly defined democratic perspective.

Democratic Audit is a not-for-profit company, grant funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Registered in England and Wales; company no. 6145962. For more information about Democratic Audit, visit

[www.democraticaudit.com](http://www.democraticaudit.com)

**“Unrivalled in terms of both breadth and depth”**

Professor Matthew Flinders,  
University of Sheffield

**“Essential reading for everyone who cares about the health of our democracy”**

Professor Tony Wright, co-editor,  
*The Political Quarterly*

**“Politicians of all parties have a duty to respond”**

Katie Ghose, Chief Executive,  
Electoral Reform Society

## About our funders

As with our previous Audits of democracy in the UK, the full cost of producing our Audit of UK democracy in 2012 was met by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT). The JRCT is an independent, progressive organisation committed to funding radical change towards a better world. The JRCT makes grants to individuals and to projects seeking the creation of a peaceful world, political equality and social justice. We are immensely grateful to the Trust for their long-term support.

For more information about JRCT, visit

[www.jrct.org.uk](http://www.jrct.org.uk)

**O**ver the last two decades, concerns about the state of democracy in the UK have prompted widespread public debate, and resulted in numerous reforms of the political system. Democratic Audit has been monitoring these developments since 1992. In our latest assessment of British democracy<sup>1</sup>, we evaluate how well the political system is operating across 75 democratic criteria derived from established international standards and consider what has changed since our last full Audit was published in 2002. While we note dozens of examples of specific democratic improvements, our overall assessment suggests that genuine democratic renewal can only arise from a new constitutional settlement for the UK.



**While we note dozens of examples of specific democratic improvements, our overall assessment suggests that genuine democratic renewal can only arise from a new constitutional settlement for the UK**



<sup>1</sup> S. Wilks-Heeg, A. Blick, and S. Crone (2012) *How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit*, Liverpool: Democratic Audit. The complete text of the Audit is available on-line at <http://democracy-uk-2012.democraticaudit.com>



**A democratic audit is a comprehensive and systematic assessment of a country's political life against some key democratic principles**



## How democratic are we?

Politicians and media commentators sometimes suggest there is little public interest in technical issues about how we are governed in the UK. There may be some truth in this assertion when it comes to specific constitutional issues such as voting systems or reform of the House of Lords. Yet, it is undeniable that wider democratic concerns do feature significantly in contemporary public debate. Popular reaction in England to Scottish demands for greater autonomy, media discussion of low turnouts in elections, and public anger about the abuse of parliament's expenses regime by individual MPs are all obvious cases.

But these examples also underline how discussion of UK democracy tends to focus on a shifting set of specific democratic problems, each of which is generally debated in isolation. It is certainly rare to hear discussion of any of the bigger questions about our democracy. What is it that defines the UK as a democracy? How far does our model of democracy differ to those which have grown up elsewhere in the world? How does the quality of our democracy compare to that in other countries? Is the UK becoming more or less democratic?

## What is a democracy Audit?

A democratic audit, or democracy assessment as it is also known, is a comprehensive and systematic assessment of a country's political life against some key democratic principles, such as popular control over decision-making, and political equality in the exercise of that control. It is a kind of 'health check' on the state of a country's democracy. Our method and framework have international standing and credibility.

The Audit framework covers all the main areas of our democratic life, divided into four main 'Blocks' covering: 'citizenship, law and rights'; 'representative and accountable government'; 'civil society and popular participation'; and 'democracy beyond the state'. The themes covered by the framework are listed in Figure 1, in the form of a screenshot taken from our 2012 Audit website (clicking on the image will take you directly to the site).

This is our fourth periodic Audit of democracy in the UK, and the first to be published exclusively on-line.<sup>2</sup> Our Audit framework is extremely broad-ranging. It provides answers to 75 individual 'search questions', covering issues as diverse as the fairness of the electoral system, the independence of the media, and public accountability of the police and security services. As with our previous studies, our latest Audit provides a snapshot of the state of UK democracy at a particular point in time. We do not seek to

<sup>2</sup> The first three major Audits of UK democracy were published in book format between 1996 and 2002. See F. Klug, K. Starmer and S. Weir (1996) *The Three Pillars of Liberty: Political Rights and Freedoms in the United Kingdom*, London: Routledge; S. Weir and D. Beetham (1999) *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain*, London: Routledge; D. Beetham, I. Byrne, P. Ngan and S. Weir (2002) *Democracy under Blair: A Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom*, London: Politico's.



**Block 1**  
**Citizenship, law and rights**

- Nationhood and citizenship
- Rule of law and access to justice
- Civil and political rights
- Economic and social rights



**Block 2**  
**Representative and accountable government**

- Free and fair elections
- Political parties
- Role of government
- Role of Parliament
- Military and police accountability
- Integrity in public life



**Block 3**  
**Civil society and popular participation**

- The media in a democratic society
- Political participation
- Decentralisation



**Block 4**  
**Democracy beyond the state**

- External influences on UK democracy
- The UK's democratic impact abroad

## What do we mean by 'democracy'?

Defining democracy has never proved straightforward. Experts agree that democracy means 'rule of the people', but disagree about many of the details of how that is best achieved. However, while many democratic alternatives have been proposed in theory, or can be found in history, virtually every democratic country in the world today would be defined as a representative democracy. Democracy has therefore come to be understood as a political system in which decisions are taken by elected representatives who have been chosen via free and fair elections in which all adult citizens are entitled to vote. From this fairly straightforward understanding of democracy, we derive the two basic principles on

which our Audit is based, namely:

- **Popular control:** how far do the people exercise control over political decision-makers and the processes of decision-making?
- **Political equality:** how far is there political equality in the exercise of popular control?

It is vital to stress that democracy is not an 'end state'. Few would argue that the UK is already as democratic as it would be possible, or desirable, for it to be. One of the key purposes of auditing democracy, therefore, is to ask whether a country is becoming more or less democratic and to identify what needs to be done to broaden and deepen democratic governance.

**Figure 1**

The Democratic Audit assessment framework

Click anywhere on the image to view the full contents of the Audit.

