

BRIDGING THE GAP: REVITALISING POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS

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This paper provides a distinctive account of the origins of the contemporary condition of political disengagement by cultivating a relatively under-nourished field of study – the politics of public expectations– and locating this analysis within the parameters of existing debates concerning public apathy with politics. This opens up a new field of analytical terrain concerning the existence of an ‘expectations gap’, a ‘performance gap’ and ‘safety-net theory’. These concepts, in turn, help us develop and sharpen the analytical traction and leverage of the notion of ‘public expectations’. The arguments of this paper matter because they pose new questions about revitalising politics, the capacity of the state, the rationalities of political competition, and the available tools of political analysis.

A gap has emerged, and has been emerging for some time, between the governors and the governed in terms of levels of trust and engagement. And yet the existence of a gap should not be confused with a public decline in interest in politics *per se*. The gap exists in relation to the public’s belief in the utility of those processes and mechanisms associated with *traditional* representative politics. As Hay (2007) has shown, explanations for this phenomenon have tended to focus on *either* supply-side (political-institutional-behavioural variables) or demand-side dimensions (sociological-cultural-demographic variables). And yet both dimensions are quite

obviously inter-related: they are two sides of the same coin, rather than separate issues. The relationship is both iterative and dialectical; and it is precisely the issue of the creation, management and impact of public expectations that forms the bridge between demand-side and supply-side explanations. The aim of this paper is to bring the issue of public expectations very much to the fore within the broader debate concerning political disengagement and, through this, pose new questions about the loss trust in politicians, the development of an avowedly 'anti-political' agenda, and how we might 'revitalise' politics.

In terms of locating this paper within the broader literature there are two critical reference points: (1) Stoker's (2006) analysis of politics in mass democracies - 'Destined to Disappoint?'; and (2) Norris's influential (1999) thesis regarding 'critical citizens'. Although these reference points approach the topic from differing starting points they both focus attention on socio-political relationships and particularly why politics is frequently interpreted as failing. This paper develops this line of analysis by locating it within the contours of a discussion regarding the politics of public expectations. It argues that the incentive and sanctions structure associated with contemporary democratic frameworks encourage politicians to promise standards of behaviour and levels of public services that are arguably unrealistic and unattainable. Having inflated public expectations, the subsequent performance of those politicians undermines public confidence,

thereby fuelling disenchantment and apathy. The focus on public expectations therefore provides a way of understanding and teasing apart a central driver of political disenchantment that has arguably been under-explored in the wider literature.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section examines the 'expectations gap'; the origins of this phenomenon, and its implications in terms of socio-political relationships. This focus on public expectations, however, exposes two puzzles - the 'performance gap' and 'safety-net theory' - that are of great consequence for the evolution of politics in the twenty-first century (and form the focus of the second and third sections respectively). The final section locates this paper's focus on the management and politics of public expectations within a number of broader debates.

The Expectations Gap

As Director of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit during 1997-2001, David Miliband developed the notion of an 'expectations gap' (see Rawnsley 2001, 330). This gap consisted of the difference between the public's expectations of what the state *should* deliver and what the state *could* realistically deliver given the resources it was provided with. The important aspect of Miliband's understanding of this dilemma stemmed from his acceptance that although New Labour's modernisation agenda for the public services could marginally increase performance, it was never going to close the gap. The most important

role for ministers, Miliband argued, was not necessarily driving forward reform but suppressing (or at least not inflating) public expectations about what the state could deliver. This notion of an 'expectations gap' is highly relevant in relation to the UK government's official review on the future of the state (conducted between 2005 and 2007). The review was explicitly located within an acceptance that public expectations about the state were increasing rapidly, and as a result it recommended public sector reforms that were designed to achieve 'more bang for each buck' (i.e. increased efficiency levels) in order to maximise the levels of service that could be delivered within a finite resource package. Couched in David Miliband's terms, the report therefore focused its attention completely on increasing supply, rather than suppressing demand.

