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Defending What From Whom? Debating Citizen Disengagement*

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Abstract

This article constitutes a pointed theoretical intervention in the debate opposing Richards and Smith to Flinders on the question of citizen disengagement. Its main contention is that Richards and Smith offer a straw man argument against Flinders by identifying him with positions he does not hold. It thus shows that Richards and Smith falsely identify Flinders with the following positions: (i) there is no need for a major overhaul in the UK's existing democratic and governance arrangements; (ii) the problem of citizen disengagement is caused by the public's insatiable demand for democratic participation; (iii) the problem with British politics is that there is too much democracy and accountability. Finally, the article closes by identifying points of genuine tension between the Richards/Smith position and that defended by Flinders.

Keywords: Flinders; Richards and Smith; citizen disengagement; democracy; 'supply/demand' dichotomy

Introduction

Drawing on the legacy of Sir Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics*, a debate about citizen disengagement in contemporary democracy has recently emerged within the pages of this journal. Matthew Flinders, with his articles and his influential book, *Defending Politics*, has provided the fulcrum for this debate.[1] In these, Flinders diagnoses the problem of political disengagement in twenty-first century liberal democracy as caused by an 'expectations gap' between what citizens hope for and what their political leaders can actually deliver. He goes on to argue for a re-evaluation of democratic politics along the following lines:

> '1. The need for a more muscular and honest form of democratic politics;
> 2. An emphasis on the public being part of the problem and part of the cure; and
> 3. The need to view politics as a counterweight to the market and not the basis of the market.'[2]

In purported response, David Richards and Martin Smith have argued against 'demand-side' accounts of democracy that broadly seek the preservation of the British Political Tradition (the BPT) in its current state.[3] That is to say, they reject the claim that they ascribe – incorrectly, I will argue – to Flinders, according to

which political disengagement is only caused by the public's failure to appreciate the successes of the current system. Instead, they argue that this disengagement is caused by distrust in a set of institutions (that is, the BPT) that is failing at delivering the basics of democracy, namely, a political system where 'people […] have confidence first in parties being able to represent their interests (and that politicians are not just 'in it for themselves'), and second that voting will make a difference.'[4] As a result, they conclude that greater efforts should be made, making use of technological innovations, to enable citizen participation in representative democracy.

These respective arguments are predominantly made on empirical grounds. In other words, the authors under discussion seek to establish the cause of political disengagement, and, while they agree about the existence of an expectations gap, Richards and Smith take themselves to be disagreeing with Flinders about what precisely causes it. In their view, this disagreement also leads to divergent normative agendas: superficially, one that seems to call for less democracy (that is, according to them, Flinders') and one that calls for more (that is, their own).

Although the nature of this dispute seems straightforward, I remain unconvinced as to the depth of this disagreement. My main contention is that Richards and Smith offer a straw man argument against Flinders by identifying him with positions he does not hold. I will thus show that Richards and Smith falsely identify Flinders with the following positions: (i) there is no need for a major overhaul in the UK's existing democratic and governance arrangements; (ii) the problem of citizen disengagement is caused by the public's insatiable demand for democratic participation; (iii) the problem with British politics is that there is too much democracy and accountability. I will address these in turn before finally underlining where real disagreement between these authors is to be found, thus suggesting where fruitful debate on the vital issue of democratic reform ought to concentrate.

What We Ought to Do: When Disagreement is Mere Misunderstanding

It is my claim that Richards and Smith mistakenly associate Flinders' view with 'a rejection of the need for a major overhaul in the UK's existing democratic and governance arrangements.'[5] It is certainly true that Flinders' overall project of defending politics aims for a fuller appreciation of the art of representative democratic politics. It is also true that this leads Flinders to defend those engaged in the arena of politics and to predominantly focus on culture-change (as opposed to institutional change) to solve the problem of citizen disengagement. However, it is incorrect to conclude from this that Flinders definitely rejects the need for major change in the British political context. Allow me to show how this mistake takes two forms:

- Scope: Although Flinders clearly writes in a manner that is well informed by the British political context, the scope of his work is broader, since it aims at

discussing contemporary liberal democracy in its general form, rather than any of its specific forms.[6]

- Consequences: Flinders does call for a renewal of the democratic faith within the citizenry, as well as a deepened appreciation of the costs and limitations involved in actually doing politics. However, nowhere does Flinders exclude the need for meaningful institutional change within existing liberal democracies. Even though he does not discuss specific plans for reform in the body of work under discussion, failure to endorse a specific project is by no means a negation of all such projects. Moreover, one might infer from Flinders' calls for a defence of politics from depoliticization, the market, climate change, and the media that he recognises the need for significant changes in political governance and institutions in contemporary liberal democracies. The fact that his focus in this intellectual project is not on the first order political questions (for example: What policies should we adopt? What set of institutions should we use? What power sharing agreements are we to live under?), but on the second order (such as: How are we to think about politics? How are to conceive of democratic citizenship? In what terms are we to engage in political discourse?), does not imply that first order discussions are not worth having. In fact, much to the contrary, a 'charitable'[7] reader might see a commitment to the need for such discussions in Flinders' emphasis on the second order issues of democratic self-conception and deliberative practices.[8] At the very least, it seems plain wrong to read Flinders as maintaining that culture-change alone within the citizenry will do *all* of the work in solving citizen disengagement. It therefore follows that Flinders does not pre-emptively reject the need for any deeper institutional change. He merely leaves his response to this first order question under-determined.