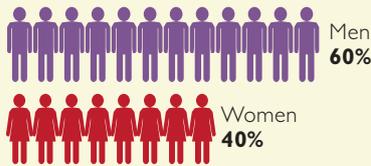
**Figure 2**  
How Democratic is the UK?  
An infographic

# Popular control and political equality in the UK

## Gender representation

Men and women as % of elected representatives

### Scottish Parliament



### Welsh Assembly



### English councils



### House of Commons



# 55%

Agree with the statement 'when people like me get involved in politics, they can really change the way the UK is run' (2009)

# 16%

Proportion of the UK population living under elected, devolved government

## UK election turnouts

2009-12



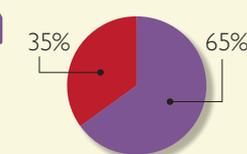
### 2010 General Election



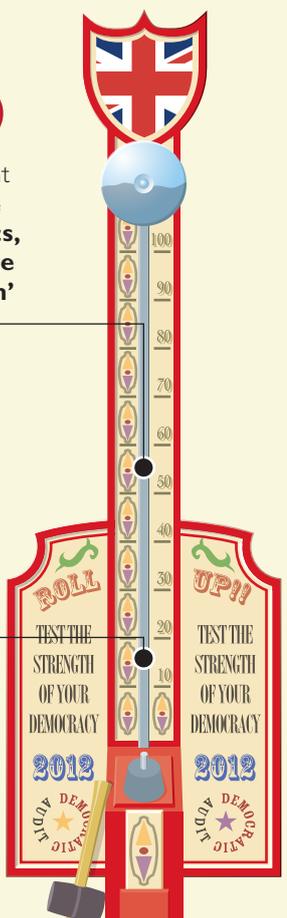
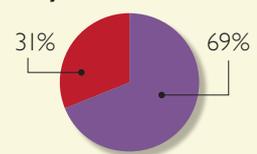
### 2011 Scottish Parliament



### 2009 European Parliament



### 2012 Liverpool Mayoral



“ Democracy is not an ‘end state’. Few would argue that the UK is already as democratic as it would be possible, or desirable, for it to be ”

# 60



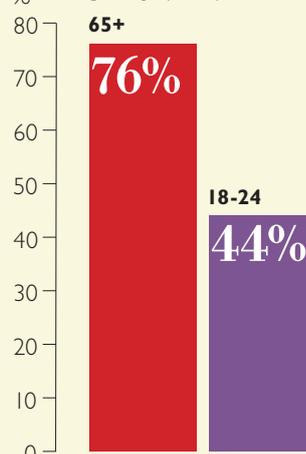
Number of donors who accounted for a total of £318 million donated to the main three political parties from 2001 to 2010



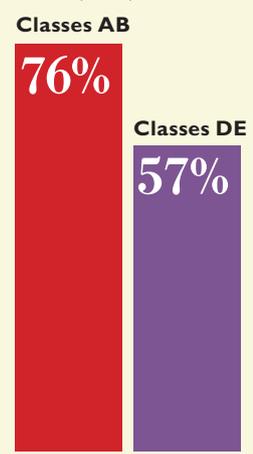
Number of OECD countries with a wholly unelected parliamentary chamber

## Social contrasts in election turnouts

### Turnout by age group (2010)



### Turnout by social class (2010)



'score' UK democracy using numerical indices. Instead, our answers to the search questions draw on a mix of qualitative and quantitative sources to evaluate the relative degrees to which democratic principles are being promoted, as well as being realised in practice.

The 'infographic' in Figure 2 provides a sample of some of the statistical indicators with the most direct bearing on the two core principles of popular control and political equality. As even a quick glance at these statistical indicators will confirm, the data contained in the Audit points to some serious concerns about the extent to which either principle is being realised in practice.

For the 2012 Audit, we have also compiled a large number of additional statistical indicators, many of them 'backdated' to measure change over several decades. Together with the qualitative analysis contained in each of the 15 main sections, this material enables us to undertake a fine-grained assessment of how UK democracy is changing.

## Is UK democracy getting better or worse?

Throughout our Audit of UK democracy in 2012, we seek to assess what has changed since we published our last comprehensive assessment in 2002. In each of the 15 sections which make up the Audit, we identify areas which have improved compared to a decade ago, those which we regard as continuing concerns, and issues which represent new or previously unidentified concerns.

As Table 1, overleaf, shows, a total of 74 areas of democratic improvement are identified across the Audit as a whole, although these must be set alongside 92 continuing concerns and 62 new and emerging concerns. It would be highly misleading to read these outcomes as a simple scorecard, however. While there have been a handful of very significant democratic advances over the last decade, many of the improvements we identify are relatively modest in scope. For instance, it clearly could not be argued that reducing the age of candidature at general elections from 21 to 18 equates in importance to the establishment of a UK Supreme Court.

Moreover, it is by no means clear that all, or even most, of the improvements we identify have become fully embedded features of UK democracy. The progress we note in the Audit with regard to economic and social rights, for instance, was not only relatively modest under the Labour governments of 1997-2010,



**While there have been a handful of very significant democratic advances over the last decade, many of the improvements we identify are relatively modest in scope**





**Some aspects of what we suggest has improved since 2002 are the subject of intense political controversy, and may potentially be reversed by the current government**



but is also likely to be undone rapidly by the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Meanwhile, some aspects of what we suggest has improved since 2002 are the subject of intense political controversy, and may potentially be reversed by the current government. Key examples here include the influence of the Human Rights Act 1998 over the last decade and the impact of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 since it was fully implemented in 2004.

It should also be underlined that many political and constitutional reforms have a tendency to create

unforeseen consequences, some of which will deepen existing democratic concerns, or even create new ones. As a result, there are a number of democratic improvements identified in our Audit which are directly counter-balanced by clear concerns arising from the very same aspects of UK democracy. This tendency is highlighted in all the examples provided in Table 1. For instance, we note a variety of ways in which devolution has enhanced democratic arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; but we also record the profound challenges which devolution poses for

**Table 1:** Assessing change since the 2002 Audit of democracy

| Areas of improvement   | Continuing concerns   | New or emerging concerns  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>74</b>  | <b>92</b>   | <b>62</b>   |
| <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple democratic benefits of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.</li> <li>Stronger separation of powers introduced by Constitutional Reform Act 2005.</li> <li>Surveys suggest that parties are reaching out to more electors during general election campaigns.</li> <li>Willingness of courts to use the Human Rights Act 1998 to offer some protection against media intrusions of privacy.</li> <li>There has been a clear growth in the membership of several smaller political parties, notably the SNP and the Greens.</li> </ul> | <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unresolved tensions arising from 'asymmetric devolution' – 'the English problem' persists.</li> <li>Unresolved tensions between notions of parliamentary sovereignty and rule of law.</li> <li>Turnout in all types of elections remain very low by both historical and international standards.</li> <li>Mounting evidence of press intrusion and harassment, and of the failure of the self-regulation of the press.</li> <li>Only 1% of the electorate are members of political parties and overall membership levels continue to decline.</li> </ul> | <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tensions arising from demands for greater autonomy, or independence, for Scotland.</li> <li>Growing political disagreement over some of the fundamentals of the UK constitution.</li> <li>Confidence in the integrity of elections may have been undermined by new concerns about electoral fraud.</li> <li>Newspaper circulation is declining rapidly and consumption of television news is falling.</li> <li>Election deposits are becoming a serious barrier to smaller political parties contesting more seats.</li> </ul> |