An awareness of the 'expectations gap', combined with an official statement of intent that focuses on pulling-up the level of performance, rather than attempting to pull-down the level at which demands have been set, raises a number of questions about the capacity of politicians, and to a lesser degree their officials and advisers, to control, shape or manage the public's expectations of what a political system can or should deliver. Clearly a range of socio-economic and demographic factors shape public expectations - rising living standards, technological change, increasing societal heterogeneity, better education, rising incomes in real terms, less deference - and yet it is possible to argue that the influence of these specific variables are

operationalised within a very specific socio-political context that encourages the expansion of public expectations. This is not a novel argument.

A great deal of this paper can be located within the contours of well-known debates concerning the rationalities of political behaviour. Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) provides the foundation for much of this literature through: (1) modelling political behaviour alongside economic exchanges; and (2) making a number of (rational choice-theoretic) assumptions about the behaviour of actors in a supply and demand relationship. Like market actors, Downs argues, political parties and politicians (as suppliers) and voters (as consumers) can be assumed to be rational and self-interested utility-maximisers. Consequently political actors seek to maximise their chances of (re-)election by promising to deliver better services, but at a lower cost than the competitors (other political parties). This creates a bidding war whereby the process of political competition artificially increases public expectations; only for these expectations to be dashed as the elected party either seeks to renege upon certain pre-election commitments or fails to achieve them.

However, the political dynamic of fostering and sustaining unrealistic public expectations arguably goes beyond elections, and exists throughout the electoral cycle. For example the implicit logic of New Public Management as the dominant paradigm of 'good governance' brings with it a clear tendency

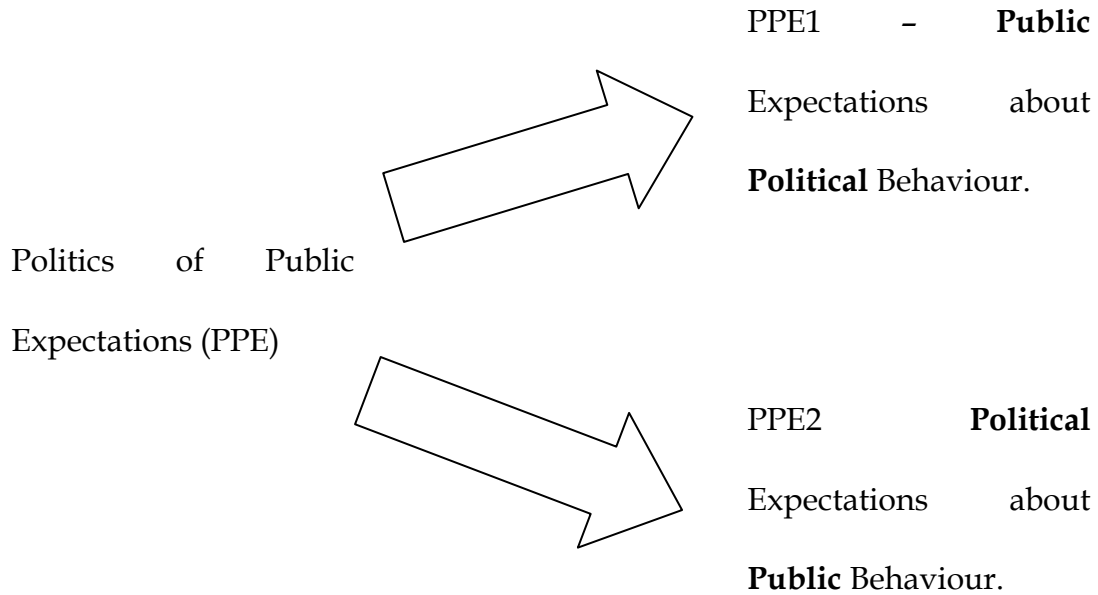
for politicians and their officials to compare public services with those provided by the private sector. As a result the public are encouraged to expect the same standards of personalisation, choice, and control in their interactions with the public sector that they enjoy with organisations within the private sector, where the mode of exchange is purely financial. This is clear from prescriptive government reviews – like the Treasury’s 2002 *Better Government Services* – but has also been a notable aspect of recent legislative reports in the UK on the relationship between citizens and the state. The emphasis of the House of Common’s Public Administration Select Committee’s (PASC) series of reports during 2007 and 2008 into public services, for example, has focused predominantly on how the public’s increased expectations can and should be delivered rather than whether those expectations are realistic or how they might be reduced. But the conception of citizens as consumers, reflected in PASC’s recommendation in 2008 of ‘Public Service Guarantees’ providing an explicit statement of entitlements, risks inflaming rather than re-shaping public expectations. The emphasis is solely on fulfilling *public expectations* about what politics and the state should deliver; rather than a more balanced approach that also calls attention to *political expectations* about public behaviour and performance (see below).

