

Institution: Oxford University
Unit of Assessment: UOA21
Title of case study: Reanimating participatory democracy on the left of British politics (21-05)
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor Stears' research addresses a widespread concern that modern political parties are increasingly disconnected from traditions of democratic participation, with adverse consequences for political engagement and the wider quality of democracy. His research develops strategies to recover and reanimate twentieth-century traditions of participatory democracy in present day politics. The work has (1) contributed to outlining a new democratic agenda for the British Left, (2) shaped a reorientation of the policy agenda of the Institute for Public Policy Research, one of Britain's leading think tanks (3) influenced discussions in the Labour Party, especially Ed Miliband's 'One Nation project', and (4) informed the on-going Collins Review of the Labour Party's organisational structure. The significance of Stears' research impacts is evidenced by his appointment as Ed Miliband's Chief Speechwriter in May 2013.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Marc Stears joined the University of Oxford in 2002 (initially as a University Lecturer, promoted to Professor in 2010) with a strong research interest in the relationship between democratic theory and democratic practice. His goal is to relate developments in theory – especially the debate between 'deliberative democrats' and 'democratic realists' – to the democratic ideals of actual political movements. The research focuses on traditions of twentieth-century democratic thinking that are explicitly anti-bureaucratic, sceptical of expert elites, concerned with grass-roots community organising, and interested in developing mass participation and the education of local democratic leaderships.</p> <p>This work speaks to a normative concern that present day politics and parties have become too disconnected from the communities they represent, and that the quality of democracy is harmed by the failure to secure substantively meaningful and effective participation in the political process. Its aim is to recover traditions of democratic thought that offer insights relevant to building more participatory, legitimate, and just forms of democracy.</p> <p>Democratic theory</p> <p>Stears' research shows that many of the fundamental democratic ideas in the political movements he examined have vanished from serious debate in more recent democratic theory. His work argues for the continued relevance of these earlier insights, particularly in thinking on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the relationship between communitarian and democratic ideals - that democratic ideals depend on strong communitarian norms [R1]; • the necessary qualities of leadership - that qualities of collaboration and cooperation are necessary to the exercise of leadership in democratic societies and organisations [R1]; • the nature of political virtue - that self-restraint and established practices of complex social reciprocity are vital to the success of social movements [R1]; • the connection between immediate concerns and long-term efforts at social transformation - that short-term crises are often essential catalysts of long-term social change [R6]; • the relationship between organisational forms of movements and the nature of fundamental political ideas - that it is possible to mitigate the apparent tensions between the radicalism of movement politics and the more conservative tendencies of mainstream political representation [R5]. <p>Contemporary democratic theory, the work argues, has become unhelpfully distanced from the day-to-day concerns of actual political practitioners, and contemporary political practice requires more guidance from democratic theory than it is currently offered [R1, R3]. Stears' work aims to revive these forgotten theoretical traditions because they relate directly and immediately to contemporary politics.</p>

American democratic traditions

In 2006, Stears was awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship to pursue a major study of the American democratic tradition. This area of research traces the development of radical democratic thinking across the 20th century [R2, R4]. The work culminated in the publication of a monograph, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* [R1], which seeks to recover ideas that can re-energize democratic activism today. Stears argues that contemporary politics can learn from the radical democratic traditions forged in the twentieth century by political activists, including progressives, trade unionists, civil rights campaigners, and members of the student New Left. Re-evaluating the moral and strategic arguments, and the triumphs and excesses, of this radical democratic tradition, Stears contends that it still offers a compelling account of citizen behaviour - one that is fairer, more inclusive, and more truly democratic than those advanced by political theorists today.

The New Realism

Stears develops these ideas further in studies of the “new realism” in political theory. This research benefitted from a sustained collaboration with the leading political philosopher, Bonnie Honig (Brown University USA/American Bar Foundation) whose work similarly examines the ways in which democratic political theory can be brought into closer and more profitable relationship with real world political concerns [R3]. Honig and Stears’ essay on the “new realism” builds on a critique of much contemporary political theory as too ahistorical, abstract and removed from the political realities that the theory is supposed to help us understand. The research proposes a “new realism” in political theory that is sensitive to lived experience, alert to the politics of power and exclusion, and that draws from history the aspiration to press beyond the status quo – an aspiration to struggle for forms of democracy that offer greater legitimacy and justice.