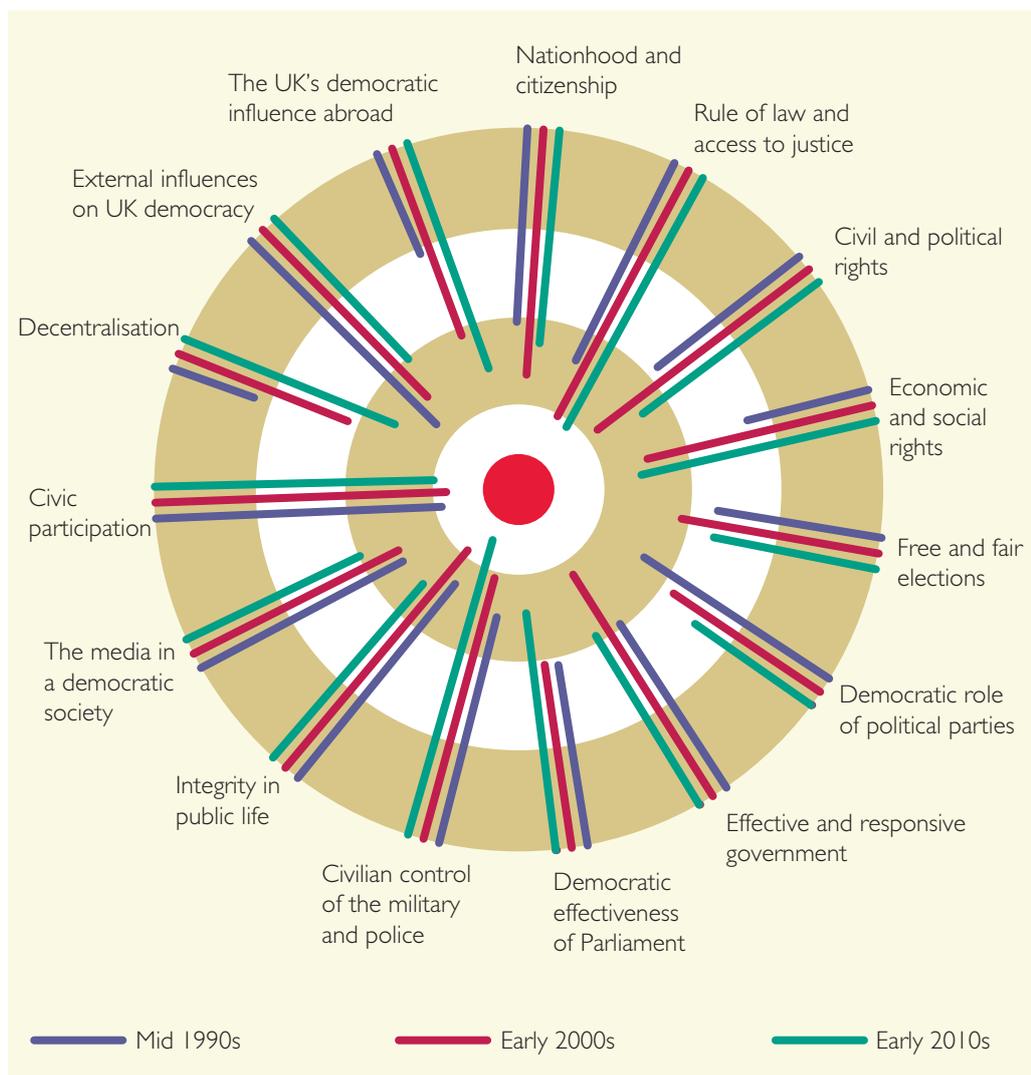
the operation of democracy in the UK as a whole. Similarly, while reforms introduced by Labour have enabled the judiciary to operate more independently from the legislative and executive branches of government, these changes have also become part of a wider set of constitutional uncertainties about where power and authority resides in the UK political system.

Ultimately, our assessment of whether the complex, and often conflicting, dynamics of UK democracy represent improvement or deterioration against our core criteria must be a subjective one. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of

qualitative and quantitative evidence we have collated, not just for our current Audit but also for our previous ones, enables us to make informed judgements about the extent to which democracy in the UK is improving or deteriorating. In our 2002 Audit, we represented our assessment of how UK democracy had changed using a target graphic, showing whether each of the areas of democracy we evaluated was moving towards, or away from, the highest democratic standards observed in practice internationally (represented by the bull's-eye at the centre of the target). With some

“  
**Reforms introduced by Labour have also become part of a wider set of constitutional uncertainties about where power and authority resides in the UK political system**  
 ”

**Figure 3:** Closer to the target? Change across 15 core features of UK democracy





**There are a large number of instances where our assessment repeats the most serious concerns we have expressed in previous Audits**



adaptations, owing to small changes in the assessment framework, we have updated this graphic using our 2012 results, as shown in Figure 3.

It is important to recognise that, due to the multi-faceted nature of the Audit framework, there is a mixture of improvement and deterioration observed in each of the 15 sections. In all of the 15 sections, we identify at least some steps forward, but also a number of steps back, and the relative size of these steps varies enormously. Even more significantly, there are large numbers of instances where our assessment repeats the most serious concerns we have expressed in previous Audits. It is the weight of these 'continuing concerns' which are generally the most significant factor in shaping our assessment of how close each aspect of UK democracy is to the centre of the target.

At first glance, the graphic points to a relatively healthy picture across the 15 sections of the Audit, albeit with clear room for improvement in each. On closer inspection, the graphic illustrates that while we find that UK democracy has moved closer to the target in four areas since our last Audit in 2002, and is broadly static in three further areas, it has slipped back, mostly very moderately, in the remaining eight. Moreover, the graphic also highlights that there are some obvious 'weak links' in the UK's democratic system, namely those which are furthest from the centre of the target or which evidence the greatest movement away from it. Significantly, these

weaknesses cluster around particular sets of issues associated with elections, political parties, the media, integrity in public life, and the responsiveness and effectiveness of government. Indeed, as we illustrate later in this summary, the tendencies which we see as most concerning tend to cross-cut several individual sections of the Audit framework.

## **How does UK democracy compare?**

Throughout our 2012 Audit of democracy in the UK, we also use a range of statistical measures to assess how well the UK compares to other established democracies. Wherever possible, we compare the UK against the averages for all advanced industrial nations (the OECD-34), western Europe (the EU-15), and each of the following groups of democracies:

- The Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden;
- The consensual democracies: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland;
- The Westminster democracies: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK.