By indulging in this behaviour without massive increases in resources, politicians are arguably deluding the public about the capacity of the state and increasing the expectations gap, thereby fuelling frustration with the

public sector. As Riddell notes in this context 'Something has to give. We cannot have it all, but don't bet on any party saying so' (*The Times* 8 May 2008). Indeed, it would be extremely difficult, but not impossible, for a political party, particularly within a highly adversarial majoritarian polity, to cultivate a more balanced and reasoned debate about the capacity and limits of the state. How then have politicians sought to strategically respond to the pressures of public expectations within the broader context of increasing public expectations?

In order to answer this question it is necessary reflect upon the notion of 'the politics of public expectations' in order to untangle its embedded components, particularly in light of this paper's characterisation of public expectations about politics as a two-way relationship between the governors and the governed. As such, the politics of public expectations can be divided into two distinct forms (Diagram 1). This distinction between PPE1 and PPE2 allows us to identify and understand the impetus and dynamics underlying recent debates about, not only political behaviour and performance (PPE1) but also more subtle and embryonic attempts to recalibrate expectations regarding politics and the state as they pertain to the behaviour and performance of the public (PPE2).

Diagram 1 Disaggregating the Politics of Public Expectations



Beginning with the analysis of PPE1 - how politicians have responded to (unrealistic) public expectations about politics - a shift towards depoliticised modes of governance has been well-documented in the wider literature. This shift has involved at least three inter-related tactics or forms of depoliticisation:

- (1) Through institutional frameworks that impose a significant degree of separation between politicians and those delivering public services. Although this shift in power to non-elected decision-makers is rhetorically legitimated using technocratic logic and arguments, it also has benefits for politicians in terms of displacing responsibility for

difficult decisions or failed initiatives away from ministers (e.g. through the creation and role of independent central banks).

(2) By adopting rule-based systems that seek to 'tie the hands' of politicians - like New Labour's 'Golden Rule' and 'Sustainable Investment Rule' - thereby seeking to remove discretion and flexibility and thereby downgrade previously 'political' decisions to 'mechanical' or 'technical' questions of rules and procedure.

(3) By means of creating and promoting a body of ideas that seek to delimit the sphere of political capacity and deny, to a large extent, the existence of choice and contingency (e.g. through recourse to the power and inevitability of globalisation).

These tactics, and the inter-relationships between them, have been examined in detail elsewhere (see Flinders 2008), and it is sufficient for purposes of this paper to locate them within the context of the ongoing debate regarding political apathy and disengagement. The public no longer trusts politicians, but at the same time they have increasing expectations concerning what they expect politicians, the political system and the state to provide and deliver. In this environment politicians have increasingly adopted depoliticisation as a strategic response to the pressures of increasing public expectations and declining public trust. Depoliticisation allows politicians to draw upon the

legitimacy of other social actors (judges, scientists, specialists, etc.) while also delimiting their own personal sphere of responsibility (a point I will return to below). Seen through the lenses of economic models of democracy and rational choice theory, depoliticisation responds to the innate irrationalities of the political-business cycle - incentives to promise too much, opportunities to make irrational decisions that offer short-term political benefits but carry long-term public costs, technical decisions being taken by individuals with no specialist knowledge, the manner in which the efficiency of the state is undermined by its inability to make credible commitments, etc.

