

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 21 - Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Engaging Citizens with Democratic Politics
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Award-winning and ESRC-funded research by Professor Matthew Flinders and Professor Colin Hay into political participation and public engagement has led not only to direct and on-going changes within the political system (notably in relation to the operation and governance of parliamentary select committees) but has also delivered wider impact through the promotion of a major public debate – embracing several million people within and beyond the UK – concerning the need to understand and defend the essence of democratic politics. Additional impact has been delivered on parliamentary outreach both in the UK and internationally through the development with the Houses of Parliament of partnership-based teaching of politics. The breadth and depth of this public scholarship has been recognised through a range of awards and prizes (including the Political Studies Association’s Political Communicator of the Year prize and an ESRC Impact Prize).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Flinders and Hay have maintained and further strengthened a long-standing tradition of research within the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield on political engagement and participation. While examining the same empirical material and data from different angles and positions, their research shares a clear focus on the concept of depoliticisation, the management of public expectations regarding democratic politics and, critically, the need for academics to play a role in promoting the public understanding of politics and enhanced engagement by citizens with democratic politics.</p> <p>Research by Flinders and Hay has not only offered new analytical narratives for what may be fuelling changing social attitudes (i.e. Hay’s influential work on ‘<i>why we hate politics</i>’), but it has also challenged (both academically and publicly) dominant assumptions about what politics can/should deliver (i.e. Flinders’ <i>Defending Politics</i>). Hay’s award-winning work (including the PSA’s Richard Rose prize in 2009) has explored both the demand-side and supply-side dynamics of political relationships, which has produced new insights into the role of the tabloid media in generating cynicism about politics. Hay has also provided a new understanding of external sources of depoliticisation, such as the effects of globalisation [R1]. Subsequent ESRC-funded research (with Gerry Stoker and the Hansard Society) further developed and deepened this work through innovative combinations of survey and focus group techniques that delivered new insights into the relationship between the public and the media regarding political processes, institutions and politicians [R2].</p> <p>Flinders has examined political disengagement and political apathy reflected in, for example, his use of Lijphartian political analysis to trace and understand the changing nature of British politics [R3, R4], the deployment of principal-agent theory and historical institutionalism in relation to British governance (<i>Walking Without Order</i>, OUP 2009), his reconceptualisation of the parliamentary decline thesis (with Alex Kelso, winner of the prize for best article in the <i>British Journal of Politics and International Relations</i>, 2011 [R5]; and, most recently, his co-authored work on the theory of moral panics and the concept of ‘folk devils’ in relation to contemporary political phenomena (<i>Contemporary Politics</i> 2012, with response pieces from Stoker, Alastair Campbell and others). In <i>Defending Politics</i> (OUP, 2012) [R6] Flinders pulled-together these strands of scholarship to challenge prevailing popular anti-political opinion and to develop an argument in favour of ‘engaged scholarship’. This latter theme was subsequently developed when Flinders’ arguments on ‘the tyranny of relevance’ and ‘the art of translation’ formed the focus of a special edition of <i>Political Studies Review</i>, including contributions from the former and current editor of the <i>American Political Science Review</i>.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>R1. Smith, N. and Hay, C. 2008. ‘Mapping the political discourse of globalisation and European integration in the United Kingdom and Ireland empirically’, <i>European Journal of Political</i></p>

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Research, 47(3), 359-82. doi: [10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00728.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00728.x)

- R2. Hay, C & Stoker, G. 2009 'Revitalising Politics: Have we lost the plot?', *Representation* 45(3), 225-236.
- R3. Flinders, M. *Democratic Drift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- R4. Flinders, M., Vatter, A and Bernauer, J. 2013. 'A global trend towards democratic convergence? A Lijphartian analysis of advanced democracies', *Comparative Political Studies* doi: [10.1177/0010414013488553](https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013488553)
- R5. Flinders, M & Kelso, A. 2011. 'Mind the Gap: Political Analysis, Public Expectations and the Parliamentary Decline Thesis', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13(2), 249-268. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00434.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00434.x) [winner of the BJPIR Best Article Prize].
- R6. Flinders, M. *Defending Politics- Why Democracy Matters in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). [Nominated for *Total Politics Political Book awards 2013*].

4. Details of the impact

The underpinning research has informed three main pathways to impact : the promotion of a major public debate; informing parliamentary reform and the promotion of public engagement; the delivery of a major impact on parliamentary outreach both nationally and internationally.