Our three groups of comparators are consciously chosen to represent three contrasting traditions of representative democracy. The distinction drawn between the Westminster and consensual models

of democracies is a long-standing one, associated with the work of Arend Lijphart<sup>3</sup>. In brief, the Westminster model comprises a centralised political system, in which a majoritarian electoral system, limited party competition, a weak separation of powers and constitutional flexibility concentrate power in the hands of single-party governments. By contrast, consensual democracies are characterised by greater fragmentation of power, including a decentralised state; a stronger, formal constitutional separation between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary; and proportional electoral systems and multi-party systems which make

coalition government the norm. The Nordic countries, which have much in common with the consensual democracies, also exhibit the long-standing influence of social democracy, which has resulted in a particular commitment to goals associated with political equality, such as measures to promote the participation of women in public life.

In total, our Audit includes over 40 comparative datasets, although not all compare the UK to the full range of comparators listed above. In virtually every case, the UK ranks below the EU-15 average. The contrasts between the UK and the Nordic countries are particularly stark. Indeed,



**Our Audit includes over 40 comparative datasets. In virtually every case, the UK ranks below the EU-15 average**



**Table 2:** Ten key measures of democracy in the United Kingdom and the Nordic Countries

|  |  United Kingdom |  Nordic Average |
|--|--|---|
| Turnout in parliamentary elections (average, 2000s)  | 60%  | 79%   |
| Proportion of the electorate who are members of political parties (late 2000s)*                | 1%   | 5%  |
| Proportion of MPs who are women (2010)   | 22%  | 41%   |
| Global ranking for levels of press freedom (2011; Freedom House index)                         | 26th   | 2nd   |
| Global ranking for absence of corruption (2010; Transparency International index)              | 20th   | 4th   |
| Compliance with human rights (2010; score out of 22 on CIRI Human Rights Index)                | 19   | 21  |
| Full-time employees earning <math>< \frac{2}{3}</math> of median gross annual earnings (2006)* | 21.6%  | 7.9%  |
| Proportion of the labour force who are members of trade unions (2010)                          | 26.5%  | 69.2%   |
| Proportion of tax revenue raised by sub-national government (2009)                             | 5.3%   | 25.4%   |
| Overseas aid as a proportion of national income (average, 2000s)                               | 0.4%   | 0.8%  |

Note: \* in these cases, the Nordic average is for Denmark, Finland and Sweden only

<sup>3</sup> A. Lijphart (1999) *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, New Haven: Yale University Press.



**Several of these sets of concerns are common to all established democracies, although we have found them to be especially pronounced in the UK**



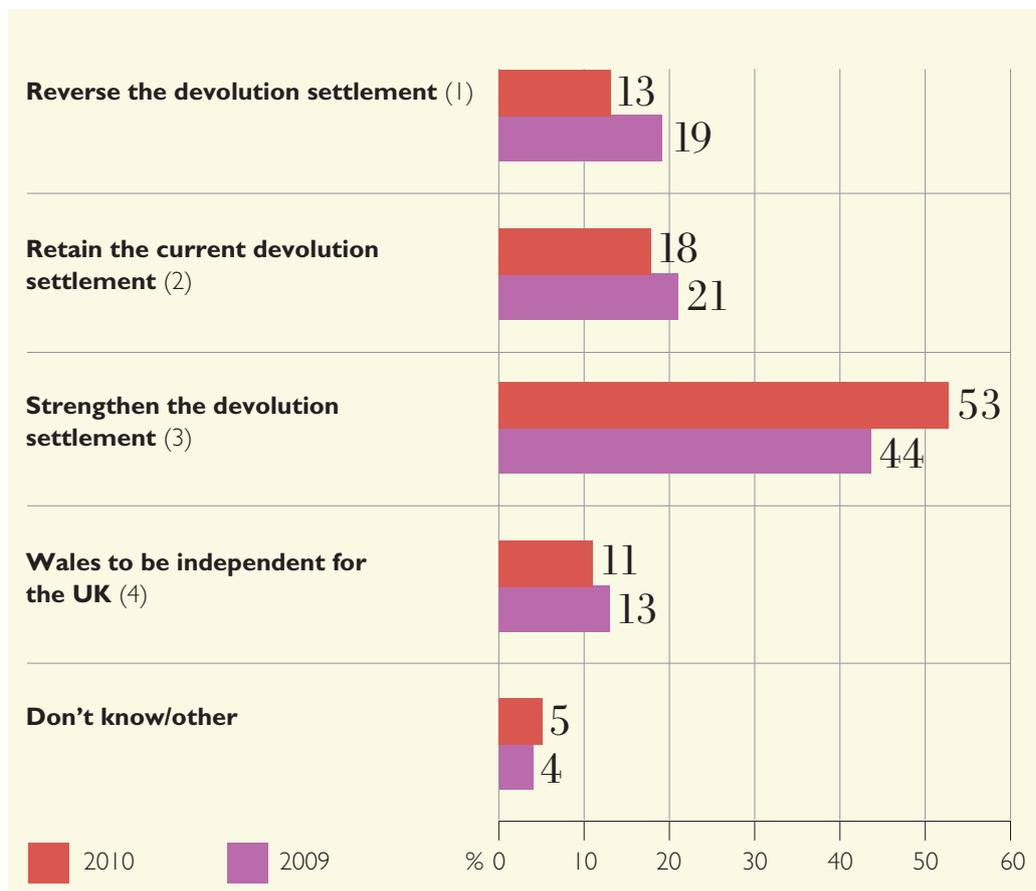
the Nordic countries out-perform the UK on just about every quantifiable measure of democracy used for cross-national comparison. The sample of indicators listed in Table 2, drawn from eight different sections of the Audit clearly illustrates this pattern.

While the Nordic countries are by no means perfect democracies, they are certainly a valuable yardstick against which other countries can be measured. That the UK trails the Nordic countries across so many statistical measures of democracy offers further evidence of the areas in which it falls short, not of an abstract ideal of democracy, but of what has been demonstrated to be possible elsewhere in northern Europe.

## What is going wrong with UK democracy?

Based on our findings, five overarching sets of concerns emerge from our 2012 Audit of democracy in the UK. As we note above, these thematic concerns were identified from the clustering of particular groups of issues across the 15 individual sections of the Audit. Yet, it should also be stressed that the cross-cutting concerns which we identify are by no means unique to the UK. Indeed, several of these sets of concerns are common to all established democracies, including the Nordic countries, although we have found them to be especially pronounced in the UK. The five key themes are as follows:

**Figure 4:** Welsh Constitutional Preferences, 2009 and 2010 (% surveyed choosing each option)



Note: Explanation of options:

**1** Welsh Assembly abolished, Wales remains part of the UK;

**2** Retain current Welsh Assembly with limited law-making powers;

**3** A Welsh Parliament with either law-making powers, or law-making and taxation powers;

**4** Wales to leave the UK, either with or without EU membership.

Some options in the original surveys have been combined.