When viewed through the conceptual lens of economic models of democracy depoliticisation can be understood as a rational response to the pressures of modern governance. Depoliticisation is, however, a very negative and somewhat oblique response to both the pressures of rising public expectations, and the challenges of public apathy and political disengagement. It is a strategy which seeks to delimit the boundaries of the political market place, deny the existence of political contingency, and does little to restore public faith or interest in conventional politics. It widens rather than bridges the gap.

And yet although depoliticisation represents a critical response to the challenges of PPE1 it is possible to detect a second strategic approach in relation to public expectations. This strategy focuses on the second strand of

the politics of public expectations (Diagram 1) by making explicit certain political expectations about the behaviour and performance of the public (i.e. PPE2). Instead of widening the gap by denying political contingency, this approach seeks to narrow the gap by making explicit the responsibilities and duties of *the public* vis-à-vis politics and the state. Since the election of New Labour in 1997, politicians have sought to emphasise both *rights* and *responsibilities* in relation to public services and this has taken many forms. It is in this context that patients have found their right to healthcare attached to obligations to lose weight or stop smoking, and the unemployed have found their rights to benefits attached to explicit expectations that they must be available and looking for work, and similar shifts in the incentives and sanctions frameworks can be identified in relation to housing, education, etc. These attempts to in many ways seek to renegotiate the relationship between the governors and the governed and have been couched in a broader rhetorical turn towards 'active citizenry'.

The benefits of this approach are theoretically twofold. (1) In terms of public understanding about the complexity and challenges of modern governance emphasising the role of the individual *alongside* that of politics and the state may re-adjust public expectations (PPE1) downwards. (2) By encouraging or compelling the public to play an active and complementary role in relation to publicly delivered social goods, through their transition from 'passive recipients' to 'active participants', politics and the state may actually be able

to deliver improved levels of service provision. Both strategies may therefore combine to close the 'expectations gap' from above and below. And yet if the potential benefits of focusing on PPE2 are so great why then are politicians, in and beyond the UK, focusing upon responding to the public's expectations about politics (PPE1), often through depoliticisation strategies, instead of seeking to cultivate a more balanced relationship by emphasising with equal vigour the political expectations about the behaviour of the public (PPE2)?

The answer to this question takes us back to Downsian arguments about the political marketplace and economic theories of democracy. The rationalities of electoral competition make it very difficult for any political party to emphasise PPE2 because the public are unlikely to vote for a party that seeks to emphasise more responsible public behaviour, especially when other parties are promising to deliver more with less.

So far this paper has sought to develop a number of linked arguments: (1) that our understanding of contemporary levels of political disengagement need to be located within a much sharper awareness of the politics of public expectations; (2) the politics of public expectations forms the bridge between *supply-side* and *demand-side* explanations of disengagement; (3) that public expectations about the behaviour of politicians and the capacity of the state tend to be too high; (4) this creates an 'expectations gap' between what is promised by political actors and what is subsequently delivered; (5) this 'gap'

fuels public apathy and political disengagement; (6) but that reducing or making public expectations more realistic is easier said than done due to the nature of competitive and adversarial political competitions; (7) consequently the politics of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century has been marked by a general shift towards depoliticised modes of governance; and (8) attempts by politicians to deny and delimit their own realm of capacity and control has further eviscerated public interest in conventional political frameworks.

