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Demonstrations of Democracy

The Make Poverty History and Stop Climate Chaos marches

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Demonstrations have become an increasingly uncontroversial form of political participation in most liberal democratic states and Britain is no exception. The proportion of Britons saying they would go on a demonstration in response to an unjust law rose from 8 percent in 1983 to 17 percent in 1994 and 20.5 percent in 1998 (Jowell et al. 1999, 320). Indeed, in 1994, 8.9 percent said they had gone on a demonstration in such circumstances (Curtice and Jowell 1995, 154), and by 2000 this had risen to 10 percent (Bromley, Curtice, and Seyd 2001, 202). In response to a differently worded question in 1996, 5.5 percent said they had participated in a protest march or demonstration in the previous five years, and 31 percent said they “definitely” or “probably” would do so (Jowell et al. 1997, 320). In 2000, asked ‘During the last twelve months have you done anything to influence rules, laws or

policies?', 5 percent said they had taken part in a public demonstration, and 34 percent said they would do so (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley 2004: 78).

The actual level of social movement mobilization may vary from issue to issue and time to time, but Britain has an incomparably more participatory political culture now than it did in 1960. If, by the turn of the century, the proportions of Britons who had recently participated in demonstrations remained relatively modest by comparison with those who had taken more individualised or less public forms of political action, their potential for participation in demonstrations had clearly risen significantly during the previous two decades.

Viewed in that perspective, the unprecedentedly massive demonstrations of the early years of the new millennium are less surprising. The massive marches organised by the Countryside Alliance¹ in 2002 and 2004, and the extraordinary demonstration of February 2003, when perhaps two million people marched in opposition to the imminent US-led invasion of Iraq confirm that it is not only in responses to surveys that the British testify to their willingness to take direct action to protest what they perceive to be injustices. Only if we make a shibboleth of confrontational protest does social movement activity in Britain appear subdued.

The 2003 anti-war demonstration remains the largest demonstration in Britain to date, but although, following the pattern typical of peace movements, the anti-war mobilisation declined rapidly once hostilities commenced, other substantial popular mobilisations have followed.

The most remarkable of these was the Make Poverty History (MPH) mobilisation that culminated on 2 July 2005, the Saturday preceding the G8 summit meeting at nearby Gleneagles, when some 225,000 people marched through the streets of Edinburgh in the largest demonstration the Scottish capital had ever seen.

¹ The character of the Countryside Alliance is disputed, but as well as drawing attention to a plethora of rural grievances ill-understood in urban Britain, its principal mobilising issue was the proposed ban on hunting with dogs which finally became law in England in 2005.

The MPH march was the culmination of months of effort stimulated by the belief that, with the UK hosting the G8 summit (at which poverty in Africa was a key theme) and holding the EU Presidency, 2005 provided an unprecedented opportunity to address trade, aid and debt issues. The participants, in a wholly peaceful demonstration that appeared to be more a procession of witness than a protest, came from all parts of the British Isles, more than half of them from beyond Scotland. During the following week, as the G8 leaders assembled and deliberated, numerous protests were staged in Edinburgh, in the immediate vicinity of the conference site, and at other locations in southern Scotland. These latter protests were coordinated by activists who, in contrast to the organizers of the MPH march, declined to negotiate routes and protocols with the police. The resulting uncertainty provoked the biggest policing operation in Scottish history as police, drawn from forces from all parts of the UK and often in full riot gear, massed to protect property and confront protesters. Yet these latter protests involved in aggregate probably no more than 5,000 participants (Rootes and Saunders 2007).

Our interest in MPH stemmed from the fact that it promised to be the largest and most all-embracing mobilization of the global justice movement (GJM) in Britain. And so it proved, even though, on the day, it was overshadowed by the wall-to-wall media coverage of the contemporaneous Live8 concert in London. As we shall see, MPH drew together supporters of a vast range of national and local organizations, and, in apparent testimony to the character of the GJM as a ‘movement of movements’, environmental movement organizations were prominent among them. As climate change loomed increasingly large on the global justice agenda, on 1 September 2005 an array of environmental and aid, trade and development organizations announced the formation of a new umbrella campaign organization, Stop Climate Chaos. On 4 November 2006, Stop Climate Chaos, as the culmination of a long publicity and letter-writing campaign, organized a march from the US embassy in London to a rally in Trafalgar Square, an event that attracted some 30,000 people and has been hailed as the largest environmental movement demonstration in Britain.