Sources: Compiled from Jones, R. W. and Scully, R. (2009) Wales devolution monitoring report, London: The Constitution Unit; BBC Wales (2010) 'Wales Poll 2010', Cardiff: BBC Wales.

**1** **The UK's constitutional arrangements are increasingly unstable and it is by no means clear what a reformed Westminster model would look like.** While significant constitutional reforms have been introduced since 1997, some changes have proved less effective than expected and several facets of the UK political system have proved stubbornly resistant to reform. Moreover, some areas of reform have had clearly unintended or unanticipated consequences, most notably devolution to Scotland and Wales (where constitutional change has gone further and faster than anticipated). The UK's previously unitary state is now characterised by highly asymmetric decentralisation, with considerable autonomy granted to the Celtic nations/regions, while the English state remains highly centralised. Demands for greater autonomy, and even independence, for Scotland represent the most obvious instability arising from the devolution settlements. However, as Figure 4 illustrates, it is also apparent that Welsh constitutional preferences are driving towards progressively greater autonomy for the principality. These tendencies make it increasingly clear that the greatest source of constitutional instability prompted by devolution is the absence of devolved government in England. Meanwhile, changes in the operation of the UK party and electoral systems have undermined some of the most fundamental planks of the Westminster

model, particularly the principle of single-party majority government, but there is, as yet, little indication of UK politicians recognising these new realities. Indeed, despite the obvious tensions, there has been a surprising reluctance to reflect on, and learn from, a decade of operating more consensual models of democracy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

**2** **Public faith in democratic institutions is decaying, and reforms aimed at restoring public confidence in democratic arrangements have tended to prove, at best, ineffectual and, in several cases, counter-productive.** Long-term survey evidence suggests that the public trust politicians and political parties less and less; that they regard democratic institutions such as parliament as increasingly irrelevant; and have growing concerns about levels of corruption in politics and government. By way of illustration, Figure 5 shows that the proportion of the UK public who regard standards of conduct in public life as either 'very high' or 'quite high' declined from 46 to 33 per cent in the period from 2004 to 2010. Measures including the transfer of functions to independent bodies, such as the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; the increased regulation of elections and party funding, overseen by a UK Electoral Commission; the promotion of greater



**It is increasingly clear that the greatest source of constitutional instability prompted by devolution is the absence of devolved government in England**





**Reforms may exacerbate a loss of public confidence in democracy if the response to genuine revelations of abuses of power is one of consistently denying or downplaying them**



openness and transparency, including the publication of official registers; and greater access to official documentation via the Freedom of Information Act, have done nothing to reverse these trends. If anything, there is a risk that negative public perceptions have been reinforced by the tendency for such measures to provide additional grounds to suspect wrong-doing among politicians and public officials. The role of media investigation and reporting in using mechanisms intended to provide for greater openness and transparency to expose such problems also needs to be noted. Where it seeks to hold the powerful to account, investigative journalism fulfils a vital democratic function. However, investigative journalism may inadvertently serve to exacerbate a loss of public confidence

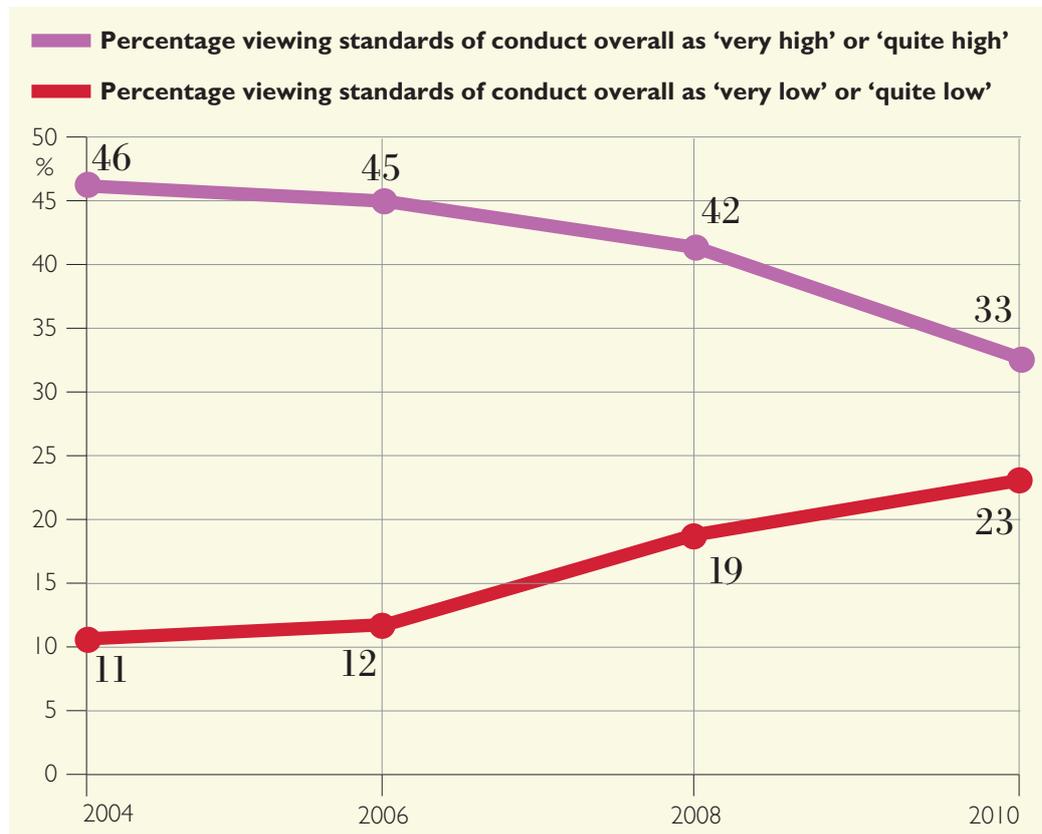
in democracy if reporting is unduly sensationalist, or if the political, regulatory or legal response to genuine revelations of abuses of power is one of consistently denying or downplaying them.