And yet our understanding of the politics of public expectations remains embryonic and a need exists to develop the analytical traction and leverage of this perspective. Indeed, drilling-down still further deepens our understanding by revealing two inter-related puzzles; one focusing on the perceptions of individuals, the second indicating a residual attachment to conventional political structures which undermines, or at the very least questions, depoliticised modes of governance.

The Performance Gap

A lack of trust in politics can produce a situation in which the public become so jaded in their view that they are unwilling or unable (or both) to appreciate and believe that in some policy areas the political system, via the institutions

of the state, can and does deliver high-quality services. This produces a critical distinction between the *existence* of political goods and the *perception* that political goods are being delivered. The public's perception of the degree to which the political system is 'working' is linked to this paper's earlier focus on economic theories of democracy. The context or environment of politics is one that is imbued with a positivity off-set and negativity-bias (i.e. an emphasis on focusing on problems and allocating blame) arising from a societal context that is often interpreted as low-trust high-blame. Being held to account in the political sphere rarely involves a balanced review of performance but more commonly involves an exercise in problem amplification and blame-allocation. This links-in with depoliticised modes of statecraft as they are adopted as a means of blame avoidance or reduction.

More broadly, however, the existence of a contextual or societal positivity off-set and negativity-bias can lead to a situation in which the public no longer believes that politics or the state is capable of achieving their expectations about the services and levels of provision it should deliver – irrespective of its actual performance. Even more interesting from the context of political disengagement and revitalising politics, however, is the fact that research suggests that the public frequently fails to perceive or believe that public services have improved *even when their own individual experience of services has been better than expected*. This is illustrated in a series of Populus surveys that have focused on the public services (health, education, transport, etc.) and

have revealed a significant disparity or 'perception gap' between how the public perceives services (generally negatively) as opposed to their actual experience (generally positive).¹

In pugilistic circles it is often said that when a boxer fights in their opponent's country, dominating every round of the contest is not enough to secure a win - only a knockout will do. The paradox of the 'perception gap' can be viewed as the same dilemma in a different context - not only must the government ensure the state *delivers* improved public services but it must also *convince the public* that this is the case. Framed in these terms the 'perception gap' can be understood as a mirror-image of the 'expectations gap'. In the latter the public expect too much, because the political system incentivises false or unrealistic promises, and the public are ultimately disappointed; but in the former the political system actually delivers public goods but the public fail to believe or perceive that this is the case. The 'perceptions gap' adds a new layer to our understandings of political disenchantment and raises distinctive questions about re-building the relationship between the governors and the governed. And yet the 'perceptions gap' flows into a second critical feature of the relationship between public expectations and political disengagement that brings with it a certain degree of optimism about public faith in politics - 'safety-net theory'.

Safety-Net Theory

The simple basis of this theory is that no matter how little the public might trust politicians, or how little faith they might have in the capacity of politics to deliver certain social goods, the public will always look to politicians and political structures respond to issues of public concern. This might be as a provider, facilitator, information provider, regulator or guarantor-of-last-resort, but 'politics' still provides a form of social-political or social-psychological safety-blanket in times of heightened public concern.

Public attitudes towards the state have shifted markedly in recent decades as the relatively optimistic public attitudes about the role and capacity of the state that characterised much of the twentieth century gave way to a more sceptical public. This took the form of debates concerning state-overload, delegitimation and ungovernability; concepts that formed central components of the Trilateral Commission into the 'Crisis of Democracy' in the mid-1970s and which resonate with more contemporary analyses of depoliticisation and public disengagement. It was in this context that neo-liberal ideas about the role and limits of state intervention and the behaviour of political actors (politicians and officials) flourished in the form of Public Choice Theory and were implemented under the guise of New Public Management.