Having interviewed and surveyed the participants in the MPH march (see below), we were intrigued to investigate the extent of overlap between the demographics, political affiliations and behaviour, and attitudes toward democracy of the participants

in each. So, as part of our research on the GJM, we undertook a comparable survey of and interviews with the participants in the SCC march and rally.

The Make Poverty History march: interviews and survey

MPH attracted activists from an unprecedentedly broad range of ideological persuasions and movement sectors (including, as well as aid, trade and development, peace, the environment, and women's rights). The MPH coalition with its three core demands – 'trade justice', 'more and better aid' and 'drop the debt' – consisted of over 500 groups and organizations including the Jubilee Debt Campaign and a host of other charities, campaigns, trade unions, faith groups and local organizations.

Although some direct action groups regarded MPH as impossibly reformist and concentrated their efforts on organizing protests closer to the site of the G8 meeting at Gleneagles, they did not entirely dismiss MPH, and individual activists were not discouraged from marching. Moreover, Globalise Resistance actively encouraged supporters to participate in the MPH march and laid on transport to enable them to do so. Thus, although a single event can only offer a snapshot of (part of) a movement on a particular day, none to date has promised to attract a larger number of participants or as broad a cross-section of the GJM than the MPH march and rally in Edinburgh.

Because the G8 meeting was the focus for mobilization of all strands of the GJM in Britain, it provided a unique opportunity to assess the relative strengths of its various components. In the event, there was a massive disparity between the size of the MPH mobilisation and the modest number of participants in the various direct action protests during the following week. The tactically moderate supporters of MPH, a campaign coalition of an extraordinarily diverse range of humanitarian, aid, trade, development and environmental organisations, churches, trade unions and political parties, appeared by mid-2005 overwhelmingly to outnumber the supporters and practitioners of more confrontational forms of collective action.

In order better to understand the character of the MPH mobilisation, we collected data by means of a mail-back questionnaire which was handed out as randomly as possible to protesters during the MPH march, using techniques for surveying participants in protest events advocated by Walgrave (2005). Of approximately 2,000 questionnaires

distributed, 563 were returned and contained usable data, an effective response rate of just over 28%. To get a measure of the representativeness of the responses to our survey, we also interviewed a randomly selected 493 participants in the MPH march, using a one-page interview schedule to collect basic demographic information as well as information on their political allegiance, organizational affiliations and past involvement in protest. Very few of those we approached declined to be interviewed, and the effective response rate exceeded 95%.

As with the British surveys of participants in the 2003 anti-war demonstrations (Rüdig 2006), by comparison with those we interviewed the respondents to our survey were somewhat more likely to be female (though this difference was barely statistically significant), older (41% over 50, compared with 29% of interviewees), and (probably as a consequence) more highly educated (31% with higher degrees compared with 21% of interviewees). They were also more likely to have voted at the 2005 general election (86% as compared with 76% of those interviewed), but although they did not differ significantly in their party political allegiances, survey respondents were less dissatisfied with democracy in Britain than were those we interviewed (13% very dissatisfied compared with 21%). Although interviewees and survey respondents did not differ much in respect of the frequency with which they had in the past participated in demonstrations, survey respondents were much less likely to have participated in direct action (including illegal demonstrations, blockades and occupations of buildings): 84% had never participated and only 2% had participated more than five times, compared with 75% and 10% respectively among those we interviewed. Furthermore, whereas 37% of interviewees professed an intention to participate in other protest events associated with the G8, only 23% of survey respondents intended to (or had done so). They also differed in the extent to which they considered themselves to be part of the GJM; 76% of those interviewed considered themselves part of the GJM compared with just 60% of survey respondents. Survey respondents were also much more likely to identify closely with a religious group (30% compared with 11%).