**3 Political inequality is widening rapidly and even provisions intended to guarantee basic human rights are increasingly being brought into question.**

While representative democracy is notionally built on principles of political equality (most obviously the notion of ‘one person, one vote’), there have always been wide variations in the extent of political participation, and degree of political power exercised, by different social

**Figure 5:** Overall perception of standards of conduct in public life

Source: Compiled from Committee on Standards in Public Life (2011) Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2010, London: CSPL.



groups. However, political inequalities in the UK have grown over the past four decades, in tandem with the widening of economic and social divisions. As was illustrated in Figure 2, there is now a 19 percentage point difference in turnout between electors in the social classes AB and those in social classes DE (in 1997 it was 13 percentage points). This pattern is replicated in other forms of political activism. As Figure 6 demonstrates, members of social classes AB report levels of political engagement (beyond voting) which are typically 2-3 times those found among members of social classes DE. The huge contrasts between members of different social classes in even discussing politics is particularly striking, and must be placed in the context of an overall decline in

the consumption of news. Finally, while the Human Rights Act has provided for some protection for those most at risk, even this principle of a 'minimal' guaranteeing of key civil and political rights has been called into question in recent years.

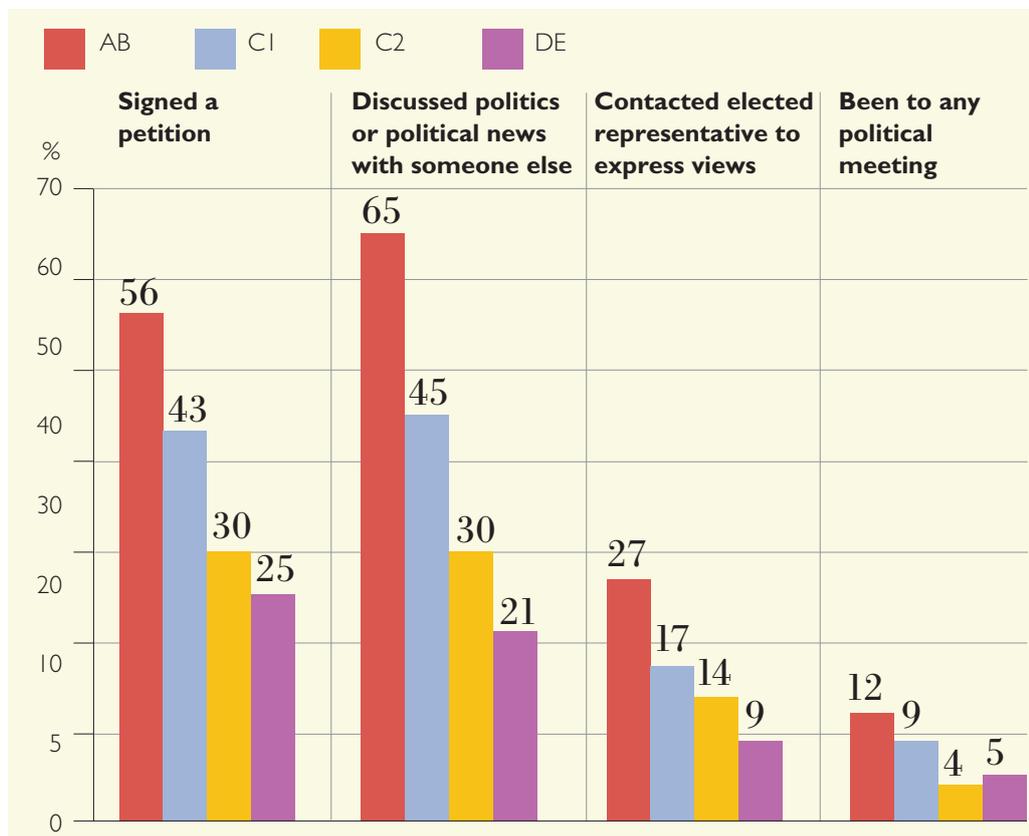
**4 Corporate power is growing, partly as a result of wider patterns of globalisation and deregulation, and threatens to undermine some of the most basic principles of democratic decision-making.** Business interests have always enjoyed privileged status in modern democracies, including considerable scope to influence politicians and policy decisions.



**Political inequalities in the UK have grown over the past four decades, in tandem with the widening of economic and social divisions**



**Figure 6:** Reported levels of political activism in last two to three years by social class, 2009



Source: Compiled from Hansard Society (2010) *Audit of Political Engagement 7*, London: Hansard Society.



**The proportion of major UK corporations which have direct connections to MPs is many times greater than that found in other established democracies**

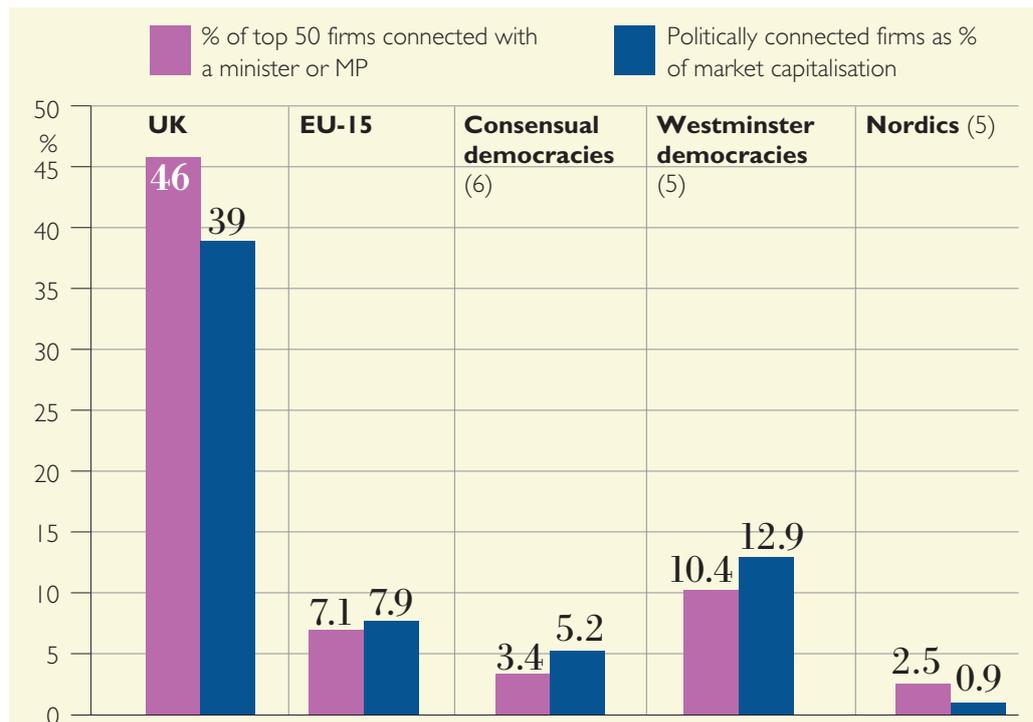


However, there are very firm grounds to suggest that the power which large corporations and wealthy individuals now wield on the UK political system is unprecedented. Bolstered by pro-market policy agendas and deregulatory measures, corporate power has expanded as a variety of countervailing forces, such as trade unions, have declined in significance. Evidence is presented throughout our Audit of ways in which policy-making appears to have shifted from the democratic arena to a far less transparent set of arrangements in which politics and business interests have become increasingly interwoven. The closeness of relationships between senior politicians and large media corporations, most notably News International, is a powerful example of this trend. However, the interweaving of political and corporate power in