In short, Flinders does not explicitly reject attempts at reforming democratic and governance arrangements, nor does he offer his own unique preferred set of curative institutional reforms. Rather, he remains agnostic on the matter. Richards and Smith do not: they offer a more ambitious institutional agenda. But this does not amount to a rejection of Flinders' position, because there is no logical inconsistency between proposing a plan and merely not offering one.

What We Ought To Think: Demand/Supply an Unhelpful Dichotomy

One piece of conceptual artillery that lends credence to the existence of a meaningful disagreement between the positions held by Flinders and Smith and Richards is the dichotomy between 'demand' and 'supply' accounts of citizen disengagement. Indeed, by defining themselves in staunch opposition to him, Richards and Smith suggest that Flinders holds the view according to which the problem of citizen disengagement is caused by the public's insatiable demand for democratic participation, because he prefers 'demand-side' to 'supply-side' accounts

of citizen disengagement.[9] Yet, I will show that, once properly contextualised, this too suggests a mistaken understanding of Flinders' position.

In *Defending Politics*, Flinders makes significant use of the idea that we can explain citizen disengagement with the use of a 'demand' and 'supply' model. He claims that 'closing or reducing the 'expectations gap' that has apparently emerged between the governors and the governed can be achieved in three main ways:

Option 1: increasing supply [of public good] (moving the bottom-bar up);
Option 2: reducing demand [for public goods] (moving the top-bar down); or,
Option 3: a combination of Options 1 and 2 (close the gap from above and below).'[10]

Flinders then goes on to argue that the twenty-first century demands a science of politics that will undoubtedly focus on Option 2, 'or more realistically Option 3', because he believes the desires of the public to be too insatiable, our problems too complex, and available resources insufficient to meaningfully satisfy public demand for public goods. Ultimately, he concludes that '[s]aving politics from *itself* and embracing a more honest account of politics therefore demands accepting that focusing on *supply* is less important now than focusing on *demand*.'[11]

Richards and Smith maintain that significant work can be done to reduce the expectations gap by introducing greater democratic engagement of the citizenry in political decision-making. They thus stress the importance of democratic *supply* over that of *demand* – hence, the apparent disagreement.

However, I maintain that this is no real disagreement at all. Even though Richards and Smith take Flinders to be their central opponent, there is a crucial difference in their respective understandings of the 'supply'/'demand' dichotomy. On the one hand, on Flinders' account, this dichotomy focuses on political expectations and their fulfilment through the provision of public goods: 'supply' here refers to the actual institutional capacity to provide public goods and 'demand' refers to the public's desire for such public goods. On the other hand, for Richards and Smith this dichotomy focuses on the locus of political action: 'supply' corresponds to the institutional provision of democratic decisional processes and 'demand' denotes the citizenry's willingness to act as democratic agents.[12] In other words, Richards and Smith conceive of the 'supply'/'demand' dichotomy in procedural democratic terms, whereas Flinders conceives of it in terms of the relationship between citizen expectations and the political capacity to deliver public goods.

Therefore, when Flinders claims that our efforts should focus on the demand-side of the equation, he is not referring to the need to keep the citizenry (as opposed to representatives) out of the political process of collective decision-making, but to the need for the public to countenance the actual capacity of any political arrangement to deliver public goods. In other words, although he does claim that the public's insatiable demand for public goods is an important factor in accounting for citizen

disengagement, he does not claim that the problem of citizen disengagement is caused by the public's insatiable demand for democratic participation.

Thus, the 'supply'/ 'demand' dichotomy, in this specific debate, seems to obscure more than it enlightens, since it suggests that all concerned authors understand this dichotomy in like manner, when they simply do not.

What We Ought To Say: Distinguishing How from What

Ultimately, I think that Richards and Smith take themselves to be disputing Flinders because, in their eyes, 'Flinders suggests there is too much democracy and accountability in the UK.'[13]

The formulations used by Flinders do often suggest that the problem with contemporary democracy is too much democracy and accountability (that is, a politically under-educated public, an overly aggressive media culture, and overly bureaucratic accountability mechanisms). However, if one reads his articles and book on the subject in their entirety it becomes clear that, in his view, it is not so much that there is too much democracy or accountability, but rather that there is too much of the wrong kind of democracy and accountability. For example, he writes:

> '[T]he problem with hyper-democracy is too much of a shallow, disengaged, and generally aggressive form of individualized market-democracy and too little of a deeper and more socially embedded model based on active and engaged citizenship. We need less shouting and more listening, less pessimism and more optimism, but most of all we need more people – from a broader range of backgrounds – to step into the arena in order to demonstrate just why democratic politics matters.'[14]

This distinction between too much democracy and accountability and too much of the wrong kind of democracy and accountability forms the basis of Flinders' wider argument about the need to shift from the 'politics of pessimism' to the 'politics of optimism'. That is why a greater degree of clarity in the use of this language might help in refocusing this discussion as it goes forward.