In summary, those who returned our questionnaire were, by comparison with those interviewed, somewhat more female, older, more highly educated, more religious, less dissatisfied with British democracy, more likely to have voted, less likely to consider

themselves part of the GJM, and less likely to have much experience of, or disposition to engage in, direct action.

The bias in our survey sample appears to be attributable to two possibly interrelated factors. Firstly, it appears that younger people, who because of their youth were less likely to have completed higher education or to have voted in 2005, were also less likely to have taken the trouble to complete and return the questionnaire. Secondly, veterans of direct action and those most disposed to take further protest action in G8 week were apparently less likely to return questionnaires. The latter may be partly explained by the competing demands on serial protesters' time in the intensity of the week of protests and by the fact that opportunities actually to protest were, in the event, rather more limited than many might have anticipated, with the consequence that intentions to protest may not always have been translated into actual participation. Those activists who are most disposed to direct action are famously skeptical of the value of survey research, and so it is no surprise that they should be less likely to return questionnaires. However, the fact remains that they and, by implication, the direct action wing of the GJM, are under-represented in our survey data. Nevertheless, their numbers are relatively small and so their under-representation, while it compels caution in the interpretation of our results, does not fatally vitiate the value of our survey or our analyses of the data so derived.

The Stop Climate Chaos march and rally: interviews and survey

We employed a similar combination of face-to-face interviews and mail-back questionnaires in our investigation of the Stop Climate Chaos (SCC) march and rally. Once again, very few of those approached declined to be interviewed, and we achieved 256 completed interviews with an effective response rate of approximately 97%. During the march, we distributed 1,883 questionnaires, of which 674 were returned completed, a response rate of 35.8%. However, compared with MPH, the discrepancies between the characteristics of the interview and survey samples were markedly greater.

Young people aged under 30, who comprised 55% of those we interviewed, comprised only 20% of those who completed questionnaires; conversely, those aged

50 and over, just 15% of the interviewees, comprised 41% of survey respondents. Perhaps as a result, whereas 20% of those interviewed had a higher degree, this was true of 35% of survey respondents. Survey respondents were less likely than interviewees to consider themselves members of the global justice movement (69% compared with 77%) and were markedly more likely to identify closely with a religious group (10% compared with 1%). Although survey respondents had rather more prior experience of marches or rallies (only 12% had never previously participated, compared with 20% of interviewees), they were somewhat less likely to have participated in direct action more than five times (8% compared with 12%). In terms of their party political preference and their levels of satisfaction with democracy, there were no significant differences between interviewees and those surveyed, but whereas 81% of those surveyed claimed to have voted in the 2005 general election, only 54% of interviewees did so.

Thus in SCC, as in MPH, the principal differences between interviewees and those surveyed were the under-representation among survey respondents of the young, the less highly educated, those most experienced in direct action, and those who identified themselves as members of the GJM, and the over-representation among them of voters and the religious. Survey respondents were also somewhat more likely to be women than were interviewees, among whom women only very slightly outnumbered men.

The most striking difference between the two surveys was that the under-representation of the young was much greater among those surveyed in SCC than in MPH. Explaining this latter difference is necessarily speculative, but the relative scale and character of the two events may be a factor. MPH was very much larger than SCC and it drew participants from a great diversity of places, whereas SCC took place in London and drew relatively few participants from outside England. We surmise (but we do not know) that it drew most of its participants from London and the south-east of England. In London at least, neither protest nor attempts to survey protesters are novel, and so it may be that cynicism about and resistance to co-operating with surveys may be greater among young people in London. The lower overall response rate to the MPH survey is perhaps explained by the content of the questionnaire, which focused upon issues and relationships among organizations, including radical

organizations, that the rather less politicized moderates who made up the bulk of MPH marchers may have found alien. SCC, simply because it was so much smaller, may have included a higher proportion of the highly committed and politicized core members of the groups and movements from which its participants were drawn. We speculate, then, that SCC, because of its relatively more selective character, reveals especially starkly a generational divide among the politically committed in respect of their willingness to respond to surveys.