the UK goes much further and is by no means restricted to the press and broadcasters. Figure 7 shows the proportion of major UK corporations which have direct connections to MPs, either in the forms of directorships, consultancies or shareholdings, together with the average figures for the same forms of corporate-parliamentary connections in our groups of comparator democracies. As the graph shows, the density of such relationships in the UK is many times greater than that found in other established democracies.

**Figure 7:** Corporate-parliamentary connections, the UK in comparative perspective, mid 2000s

Source: Compiled by Democratic Audit using data in Faccio, M. (2006) 'Politically connected firms', *American Economic Review*, 96 (1), pp.369-86.



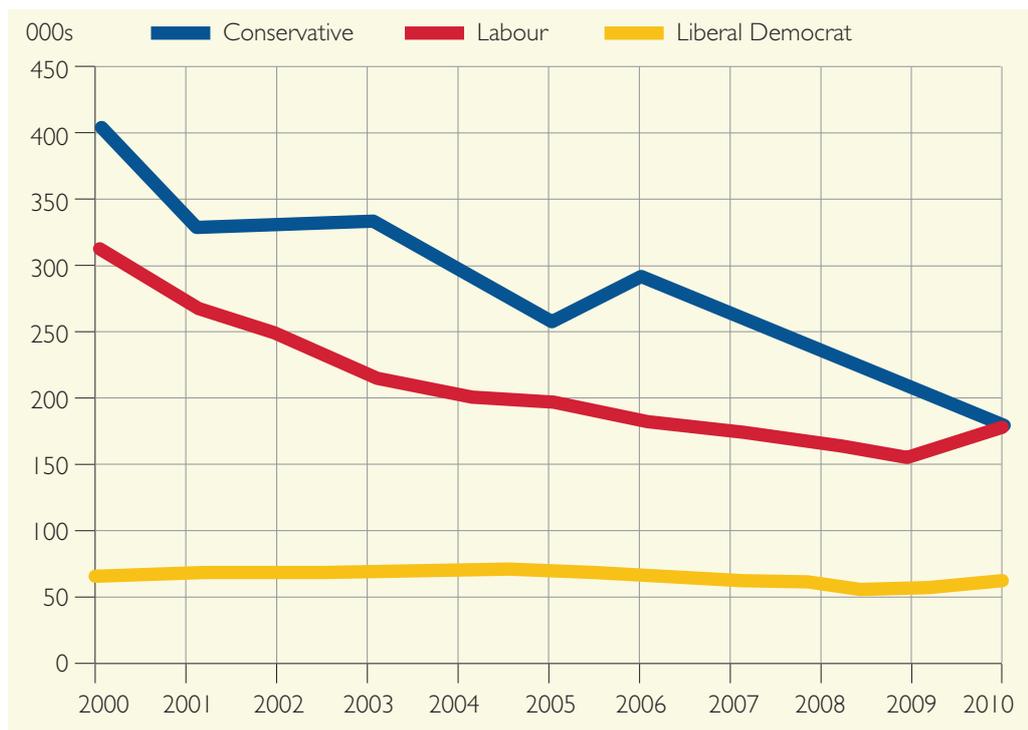
**5 Almost all available indicators suggest that representative democracy is in long-term, terminal decline, but no viable alternative model of democracy currently exists.**

All measures of popular engagement with, and attitudes towards, representative democracy show a clear decline since the 1970s. Whether the measures we adopt are turnout in elections, membership of political parties, voter identification with political parties, or public faith in the system of government, the pattern is the same. The tendency is perhaps most dramatic with respect to party membership which, as Figure 8 shows, has continued to decline sharply over the last decade. Members of political parties now amount to approximately one per cent of the UK electorate, compared to

about 10 per cent in the mid-1960s. While the same basic trends are found in all established democracies, the UK compares especially poorly on just about every conceivable measure of representative democracy presented in our Audit. Admittedly, not all forms of political participation are in decline. The UK continues to display high levels of participation in wider forms of civic engagement, and there are grounds to suggest growing interest in forms of direct and participatory democracy. However, it is by no means clear how these alternative models can co-exist with the assumptions and practices which have traditionally underpinned representative democracy in the UK. Again, there would appear to be much to learn from the devolved nations, where greater transparency has been associated with a stronger democratic culture, and mechanisms of

“All measures of popular engagement with, and attitudes towards, representative democracy show a clear decline since the 1970s”

**Figure 8:** Membership of the UK's three main political parties, 2000-2010



Source: Compiled by Democratic Audit from parties' annual accounts and media reports on membership ballots.



**Flashpoints of popular disquiet have given rise to periods in which constitutional reform efforts have been as incoherent as they have been intense**



direct democracy, such as e-petitions, have been integrated with the new institutions of representative democracy.

### **Where next for constitutional and political reform?**

We welcome both the greater profile given to constitutional reform in recent decades, as well as many of the individual reforms which have been introduced. However, in view of the evidence we present in this Audit, we are critical of the failure of governments, and opposition parties, to take a 'holistic view' of the reform process. Constitutional change since 1997 has been extensive, but reform has tended to be piecemeal, lacking in any consistent or coherent approach or any clear sense of direction. The most obvious overarching objective of recent reforms has been the stated desire of senior figures across all political parties to reverse the decline in public trust and popular participation in UK democracy. Yet, as we have noted, there is little evidence that recent reforms have had any success in this regard – about the best that can be said is that the decline in electoral turnout has been arrested.