What is critical, however, in terms of outlining any options for revitalising politics and seeking to orchestrate a debate regarding the politics of public expectations is that, as the opening section emphasised, public attitudes towards politics and the capacity of the state remain overwhelmingly negative. In the UK, for example, a series of YouGov surveys suggest both increased public scepticism about politics and increased reluctance to paying higher taxes because the public no longer believe that more resources will be translated into better public services.² And yet this is an example of the ‘performance gap’ because the increases in real-terms resources that New Labour have since 2001 allocated to health and education have – according to the analysis and reports of the National Audit Office - led to *increases* in levels of service provision. There is also a time-related element to arguments concerning public expectations, political promises and political disengagement. The social benefits of many policies (anti-obesity strategy, targets for reducing heart disease, Sure Start, etc.) are less tangible and will only become apparent in the long-term.

However in spite of the ‘expectations gap’ and ‘performance gap’ there is little evidence that the public no longer sees politics as a viable response to issues of social concern. It may not trust politicians, it may expect too much from the state, and it may be unwilling to pay higher taxes but the public clearly still expects, and indeed demands, that the political system assumes responsibility for an increasing range of social issues and concerns. As the

takeover of Network Rail, the nationalisation of Northern Rock, and the intervention of ministers in disputes regarding the public availability of expensive cancer treatments illustrate, although ministers might seek to adopt depoliticising strategies there is no guarantee that the public will accept them. At the same time completely new issues are emerging (e.g. xeno-transplantation, human reproductive technologies, etc.) that place new expectations at the door of politics. So although we live in a period in which levels of public trust and public engagement with traditional political structures have declined markedly, we are also living through a period of intense scientific and technological advancement that is broadening the responsibilities of the state and increasing public expectations about what 'politics' should and can deliver. The result of this situation is generally not one in which the public turn away from or give up on established political structures but very often make new demands or refuse to accept statements regarding political impotence.

This creates a critical counterpoint to much of the literature on depoliticisation, and particularly to those attempts by politicians and officials to deny or downgrade their capacity for action. From the perspective of new demands on old political structures we can actually identify a continuing connection between the governors and the governed; politics, viewed as the processes, institutions and mechanisms of representative democracy, provides a form of social safety-net. Let us develop this line of reasoning in

two ways, both of which deepen the link between public expectations and revitalising politics by: (1) considering the implications of 'safety-net theory' for the concept of depoliticisation; and (2) looking more broadly about the main challenges facing politics in the twenty-first century and what they suggest about the link between public expectations and political disengagement.

'Safety-net theory' exposes the fact that depoliticisation is a myth. An issue, policy area, or decision becomes no less political simply because a politician is no longer *directly* involved. The social consequences of decisions regarding interest rates, the availability of medicines, or the decommissioning of nuclear power stations, for example, are not affected by the fact that those decisions have been shifted to a *different* political arena; different in the sense that an elected politician is no longer involved rather than that the decision is any less political. Furthermore the empirical manifestation of 'safety-net theory' is relatively easy to identify as social pressure builds to the point at which elected politicians are forced to intervene, assume emergency powers, or even bring the responsibility back within the contours of 'politicised' modes of governance. In many ways the basic theory and structures of representative democracy make it very difficult, if not impossible, for elected politicians to disclaim their responsibility for issues of social concern – they fulfil a lightning-rod function that links back with the idea of the political system acting as a safety-net, safety-blanket or even safety-valve.

But in terms of highlighting the relationship between the politics of public expectations and political disengagement it is too reductionist, simplistic and pessimistic to understand the role of politics as little more than a fallback option for societal concerns. A more expansive and future-orientated awareness of the most pressing contemporary social and political challenges - migration, obesity, global warming, terrorism and security, fiscal security, mental health, etc. - suggest that the role of conventional political structures are likely to increase rather than diminish. In this context arguments concerning the 'end of politics' appear ill-founded and premature, and discussions regarding the 'politics of public expectations' take on added emphasis.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

This paper matters because it has sought to provide a distinctive account of the origins of the contemporary condition of political disengagement. It has achieved this by cultivating a relatively under-nourished field of study - the politics of public expectations - and locating this analysis within the parameters of existing debates concerning public apathy with politics. The arguments of this paper matter because they pose new questions about

revitalising politics, the capacity of the state, the rationalities of political competition, and the available tools of political analysis.