3. References to the research

- [R1] Stears, Marc., *Demanding Democracy: American radicals in search of a new politics*. (Princeton University Press.) 2010
- [R2] Jackson, Ben., and Stears, Marc., *Liberalism as Ideology. Essays in Honour of Michael Freeden*. (Oxford University Press) 2012.
- [R3] Stears Marc, *The ‘New Realism’* (with Bonnie Honig) in Floyd, Jonathan & Stears, Marc. (eds.) *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism, Real Politics and Contemporary Political Thought*, (Cambridge University Press), 2011.
- [R4] Stears, Marc., *How the US State Department Works* (with Desmond King), *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2011): 505-517.
- [R5] Stears, Marc., *Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion*, *British Journal of Political Science* 37 (2007): 505-31.
- [R6] Stears, Marc., *Public Reason and Political Action: Justifying Citizen Behavior in Actually Existing Democracies* (with Mathew Humphrey), *Review of Politics*, vol 74, issue 2, spring 2012, pp.285-306.

Evidence of research quality: The research was funded by a prestigious, competitively awarded six month Leverhulme Research Fellowship for the project “*Radical democrats: Reconsidering US democracy*” (in 2006), which culminated in the publication of Stears’ monograph *Demanding Democracy* [R1] with Princeton University Press.

4. Details of the impact

Over the last five years, Stears’ research on the democratic ideas and practice of previous eras has informed a process of political change on the left of UK politics. His emphasis on the importance of grass-roots involvement, participatory democratic organisation, and communitarian ideals has helped to define a new democratic agenda for the British Left, shaped proposals to introduce more participatory policy processes in a range of policy areas, and influenced the debates about political orientation and organisation within the Labour Party.

(1) Shaping a democratic agenda for the British Left

On the basis of the research presented in *Demanding Democracy* [R1] and related works, Stears was invited in 2010 by the think tank Demos to participate in a research project on the ways in which British politics might benefit from developments in democratic research. Stears wrote a paper entitled *Active Equality* [C1]; drawing extensively on *Demanding Democracy*, he argued that the centre-left would benefit from a return to the more decentralised and participative approaches to policymaking and implementation that had marked earlier historical moments in Britain and America [R1 & R4]. Stears was then asked by Maurice Glasman and others to help convene a series of seminars on new directions for policymaking and party organisation (hosted by University College, Oxford and London Metropolitan University). These seminars were attended by heads of major think tanks, Labour politicians, senior journalists and representatives of civil society bodies. Stears produced one of three major papers for the seminars, entitled *Democracy, Leadership and Organising*. The collected papers were published electronically (simultaneously by the Christian Socialist Movement, Compass, the Fabian Society, and Progress and Soundings) as *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox* (downloaded over 100,000 times in the first month after publication) and became popularly known as the *Blue Labour Book* [C2]. The book provided the foundation for the subsequent impact of Stears' research within the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and then within the Labour Party.

(2) Shaping the agenda of the Institute for Public Policy Research

On the basis of his research and contributions to the *Blue Labour* debate Stears was invited by the IPPR to help re-direct its research agenda (2010-13). He produced a short book, *Everyday Democracy* (2011) that presented the major findings of his previous research in an accessible format. The book argued that democracy can be enhanced by empowering people and communities to influence policymaking and implementation, through decentralization and everyday forms of participation [C3]. These ideas challenged the traditional Westminster model of top-down policymaking, and helped to refocus IPPR's approach so as to take account of the importance of democratic participation in decision-making. Stears applied his insights in structuring IPPR projects, including work on housing policy, cultural integration, the living wage, responsible business practices, and social security policy [C4]. He also convened a series of internal and external seminars introducing IPPR researchers to major new ideas in political theory, especially ideas related to the "new realism" [R3]. These resulted in changes in the intellectual direction of IPPR which are described in detail by the Director Nick Pearce in a recent article for the IPPR journal *Juncture* [C10].