In this context, it is important to note that moments of crisis have often served as drivers of change, notably accusations of 'sleaze' in the 1990s and the controversies over MPs' expenses from 2009 onwards. These 'flash-points' of popular disquiet have given rise to periods in which constitutional

reform efforts have arguably been as incoherent as they have been intense. One fundamental contradiction has remained throughout. Governments have attempted to respond to declining public faith and popular participation by rendering political and governmental processes more open and transparent, and extending the options for citizen engagement. But, with the exception of devolution, they have done so without fundamentally challenging the 'power-hoarding' instincts of the British state. The result is a highly flawed variant of the Westminster model of democracy in which some elements more typical of the consensual democracies have been imported, but political power remains highly concentrated. As Matthew Flinders has noted, we are therefore caught in a process of 'democratic drift'.<sup>4</sup>

Democratic Audit supports greater transparency and openness although, as we have already noted, there is little evidence to suggest that they will, of themselves, restore popular trust in the democratic process. We also support the development of mechanisms for greater participatory democracy. But it is also our view that simply extending the menu of options for citizens to participate, whether through consultation procedures, e-petitions, citizens' juries, referendums, or the direct election of police and crime commissioners, represents an insufficient basis for democratic renewal. Some of these initiatives can, and should, have a role in reinvigorating our democracy, but they also risk

<sup>4</sup> M. Flinders (2010) *Democratic Drift: Majoritarian Modification and Democratic Anomie in the United Kingdom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

becoming a diversion from the core problems of the UK's political system.

We would suggest that political and constitutional reforms will only succeed if they are guided by a long-term vision of how parliament, local councils and other organs of representative democracy are to be re-established as the centrepiece of our political system. Recent reforms to the UK Parliament are an encouraging development, as is the evidence of parliamentarians becoming more assertive in their role as scrutinisers of government legislation and action. And, while they are certainly not democratic panaceas, there is a great deal to be learnt at Westminster from the way in which the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have forged links between representative institutions and civil society. But perhaps the most significant lesson to be learnt from devolution is that democratic improvements do not stem from 'quick fixes'. The successes of devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are the products of new constitutional settlements, from which the residents of England, by far the great bulk of the UK population, have been excluded. If significant, and sustained, improvements in British democracy are to be achieved, then a fresh constitutional settlement will be required for the UK as a whole. In this regard, the case for defining a new, written constitution for the UK, as an act of far-reaching democratic reform and renewal, has never been stronger.

## About the authors

The principal authors of the 2012 Audit of democracy in the UK are Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Andrew Blick and Stephen Crone. The text as a whole was edited by Stuart Wilks-Heeg.

**Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg** is the Executive Director of Democratic Audit and Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of numerous books, reports and articles about democracy in the UK and regularly provides media comment on various aspects of UK politics.

**Dr Andrew Blick** is a Senior Research Fellow at both Democratic Audit and the Centre for Political and Constitutional Studies, Kings College London. He has authored or co-authored books on special advisers, government war powers and the office of Prime Minister, and has published articles in a wide range of specialist journals and periodicals.

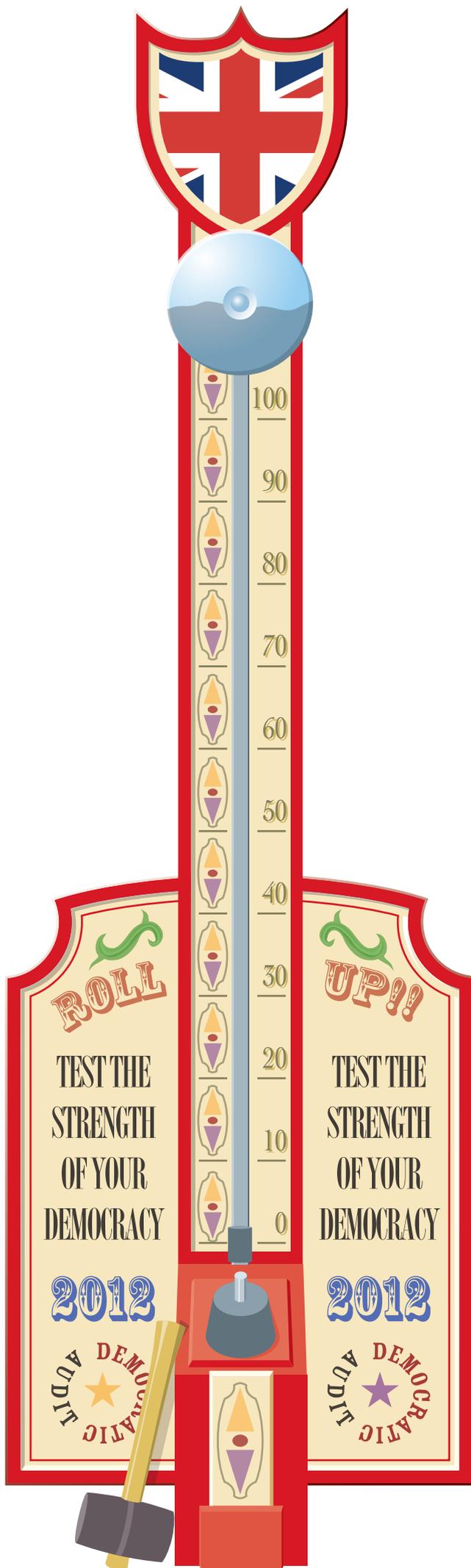
**Mr Stephen Crone** was a Research Assistant at Democratic Audit from 2010-12. In addition to co-authoring the full Audit of UK democracy, he has published a number of reports and articles, many of them written jointly with Stuart Wilks-Heeg.

In addition, the following individuals have made contributions to specific sections of the Audit: Lewis Baston, Dave Ellis, Raminder Samrai, Stuart Weir, David Beetham, Keith Ewing and David Whyte.



**If significant, and sustained, improvements in British democracy are to be achieved, then a fresh constitutional settlement will be required for the UK as a whole**





“Democratic Audit has established itself as the benchmark for any serious analysis of the condition of British democracy. It cuts through the rhetoric and provides a comprehensive assessment of the democratic balance sheet. This makes it essential reading for everyone who cares about the health of our democracy”

**Professor Tony Wright**, co-editor of the *Political Quarterly*, formerly MP for Cannock Chase (1992-2010) and Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee (1999-2010).

“Plenty of studies have alluded to the crisis facing British democracy. The Democratic Audit is unique in offering both the big picture and the long view, with comprehensive and eye-opening analysis of that crisis, built on hard evidence. The Audit tells it like it is, and politicians of all parties have a duty to respond”

**Katie Ghose**, Chief Executive, Electoral Reform Society

“Once again the Democratic Audit has produced a brilliant report that allows us to gauge how the nature of British democracy has changed in recent years. It is unrivalled in terms of both breadth and depth and is likely to become required reading for both students of politics (professors included) and practitioners of politics. In light of the constitutional dilemmas that are likely to arise in the next couple of years, not least over the future of Scotland, its conclusions about the need for a new constitutional settlement should be considered by MPs and ministers alike”

**Professor Matthew Flinders**, University of Sheffield, author of *Democratic Drift* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

## How Democratic is the UK?

### The 2012 Audit

