

# **McDougall Trust**

**Arthur McDougall Fund**

**Promoting public understanding of  
electoral democracy**

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## **ANNUAL REVIEW July 2016**

### **The Electoral Climate in 2015-16**

W219, Vox Studios, 1-45 Durham Street, London SE11 5JH

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

admin@mcdougall.org.uk

Telephone: 07469 245072

Registered Charity No. 212151

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## **The Electoral Climate in 2015-16**

McDougall Trust operates in an environment in which short-term, sometimes frenzied, political developments sometimes disguise, but can also reflect, significant long-term changes. The Trust attempts to identify those which matter most to its central concern with public understanding of the way elections work and contribute to democracy.

### ***UK General Election, 7 May 2015***

The most significant event during its 2014-15 financial year was the unexpected outcome of the May 2015 UK general election. The unexpectedness owed much to the apparent failure of the opinion poll predictions, which had pointed (with remarkable consistency across different polling methods and over the period of the campaign) to a House of Commons in which no one party would have a majority. The discrepancy required explanation, the subject of the Trust's research workshop in April 2016.

Sampling issues, which turned out to be the main reason for the discrepancy, also highlight how rapid changes in technology and society are rendering obsolete methods devised when social structures and ways of communicating were different. The problems faced by opinion pollsters have their parallels for political parties, campaigning groups or individuals pursuing a political career.

On the face of it, the outcome of the May 2015 election looked in the other direction, restoring a familiar feature of the party landscape – the production of a one-party majority in the Commons from the inter-action of party competition and the voting system. The political atmosphere of the previous five years, with its discussion of coalition and of multi-party politics, appeared to dissipate suddenly in this return to “normal”.

Of the main domestic constitutional changes on the 2010-15 political reform agenda, only one had stuck: fixed-term parliaments. Yet the detail of the way people voted in May 2015 showed that much more had changed; there was not a real return to normality.

The Scottish independence referendum in September 2014 had produced a clear, though not substantial, majority for maintenance of the United Kingdom with only limited change, taking the form of further devolution of powers to Scotland. Yet eight months later, the Scottish people's vote, with the independence-seeking party winning all but three of Scotland's Westminster seats, sent shock waves through the UK's party system as well as raising unexpected further questions about how its electoral system worked.

Another consequence has been renewed interest in devolution within England, especially to the major cities of the North. The November 2015 special issue of the Trust's journal *Representation* examined the devolution project in Greater Manchester. The Trust suspects that a deeper and more comprehensive debate about territorial government throughout the UK is likely, and perhaps necessary, before long.

That what is now the third largest party in the House of Commons - the Scottish National Party - is only the fifth party in the popular UK vote is not the only part of the May 2015 election result to raise a question; no party has ever in the past won a vote anywhere near UKIP's 12.6% only to be rewarded by a single MP (the rise of UKIP was the subject of the Trust's March 2015 workshop).

Furthermore, the working of the system as between the two largest parties suddenly changed. From 1974 (when in February the Conservatives were ahead in votes but Labour won more seats), analysts and parties had accepted that there was a technical bias in the way the electoral system worked, sometimes ascribed to constituency boundaries.

The Trust has in the past examined this issue, and the process of constituency boundary drawing. In May 2015, without any change in boundaries or the rules, the bias switched radically to favour the Conservatives rather than Labour – a switch whose impact has yet to be widely acknowledged.

***Party leadership election—Labour Party, Summer 2015***

Summer 2015 saw another unexpected development in the way electors within the UK are enabled to participate in politics. The election of the Labour Party leader by a new process involving registered supporters as well as party members carried wider implications about how political parties reflect and stimulate democracy. Forty years ago in 1976, the Liberal Party kicked off a process of change by switching the election of its leader from its MPs to its members. This change has been since followed by all UK parties in a series of trials which have sought to balance the role of MPs and a wider electorate. The Labour experiment of 2015 not only produced the widest electorate yet to elect a party leader in the UK; its outcome announced a stark discrepancy between the preferences of its MPs and those of its members. The implications for both the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy and the role of political party members demand careful consideration. The Trust's July 2016 workshop accordingly focused on the motivation and contribution of those who join parties.

The Trust is conscious that this change in the UK is an instance of what is happening across mature democracies. The largest-scale open primary yet held in Europe, the selection of the Socialist Party/Left candidate for the French presidential election in 2011, when some three million people voted, was subject to scrutiny at a Trust workshop in July 2012; there are now plans by the French Centre-Right for a parallel open primary in November 2016.

Primaries developed much earlier in the United States of America, and the enthusiastic public involvement in the recent presidential primaries is notable. The Trust considers it is well-placed to draw on expertise on such changes, and to examine lessons from them for UK audiences.

### ***UK Referendum on the European Union, 23 June 2016***

As this report was being finalised, the vigorous June 2016 referendum debate about the UK's membership of the EU raised further questions about democracy in the contemporary world. Although the leading issues presented in the referendum campaign (e.g. economics and migration) lie outside the Trust's remit, the widespread concern about whether the European Union was, or could by its nature be, democratic is relevant to the Trust's purpose, while the actual outcome of the referendum itself in favour of Leave has left the UK's familiar political (and economic) order badly shaken.

Many questions, both theoretical and practical, have been raised by the result not least concerning the capacity of democracy to operate across national frontiers; the nature of the UK's future institutional (and economic and social) relations with the EU; the equivalent future arrangements between the five main component parts of the British Isles (including the Irish Republic); the potential for constitutional conflict arising from the clash of principles of parliamentary sovereignty and deliberative, representative democracy (exemplified by the House of Commons) on the one hand against expressions of the popular will through direct democracy (in this instance exemplified by use of the referendum device) on the other; and in light of the unsettled reactions within the main UK political parties to the result, the relationships between party leaders, their party members and the wider electorate.

All these questions and more arising from the (largely) unanticipated referendum outcome will provide an abundance of material for study in years to come by thinkers, writers and scholars in political science and a variety of associated disciplines. McDougall Trust will hope to encourage and support such study and to share the findings of such research with a wider audience.

An independent body, operating as a charitable trust, can have a valuable role in providing a forum for analysis, discussion and reflection amongst those wishing to understand better and so to improve the way democracy operates. We are confident that the Trust is well-placed to play such a role, and that the need for this role will augment.

### **Aims of McDougall Trust**

*July 2016*

McDougall Trust exists to advance knowledge and understanding of, and research into, the forms, functions and development of electoral democracy. It has developed a longstanding focus on representative institutions, voting systems and elections.

McDougall's principal activities are:

- the Lakeman reference library and archive collections on electoral studies;
- an information service including an online catalogue of its reference library resources;
- a quarterly journal: *Representation: Journal of Representative Democracy*; and
- periodic research and information workshops

## **Strategic Vision for McDougall Trust**

To be a forum for electoral democracy, visibly influencing the political arena and the quality of public debate

### **Strategic Priority 1:**

To be a recognised and valued information and evidence provider

### **Strategic Priority 2:**

To shape debate and influence opinion formers

### **Strategic Priority 3:**

To be sustainable and collaborative; develop partnerships and complementary relationships

### **Trustees at July 2016**

Natasha Bolsin

Derek McAuley

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