(3) Reviving communitarian and democratic ideals in Labour Party ideology: One Nation Labour

On the basis of his contributions in re-shaping the broader agenda for the British Left, Stears was invited to work for the Labour Party itself. In 2012 he was asked by Ed Miliband to assist in the production of his annual conference speech on the idea of 'One Nation' [C5]. In working on the speech Stears drew extensively on his research concerning the relationship between communitarian and democratic politics [R1]. The speech contributed significantly to Miliband's wider efforts to reshape the Party's identity - the *One Nation Project* - in which Stears has remained closely involved. The Project emphasizes ideas of power sharing, and of reforming the state and market to enable a politics that is bottom-up not top-down, that is organised rather than managed - objectives that reflect the research based ideas advocated by Stears.

The *One Nation Project* has had a significant impact within the party and beyond. It promoted public debate [C6] and triggered a new electronic publication, the *One Nation Register*, viewed by many younger Labour MPs as a campaigning tool and ideological guide for the Party [C7]. It also resulted in a major academic conference at Queen Mary (University of London, April 2013), and a series of public lectures at the London School of Economics, hosted by the Director Craig Calhoun.

(4) Working towards a greater emphasis on participatory democracy in Labour Party organisation: The Collins Review

Stears also contributed to initiatives to reform Labour Party organisation, in which he drew on his

work on democratic organisational practices. He was invited to work with the leading community organiser Arnie Graf, who had been recruited by the Party to re-energise democratic practices at the grass-roots level. Graf and Stears worked closely together to pursue the party's aspiration to become a more democratic, community based organisation [C8]. Stears also influenced the establishment of the *Collins Review* into the structure of Labour Party membership [C8]. The *Collins Review: Building a One Nation Labour Party* was announced by Ed Miliband in a speech in July 2013. Stears was involved extensively in the preparation of Miliband's speech and influenced the terms of reference for the Review, which reflect many of his research-based ideas for participatory democracy [R1, R5]. For instance, Collins has a mandate to review the automatic affiliation of trade union members to the Labour Party and to consider new ways for members to participate in Party decision-making [C9]. These terms of reference give the *Collins Review* the scope to recommend the most radical and extensive reforms to the Party's internal organisation since it adopted its constitution in 1918.

In short, Stears' research has contributed to a renewed focus of the Labour Party and the wider policy community on participation, community based organisation, and grass-roots based approaches to policymaking and implementation. Since 2010, his work has had significant impact in shaping Labour's *One Nation Project* and the organisational choices of the party. Its reach and significance is evidenced by Stears' appointment by Ed Miliband as Chief Speechwriter to the Leader of the Opposition until the next general election. With the support of the Department, Stears took up that role on secondment in May 2013.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] *Active Equality: A Democratic Agenda for the British Left* in James Purnell and Graeme Cooke (ed.), *We Mean Power: Ideas For the Future of the Left* (London: Demos, 2010) <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/we-mean-power>
- [C2] *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*. The Oxford London Seminars 2010-2011. (http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/labour_tradition_politics_paradox.html)
- [C3] *Everyday Democracy: Taking Centre-Left Politics Beyond State and Market*. (<http://www.ippr.org/publications/55/7993/everyday-democracy-taking-centre-left-politics-beyond-state-and-market>)
- [C4] Director of IPPR, will confirm Stears' contribution to changes in IPPR's research agenda and to IPPR's organisational direction.
- [C5] Confirmation from Senior Strategic Advisor to Ed Miliband (and participant), of Stears' invitation to contribute to the 'one nation' speech given by Ed Miliband at the Labour Party Conference in 2012.
- [C6] [Guardian article http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/02/ed-miliband-speech-marc-stears](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/02/ed-miliband-speech-marc-stears) 2 October 2012. The article refers to Stears' role in preparing the speech.
- [C7] The link shows the response to the One Nation idea by a group of Labour MPs. <http://www.labour.org.uk/onenationbook>
- [C8] Statement from the Director of the General Secretary's office (Labour Party) and participant in the process, on Stears' contribution to reform in the Labour Party and Collins review.
- [C9] Terms of reference of the Collins review are set out in the St Brides speech made July 9, 2013. <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2013/07/09/ed-miliband-union-funding-speech-in-full>
- [C10] Nick Pearce, "What Should Social Democrats Believe?" *Juncture* 20 (2013): 101-110. <http://www.ippr.org/juncture/171/11280/what-should-social-democrats-believe> (particularly the section of the essay reflecting on the relevance of new realist thinking)