In view of these discrepancies, we are cautious about the representativeness of the data collected in the longer survey questionnaires by comparison with that derived from interviews that we are fairly confident represent a random cross-section of the participants in the two events; indeed, we were especially careful in the case of SCC to instruct interviewers to approach every tenth person to avoid selection bias. We shall, therefore, proceed first by comparing the responses of interviewees before, more tentatively, considering the pattern of responses to the survey questionnaires.

MPH and SCC participants compared: the interviewees

Dissatisfaction with democracy

The greater youth of SCC marchers is precisely reflected in their lesser likelihood of having voted in the 2005 general election; the difference in each case is 22%. But youth, though it explains a great deal of non-voting, by no means explains it all. Although in both cases youth was inversely correlated with having voted, amongst all age groups SCC interviewees were less likely to have voted than those who marched to MPH. Non-voting, although it was especially prevalent among the young, was also common among the middle-aged and not unknown even among the over 50s.

How are we to explain this? Higher rates of non-voting may, in part, be a London effect. In London, to a much greater extent than in the rest of the UK, a high proportion of people, especially younger people, live in rented accommodation with little security of tenure. They are, accordingly, more likely to be transient, less likely to register to vote, less likely to be embedded in their local community, and less likely actually to vote, especially in the many constituencies where the outcome of the ballot

is entirely predictable. Thus, to the extent that SCC attracted a far higher proportion of London residents, it is likely for that reason alone to have attracted a higher proportion of non-voters than MPH. Since we are unable to estimate the size of this effect, it would be rash to deduce, on the basis of their lesser likelihood of having voted, that SCC marchers were more alienated from representative democracy than MPH marchers.

Among those who did vote, aside from the 14% of MPH marchers who voted for a Scottish party (SNP or SSP), the most salient difference was the level of voting for the Green Party – 33% of SCC marchers compared with 11% for MPH marchers, this being balanced by the rather lower level of voting for Liberal Democrats (33% SCC cf. 42% MPH); in both samples, just less than a quarter had voted Labour, and fewer than 5% had voted Conservative. The political atypicality of marchers is thus clear; the parties that in 2005 together attracted 70% of votes were supported by less than 30% of the marchers we interviewed. Participation in these demonstrations thus appears highly correlated with voting for minority parties.

Voting for minor parties may itself be an indicator of dissatisfaction with British democracy. Alternatively, since the electoral system produces grossly disproportionate results in terms of parliamentary representation – even the Liberal Democrats, with 22% of the vote in 2005, gained less than 10% of the seats in Parliament, while the Greens gained none – supporters of minor parties may, as a result, be relatively dissatisfied with the present democratic system. Certainly, the greater dissatisfaction of SCC marchers appears to reflect their greater support for the Green Party. Indeed, among English residents who participated in SCC or MPH, those who had voted Green were even more dissatisfied with British democracy than those who had not voted at all (among SCC marchers, 42% of Green voters were ‘very dissatisfied’ compared with 38% of non-voters; the figures for MPH were 57% and 18% respectively). Only the small number of voters for other, even smaller parties were comparably dissatisfied.

Almost identical proportions of the MPH and SCC marchers interviewed considered themselves to be part of the GJM (76% and 77% respectively). This is remarkable

because, in terms of the sector of the organization with which they most closely identified, MPH and SCC marchers were strikingly different.

MPH marchers were drawn from all the main constituents of the GJM.

Unsurprisingly, the sector of the organization with which most marchers claimed to identify most closely was aid/trade/ development (45%), followed by peace and environment (each 13%), religious (11%), human rights (10%), trade unions (6%), and race/ethnic solidarity/immigrants' rights (3%). None claimed to most closely identify with a political party.

If MPH appears to have reflected the 'movement of movements', SCC, which might be considered the first major public test of the GJM's proclaimed embrace of environmental justice reveals the continuing segmentation of the movement and the predominance of environmentalists among those raising issues of climate change. A clear majority (56%) of the SCC marchers interviewed most closely identified with an environmental organization. Those who most closely identified with an aid/trade/ development organization made up 22%, followed distantly by human rights (8%) and peace organizations (6%) and political parties (5%). Religious and race/ethnic solidarity/immigrants' rights organizations and trade unions scarcely figured.

