

UK poised to embrace authoritarianism, warns Hansard Society

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Public attitudes emerge that "challenge core tenets of our democracy", says report

The UK public is increasingly disenchanted with MPs and government and ever more willing to welcome the idea of authoritarian leaders who would ignore parliament, a long-running survey of attitudes to politics has shown.

Amid the Brexit chaos, overall public faith in the political system has reached a nadir not previously seen in the 16-year history of the Hansard Society's audit of political engagement, lower even than at the depths of the crisis over MPs' expenses.

Almost three-quarters of those asked said the system of governance needed significant improvement, and other attitudes emerged that "challenge core tenets of our democracy", the audit's authors stated.

The study, compiled annually by the democracy charity, found that when people were asked whether "Britain needs a strong ruler willing to break the rules", 54% agreed and only 23% said no.

In all, 42% of respondents agreed with the idea that many national problems could be dealt with more effectively "if the government didn't have to worry so much about votes in parliament".

Ruth Fox, the director of the Hansard Society, said scepticism about politics, a feeling that the system was rigged and a willingness to consider radical solutions was a potentially dangerous combination.

She said: "Preferring a strong leader who is willing to break the rules, or thinking that the government should be able to tackle the country's problems without worrying about the approval of parliament, would challenge core tenets of our democracy."

“The public feel strongly that the system of governing favours the rich and powerful and that political parties don’t care about the average person. And people are not confident that politicians act in the public interest. Unless something changes, this is a potentially toxic recipe for the future of British politics.”

Hope Not Hate, which monitors extreme groups, said the suspicion of politicians, if coupled with a post-Brexit economic downturn, would be “fertile ground for a far-right populist surge”.

Rosie Carter, a senior policy officer with the group, said: “We are facing a crisis of political mistrust. And when people do not trust traditional political systems, they look elsewhere. That’s when support for political extremes grows.”

The report was based on face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of more than 1,000 people, who were asked a mix of new questions and those asked each year. The proportion who said the system of governing needed “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of improvement rose by five points from 2018, to 77%, the highest level recorded.

The survey found that 25% of the public had confidence in MPs’ handling of Brexit, and overall they were more likely to have faith in the military, judges, civil servants, TV broadcasters, councils, and banks to “act in the public interest”.

Fifty-six per cent of respondents said they believed Britain was in decline, while 63% agreed that “Britain’s system of government is rigged to the advantage of the rich and powerful”.

The overall picture was one of people engaged in politics but with little faith in their ability to shape matters, with 47% saying they felt they had no influence at all over the national direction.

One of the few areas where the populist mood has subsided is backing for referendums. Before the Brexit vote, 76% of people supported more issues being put to the public in referendums, but this has now slumped to 55%, three points lower than 2018.

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