The Promotion of a Major Public Debate

In a period in which defending politics – and therefore politicians – is a highly unfashionable endeavour, the work of Hay and Flinders has promoted wider public engagement through, for example, the written and broadcast media: Flinders' *Defending Politics* was the subject of a BBC Television *BOOKtalk* programme and both Hay and Flinders have taken their arguments to a wider audience through invitations to literary and book festivals: Hay was invited to the Gothenburg literary festival while Flinders spoke at the Holland Park literary festival with the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, discussing why politics still matters in the century of 'disaffected democrats' and political disillusionment. Flinders also spoke at literary festivals in Edinburgh and Cheltenham. In addition, ESRC-funded research involving Hay informed an event in the Houses of Parliament with the Hansard Society that presented the Audit of Political Engagement 9, Part 1: Media and Politics on which Hay advised. In June 2012, Hay working with the Hansard Society used data arising from ESRC-funded research to underpin a submission of evidence to the Leveson Inquiry into Press Standards that clearly demonstrated the negative impact of tabloid readership on attitudes towards politics among citizens. This evidence fed into broader campaigning by Lord Puttnam who, referring directly to the evidence presented by Hay with the Hansard Society to the Leveson Inquiry, commented that: 'I believe our developing concept of a duty of care should be extended to "a care for our shared but fragile democratic values". After all, the absence of a duty of care within many professions can amount to accusations of negligence and, that being the case, are we really comfortable with the thought that we are being, in effect, negligent in regard to the long term health of our own democracies and the values that underpin them? For those that remain in doubt the clearest possible case is made out in the Hansard Society's recently published Audit of Political Engagement 9, Part 2: Media and Politics' [S1].

Further evidence that this strand of engaged scholarship has influenced political and public debates came in May 2010 when the Leader of the House of Commons, Sir George Young, cited Flinders' research and writing in his inaugural speech and noted '**In a recent speech "A Defence of Politics" – a title which has a famous lineage, leading back through Tony Wright and originating, of course, with Bernard Crick – the Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield, Matthew Flinders, said that, "the public hankers after a more optimistic, balanced and informed account of politics". I agree**'. [S2].

The reach and significance of the debate was intensified during the Autumn of 2011 as a result of Flinders' three-part series – *In Defence of Politics* - on BBC Radio 4 that attracted a listening audience in **excess of 1.7 million** [S3]. Referring to Flinders' research and a meeting with him at the BBC, Alistair Campbell wrote on his blog that it is: 'heartening to find an academic willing to put his head above the parapet and swim against the tide of negativity that flows from the building in which we sat'. Hay and Flinders continue to use their research as the basis for practitioner and public interventions. Flinders' research and writing also formed the basis of invited submissions of

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evidence to, *inter alia*, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority [S4], the Lords Committee on the Constitution [S5] and the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee. Contributions have been made by Flinders to a vast range of public events. Highlights include a presentation 'Defending Politics' to the Royal Society of Arts, the video of which has attracted more than 5300 Youtube views and more than 300 participants in on-line debates (as of October 2013). During a plenary event at the PSA annual conference in Belfast in April 2012 the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, praised Flinders' contribution to promoting public engagement and the public understanding of politics [S6] and, later that year, Flinders received the **Communicator of the Year** award from the Political Studies Association of the UK.

Parliamentary Reform and Public Engagement

Since publication in 2002 of his article 'Shifting the Balance? Parliament, the Executive and the British Constitution' [winner of the Harrison Prize for Best Article in *Political Studies*] Flinders has maintained an active relationship with a range of select committees and more recently with the Liaison Committee (the committee made up of the chairs of all the select committees). In 2012 Flinders was invited to contribute to the Liaison Committee's review of 'the effectiveness, resources and powers of select committees' and used this opportunity to promote a specific argument about the need for select committees to reach out more broadly and play a more vigorous role in promoting the public understanding and accessibility of politics. He was the only witness to make such an argument and pressed his case whilst giving oral evidence to the full committee on 23 February 2012. In November 2012 the Committee published its final report [S7] and drew from Flinders' arguments that emphasised the dual role of committees: first, to hold the executive to account; and, secondly, to promote public understanding of politics. This then formed the basis for a new 'core task' for *all* select committees:

'PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT - Task 10: To assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public' (HC 697, paras. 15-17).

In attesting to Flinders' impact on public engagement by select committees, the Senior Policy Analyst to the House of Lords Constitution Committee has stated that Flinders' **'impact is characterised as much by its breadth as by its depth ... Flinders contribution to the work of parliamentary select committees extends well beyond the Constitution Committee. He has made a number of invited submissions, both oral and written, to all the key House of Commons committees ... The fact that Prof. Flinders was invited to give oral evidence to the Commons Liaison Committee is particularly indicative of the high regard with which he is held'** [S8]. Flinders also authored the guidance document for social scientists who want to engage with Parliament and Select Committees that now forms part of the **ESRC 'Impact Toolkit'** [S9] and that has also been adopted by a range of other professional associations (e.g. the Campaign for Science and Engineering).