This has been a wide-ranging paper and, like painting on a large canvas, this has required the use of a fairly broad brush, in analytical and conceptual terms. However it is hoped that by emphasising the role and power of public expectations within the parameters of debates concerning political disengagement that this paper will stimulate more scholarly interest on this topic, thereby filling-in the detail and achieving a more fine-grained understanding. Politicians and policy makers would also benefit from reflecting more closely on the relationship between public expectations and political trust and disengagement. The *Governance of Britain* reform agenda, for example, recognises that at the beginning of the twenty-first century something is seriously wrong with the relationship between the governors and the governed- it recognises the extent of the gap - but it fails to understand the underlying fault lines. The proposals therefore focus on the symptoms rather than the cause of public disengagement and political apathy.

Hay and Stoker (2007, 8) are therefore correct to conclude that, 'If we are to restore trust to the political process we need a far more wide-ranging debate'. The political dimensions and drivers of public expectations should be at the core of this debate.

Reducing everything down to its simplest form, however, illustrates that both public expectations and the revitalisation of politics hinge upon the existence of confidence. Confidence (1) amongst the public that they can trust politicians and political processes to make a positive difference; (2) amongst politicians in their own capacity to make a difference; and also (3) in terms of a societal capacity to engage in a mature debate about the capacity of the state and through this more realistic expectations about what can and should be achieved.

The issue of confidence provides a direct link with the banking crisis of 2008, which has already provided a new context and impetus to debates regarding the link between the management of public expectations and the revitalisation of politics. For decades public expectations and demands were dampened to some extent by a dominant discourse and ideology that was founded on the need for financial prudence and tight economic management, and a normative commitment to a very limited role for the state within economic management. The multi-billion pound financial packages that have been put in place by governments around the world to support the banking sector, not to mention the part-nationalisation of several banks, may increase public expectations and thereby exacerbate the expectations gap and attenuate political disengagement and apathy in the future. It was in this vein that Freedland (*The Guardian* 15 October 2008, 27) noted, 'Now that they [the

public] have seen their governments spending eye-watering sums of money to get out of a crisis, won't voters demand similar largesse to solve other pressing social problems?'

Alternatively the impact of the banking crisis – economic recession, increasing unemployment, rising borrowing – may in fact open-up the political space into which a more honest and considered debate about the limits of the state and public perceptions could be conducted. In actual fact (and in line with the emphasis of this paper on 'gaps') it is already clear that the banking crisis is very likely to compel governments around the world to reconsider their taxation and spending plans. We are entering a global period of 'tight constraints and reduced ambitions' (*The Times*, 16 October 2008, 8) that may well paradoxically aid the revitalisation of politics by reducing social and political expectations. The fiscal crisis may therefore lead to the articulation of political ambitions that could actually be achieved. Phrased in the language and discourse of this paper such a development would be interpreted as seeking to close the 'expectations gap', which in turn may rebuild public trust and confidence, thereby destabilising the 'performance gap'.

The danger of this development, viewed as an attempt to more carefully manage and control the politics of public expectations, is that it may limit or reduce the degree of social dynamism, energy and vivacity that is in itself a driver of high public expectations about the capacity of politics: 'such a

rational recalibration of our expectations might lead us to lose our sense of political ambition, animation and engagement' (Hay 2007, 7). This is a risk worth taking. Political ambitions, animation and engagement are likely to be stimulated, rather than suppressed, by the achievement of realistic public expectations. And in this sense managing the politics of public expectations - in all its forms - provides a (but not *the* way) way of bridging the gap and revitalising politics.

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¹ See www.populus.co.uk notably 'Public Services: Experience V. Perception', March 2006.

² See www.yougov.co.uk