Conclusion: What is Left to Discuss

In this article, I have endeavoured to show that much of the presumed disagreement between Flinders and Richards and Smith is not as substantive as it may at first appear, because Richards and Smith mistakenly associate Flinders with positions he does not hold. Therefore, from a normative standpoint, it ought to be clear that we need not necessarily pit Flinders' second-order conception of engaged citizenship against Richards and Smith's first order democratic institutional reformist proposals. We may even see them as potentially complimentary, since greater

democratic participation requires and might hopefully yield a more politically literate citizenry. Yet, it is worth pointing out that points of genuine tension and potential contradiction between these authors remain. These are as follows:

(a) Priority: Flinders' emphasis on culture change suggests that he gives priority to cultural change in addressing citizen disengagement, while Richards and Smith give priority to institutional change.
(b) Cynicism: Flinders claims that widespread cynicism among the citizenry about the political class is both unfounded and detrimental to democratic citizen engagement, while Richards and Smith claim that this cynicism is not only well founded but also spurs on deeper levels of democratic scrutiny within the citizenry.
(c) Blame: Flinders insists on the need to overcome blame culture in politics, yet he appears to displace this blame upon citizens for failing to become 'men and women in the arena,' while Richards and Smith blame the BPT (that is, existing institutions instead of politicians or citizens) for failing to earn the trust of the citizenry.
(d) What Counts as Politics: Even though Flinders and Richards and Smith agree on the need for renewal in the ways of doing politics, they seem to disagree about the methods of accommodating such novel forms of political action, with Flinders seemingly favouring the more formal avenues and Richards and Smith wholeheartedly embracing informal sites of political engagement.
(e) Citizenship as a Social Identity: At the core of this discussion lies the question of how we account for the behaviour of citizens *qua* citizens (that is to say, how citizens act when they engage with any political aspect of their lifeworld as citizens, as opposed to any other social identity). Flinders' use of public goods and Richards and Smith's use of democratic trust to characterise the 'expectations gap' reveal different conceptions of the social identity of the citizen – the former suggesting a more economistic model and the latter a more pro-social and democratic one.

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[1] M. Flinders, 'In Defence of Politics', The Political Quarterly, Vol. 81, No. 3, July–September 2010, pp. 309-326; 'In Defence of Politics: Fifty Years On', The Political Quarterly, Vol. 83, No. 4, October–December 2012, pp. 639-644; and, *Defending Politics: Why Democracy Matters in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

[2] M. Flinders, *Defending Politics*, op. cit., 2012, p. 131.

[3] D. Richards & M. J. Smith, 'In Defence of British Politics Against the British Political Tradition', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 1, January–March 2015, pp. 41-51.
[4] Ibid. p. 44.
[5] Ibid. p. 43.
[6] M. Flinders, 'In Defence of Politics', op. cit., 2010, p. 310: 'As such, it is important to realise the argument I seek to make—my defence of politics—has merit far beyond our shores.' And on the same page: '[Liberal democracy] delivers far more than most 'critical citizens' in the USA, the UK and other 'disaffected democracies' realize'.
[7] Here I mean 'charitable' in the sense Donald Davidson summarises thus: 'We make maximum sense of the words and thoughts of others when we interpret in a way that optimizes agreement', in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 47 (1973 -1974), p. 19.
[8] Further underscoring this point, the eager reader will also find that Flinders has, in previous projects, actively analysed and commented on detailed reformist proposals in the following publications: 'The Half-Hearted Constitutional Revolution' in Dunleavy, P et al. eds. *Developments in British Politics 8* (London: Palgrave, 2006); *Democratic Drift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); 'Explaining Majoritarian Modification', *International Political Science Review*, 2010, 31(1), pp. 1-20.
[9] D. Richards & M. J. Smith, 'In Defence of British Politics Against the British Political Tradition', op. cit., 2015, p. 43-4
[10] M. Flinders, *Defending Politics,* op. cit., 2012, p. 58.
[11] Ibid. p. 59.
[12] Admittedly, this understanding is the paradigmatic understanding of this dichotomy within the literature on citizen disaffection – see, for example, Colin Hay's *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
[13] Richards and Smith, 'In Defence of British Politics Against the British Political Tradition', op. cit., 2015, p. 49.
[14] M. Flinders, 'Do we have too much democracy?', 2 July 2014, http://blog.oup.com/2014/07/too-much-democracy/ (access date: 28/05/2015).