

On-Going Research

This section presents updates on the array of research on contemporary Europe that is currently being carried out at the SEI by faculty and doctoral students.

How New is the New Politics?

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On November 3rd politicians, academics from SEI and LPS, and a public audience gathered at the Dome in Brighton to discuss the question 'How new is the new politics?'. The background was the 2010 UK election, the novelty of a coalition government, and the forthcoming referendum on change to an Alternative Vote system. But will these events change British politics? And how new is this really?

The government is a coalition in name only. The junior supporting party has got little out of it. The most they won from the coalition deal was a referendum on a new voting system that falls far short of the proportional alternative they believe in. The Conservatives will campaign hard for a no vote.

Beyond this the Liberal Democrats' main achievement has been to get bodies in government, rather than successes in ideology and policy. They made a rapid turn around on policies like student tuition fees, which they had been against but now propose doubling and using to replace public funding. They have employed a rhetoric of fairness. But it has been used to legitimate policies that hit certain groups the hardest, the poor and women for instance. David Cameron has allowed the Liberal Democrats to use a discourse of fairness to

hide unfairness. Nick Clegg looked like an astute politician in the election campaign and coalition negotiations. Since then Cameron has looked cleverer, and Clegg the naïve one taken advantage of.



Politics since May 2010 have been old politics. They have involved traditional Conservative preferences. The Comprehensive Spending Review uses deficit reduction as a justification for implementing large-scale cuts to the public sector, especially welfare. The Conservatives say there is no alternative. But there is. The Labour Party favours cuts, but smaller and slower ones. Alternatives include increases in tax, for example on corporations and financial transactions, and the cancellation of Trident. The CSR does not address the basis of the crisis in short-term risk-taking by banks. Policies have been to cut spending to deal with effects, rather than regulate to tackle the root cause.

Think about higher education. The government propose big reductions in government funding of teaching, especially in subjects outside those with a narrow business rationale. Immigration, which provides vital funds for higher education and boosts economic growth, is also being reduced.

These cuts will be partly offset by increases in fees

paid by students. A reason given for this is that there is no money to pay for higher education. But the money is there. It is just to be paid by students rather than taxpayers.

The consequence is that public institutions will become increasingly privatised, funded by consumers instead of the state. Making judgements about what sort of education will provide for the public good will be replaced by education tailored to increasing income on the market. The balance of courses at universities is likely to change to one that favours courses with a narrowly economic justification at the expense of those geared to social need or the enhancement of culture.

The issue of inequality is highlighted further by the fact that the crisis was caused by self-interested decisions made by bankers but is being dealt with by special emphasis on cuts to welfare.

Another effect will be a division between universities charging higher fees and attracting middle class students, and others who charge lower fees attracting mainly working class students - reinforcement of a multi-tier class-based system. Or working class participation, such as it is, will drop and lower tier universities will close down with serious consequences for student places, staff jobs and the economies of local communities.

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The government does not have a democratic mandate for this radical restructuring. The Conservatives do not have a majority of seats and the Liberal Democrats are supporting them in policies that their own voters did not vote for.

Labour post-New Labour has not opposed these policies. In fact they initiated tuition fees and propose less cuts more slowly. New Labourites say new thinking is needed about the boundaries be-

tween the market and the state. But this is another way of talking about the market and privatisation taking over state functions.

The TUC responded to a Spending Review in October that would lead to 490,000 job losses in the public sector, on the government's own figures, with a proposal for a demonstration – to be staged an astonishing 5 months later.

The Labour Party and trade unions have evacuated the space for anti-cuts politics. A hole for the politics of the public good – once at the basis of the labour movement - has been left.

In response to this failure of democracy, party politics and trade unions, people have filled the gap by taking to the streets – the politics of civil society rather than party or state. The public good has had to be defended by people organising outside politics. This is also not new politics. Social movements coming out of society to fill the space left by the failure of mainstream politics is age-old. The labour movement and the public sector came from these roots themselves.

Demonstrators are concerned about traditional issues such as equality and the social good. Higher education protests in the UK have not been the politics of self-interest. Many of the tens of thousands of students who have taken to the streets will not be hit by the changes in government policy. They will have graduated by the time these take effect. They were protesting for their staff, successor generations of students and for values they believed in.

What I have described is old politics – the public good versus the market, questions about the role and size of the state or private provision, issues of welfare, equality and social justice, and questions about functioning democracy, and the role of political parties or social movements. Radical restructuring of the state is being proposed. And the main divide in the debate is quite an old one – between left and right.