Majorities of participants in both MPH and SCC expressed themselves dissatisfied with British democracy (57% and 72% respectively), but only 20% of MPH interviewees were 'very dissatisfied' compared with almost a third of SSC interviewees.

Among both MPH and SCC interviewees, levels of satisfaction with British democracy were slightly lower among the middle-aged (particularly those aged 30-49) than among either the young or the elderly. Although the differences are barely significant, they do at least dispel the myth that it is the young who are especially disaffected from representative democracy. Dissatisfaction with democracy was especially marked among SCC interviewees, 78% of those aged 39-64 expressing dissatisfaction compared with 58% of MPH interviewees in the same age group, and with 69% of younger SCC interviewees.

Levels of satisfaction with democracy do not correlate straightforwardly with level of highest educational qualification. In both samples, levels of dissatisfaction were somewhat higher among those with university degrees than among those with intermediate qualifications, but lower among those with higher degrees.

Organizational identification is associated with much clearer differences. Among MPH marchers, it was those who most closely identified with socialist and peace organizations who were most dissatisfied with British democracy (83% and 75% respectively), followed by those who identified with an environmental organization (59%) and aid/trade/ development or human rights organizations (both 45%). SCC marchers were more dissatisfied pretty much across the board; 75% of those who identified with an environmental organization were dissatisfied, but so too were 61% of those who identified with an aid/trade/ development organization. The greater dissatisfaction of SCC marchers extended even to those did not name any organization with which they closely identified (53% MPH, 58% SCC) but the relative modesty of this difference suggests that, at least among the relatively committed participants in the smaller demonstration, close identification with an organization may itself be an indicator of dissatisfaction with democracy. The usual presumption of political participation theory – that participation is positively correlated with organizational membership and satisfaction with democracy – is thus turned on its head.

Why should SCC marchers be so much more dissatisfied than MPH marchers? Given the frequency of statements by government ministers approving and supportive of MPH's goals, MPH marchers may have thought they were simply demonstrating their support for the stated aims of the Blair government at the G8 meeting; indeed, at least one marcher we interviewed rejected the very idea that the MPH march was a protest at all, a view shared by many of its radical critics. By contrast, SCC marchers who, because of the much smaller size of the march are likely, by comparison with MPH, to have over-represented the most committed core of activists, are likely to have been extremely frustrated by the Blair government's failure to match words with deeds in the battle against climate change. If MPH was, for many, a procession of witness rather than a protest, SCC appears to have been more straightforwardly a protest.

Remarkably high proportions of both MPH and SCC marchers had previously participated in marches or rallies. Only 27% of MPH and 20% of SCC marchers had never done so, whilst 32% of MPH and 40% of SCC marchers had done so more than 5 times. Whilst a significant minority in both cases had participated in one or another form of direct action more than five times (MPH 10%, SCC 12%), the great majority had never done so (MPH 75%, SCC 70%). The differences between the MPH and SCC samples in this respect are surprisingly modest and are probably small enough to be accounted for by differences in the geographical distribution of opportunities to protest – London, with 12% of the UK population, accounted for over 26% of the environmental protests reported in *The Guardian* during the years 1998-1997 (Rootes 2003: 28).

Nevertheless, MPH marchers who had previously participated in marches or rallies more than five times were much more likely to say they were ‘very dissatisfied’ with democracy in Britain (41% compared with 13% who had previously participated 2-5 times, and 8% of those who had done so once or never). Whilst SCC marchers were in general more dissatisfied – 51% of those who had marched or rallied more than five times were ‘very dissatisfied’ – those who had participated only once or never were very much more dissatisfied than their counterparts in MPH (25% and 18% respectively). Moreover, whilst 59% of MPH marchers who had participated in direct action more than five times were ‘very dissatisfied’ with democracy, that was true of 72% of SCC marchers, and whereas just 11% of MPH marchers who had never participated in direct action were ‘very dissatisfied’ this compared with 19% of SCC marchers. Thus it appears that, to a greater extent than MPH, SCC rallied a number of relatively inexperienced protesters who were very dissatisfied with democracy. The greater dissatisfaction with democracy of the latter is not simply a function of their greater experience of protest.

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