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Democracy ‘trapped in the Trump/Brexit mindset’, new Cambridge University centre says

As Britain quits EU, Centre for Future of Democracy report author notes ‘UK is not a developed country’

By Mike Scialom

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The Centre for the Future of Democracy at the Bennett Institute was launched in Cambridge on January 29.

“The goal is to focus research on the really big issues facing democracy around the world,” said David Runciman, professor of politics at Cambridge University, in his opening address. “The Centre for the Future of Democracy takes the long view - a lot of anxiety about democracy is driven by things that have happened quite recently. It’s trapped in the Trump/Brexit mindset, but we’re looking at democracy in the round - the last 100 years, and the next 100 years.”

The launch evening at Clare College’s Riley Auditorium produced the unveiling of a new study: *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020* report, which was presented to the public at the event. It gathered data from 1973 to 2020, which involved 4 million citizens being asked about how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with democracy. Highest-ever recorded levels of democratic dissatisfaction were recorded in the US, Brazil, Mexico, the UK, South Africa, Colombia and Australia. All-time highs were also recorded for Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

Dr Foa said: “34 per cent of US citizens since 1990 have become dissatisfied with democracy - which actually makes them a normal country now, as they were so far ahead. It’s unthinkable that someone like Donald Trump to become president of the United States had they maintained this absolute faith in their own democracy.”

But populism was only possible because the inequality spike solidified following the financial crash of 2007-8.

“Why is dissatisfaction with democracy rising?” the author of the report, Dr Roberto Foa, asks. “The four horsemen of the democratic apocalypse are paralysis, polarisation, perfidy and powerlessness. I don’t see populism as a cause of democratic dissatisfaction.... populism is not so much a cause as an effect of dissatisfaction.”

Dr Foa is a university lecturer in politics and public policy at POLIS, the Department of Politics and International Studies. Speaking to the *Cambridge Independent* before the launch event, Dr Foa said: “We’re living in the middle of a malaise of democracy across the world and Cambridge has a very important contribution to make.”

One reason why democracy has problems is the quality of politicians (with honourable exceptions). This is especially true in the so-called Anglo-Saxon democracies - the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand - where the proportion of citizens dissatisfied with the performance of democracy has doubled since the 1990s. The US accounts for a big chunk of that rise, but even in Britain almost one-fifth (18 per cent) of the population has moved from satisfied to dissatisfied. Why? The authors state that “rising income inequality also decreases satisfaction with democracy”. Making this even worse is the fact that “this sense of exclusion and frustration with political elites is only made stronger when the other effect of income inequality is to skew influence over the political system, providing increased resources for lobbyists and rendering politicians more dependent upon securing donor campaign contributions”.

“The professionalisation of politics has made politics more remote,” Dr Foa commented. “Another is the 24-hour news cycle. That’s made politicians more robotic, because they are just providing soundbites. But the way the party systems have changed is the core of the issue. In the 1970s, both the Labour and the Conservative parties had huge mass membership, and they engaged with people face-to-face so they were internally democratic. There were pathways into politics that existed, so you could go from the shop floor to becoming an MP or Parliamentary worker, but those paths exist no more.”

Another factor that has blown up politics in this country is the failure to recognise what sort of nation we actually are, suggests Dr Foa.

“There is massive regional inequality, in fact the UK is not really a developed country, it’s a medium country with one particularly rich city. London is one of the richest regions in the developed world, but if you look at the UK minus London it’s below Spain and Italy, and much closer to the developing world.”

As to the UK’s departure from the EU, Dr Foa said: “Cambridge is not one of the winners, obviously, of the Brexit process. We live in an interdependent world. The old Westphalian model of sovereignty isn’t appropriate any more, but populist politicians are finding out that there’s no way you can cut yourself off from the rest of the world. The reality for many people is that what happens in one country happens in another country, for instance climate change.”

The launch evening concluded with a Q&A involving Prof Runciman, Dr Foa, Helen Thompson from acclaimed podcast *Talking Politics* and Andrew James Klassen, principal researcher of Human Surveys, who handled the computation of the data.

Pinpointing the start of democracy's woes in the modern era, Ms Thompson said: "The 2008 financial crash is often seen as the starting point, but that was building up from 2005. In 2005 the EU's constitutional treaty fails and has to be put back together at the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007."

The full report is available [here](#).

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