Impacts on parliamentary outreach

The final layer of this case study extends beyond the University of Sheffield to deliver impact on the outreach and educational activities of parliaments in the UK and internationally. This impact links back to work by Hay and Flinders' by encouraging students of politics to directly engage both with practitioners and with modes of parliamentary governance.

In 2012, after twelve months of negotiation and co-operation with the Speakers of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the University of Sheffield launched the first ever undergraduate module to be **formally accredited and co-taught by the Houses of Parliament**. Seminars are led by a combination of senior parliamentary staff and former or retired MPs and ministers. Instead of a standard essay, students are required to produce a 'memorandum of evidence' for a hypothetical select committee inquiry. The module has been highly successful. For example, eight students have received 'parliamentary studies' scholarships from the Higher Education Academy. In November 2012 the Speaker of the House of Commons announced his decision to extend this Sheffield-led initiative across the UK and, in January 2013, fourteen other universities were selected to offer the module for the 2013-14 academic year. The Sheffield-based pilot has had a major impact on reinvigorating the study of Parliament across the UK. The Head of Public Information and Outreach at the Houses of Parliament notes the impact on parliamentary

outreach as: **'the module provides a positive opportunity for parliamentary staff to travel across the UK to promote the study of parliament ...Parliamentary staff are therefore engaging with academics in new ways'** [S10]. This impact is now extending internationally with the module being delivered by: the University of Hong Kong and the Legislative Council of Hong Kong; the University of Sydney and the Parliament of New South Wales; and between Murdoch University in Perth and the Parliament of Western Australia. Recognition occurred in 2013 at the ESRC's national 'Celebrating Impact' competition at which **Flinders won a prize in the category 'Impact Champion'**.

To conclude, the impact of this research is **a set of demonstrable reforms, initiatives and innovations that range from policy-specific or impacts on parliamentary outreach to far broader 'public engagement' and 'relevance-based' achievements**. Each can be traced back to underpinning research by Flinders and Hay. This impact demonstrates a contemporary manifestation of the long-standing commitment of the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield to engaged scholarship. This distinctive research and associated high-level and extensive impact has effectively bridged politics *as theory* and politics *as practice* at a number of levels. On the basis of the success of his earlier programme, Flinders was commissioned in May 2013 by BBC Radio 4 to write and present a second programme on the theme of political literacy and understanding focusing on the impact of political comedy and satire on young people. This project – *Joking Apart?* – involves interviews with leading writers, comedians, politicians and commentators, including in the United States, Italy, Australia and the UK, investigating the role of satire and comedy as a political medium.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. The Guardian *Comment is Free* (<http://tinyurl.com/phk6uw2>) corroborates the claim about the impact of Hay's research on press standards.
- S2. Speech by Rt Hon. Sir George Young, Leader of the House of Commons, May 2010 (for which an audio file is available) corroborates the claim about the impact of Flinders' research on the public understanding of politics.
- S3. 'In Defence of Politics', three-part series broadcast in 2011, BBC Radio 4 and available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0150mt8> corroborates the claim about the wider public impact through broadcast media of Flinders' research. Broadcast dates are Episode 1: 26/9/11; Episode 2: 3/10/11; Episode 3: 10/10/11
- S4. Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, Jan. 2013 *Reviewing MPs Pay & Pensions*. (<http://tinyurl.com/m85gpkw>) corroborates the claim about the impact of Flinders' research through direct references on pages 11, 13, 14, 35, 37, 42, 46, 51, 59, 60, 64.
- S5. HL 177 *The Process of Constitutional Change*, House of Lords Committee on the Constitution, Session 2010-2012 (<http://tinyurl.com/py2wv9x>) corroborates the claim about the impact of Flinders' research through direct references on pages 10, 12, 13, 14, 21 and 25.
- S6. Speech by the Speaker of the House of Commons at the Political Studies Association, April 2012 corroborates Flinders' impact on the public understanding of politics.
- S7. HC 697 *The Effectiveness of Select Committees*, Liaison Committee, Session 2012-2013 (<http://tinyurl.com/nfracm9>) corroborates the claim about impact on reform of select committees by making reference to Flinders on 28 occasions (pp9, Ev1-10, Ev13-15)
- S8. Letter of Corroboration from Policy Analyst, House of Lords Constitutional Affairs Committee corroborates claims about Flinders' impact on debates about parliamentary and constitutional reform
- S9. The ESRC toolkit on engaging with Parliament corroborates the impact of Flinders' research on the academic community: <http://tinyurl.com/ph8r8tz>
- S10. Letter of corroboration from the Head of Public Information and Outreach at the Houses of Parliament corroborates the impact of the parliamentary studies module on outreach.