Who Runs Britain?

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) ippr is the UK’s leading independent progressive think tank. Through our well-researched and clearly argued policy analysis, our strong networks in government, academia and the corporate and voluntary sectors and our high media profile, we can play a vital role in maintaining the momentum of progressive thought.

Political context

British politics is currently undergoing a process of transition, with leading figures in all the main parties making the redistribution of power a key strand in their political renewal. The Chancellor Gordon Brown has emphasised the need for a new constitutional settlement to give citizens a greater say in how the country is governed. The Environment Secretary David Miliband has called for the devolution of power to local communities and has described empowerment as the central thread of a potential fourth Labour term. For the Conservatives, David Cameron has emphasised the need to give power and responsibility to people and communities and, by implication, to remove it from the state.

This renewed interest in the question of power reflects widespread concern about the nature of Britain’s political system. It reflects in particular concerns about:

- The extreme centralisation of the British state, which prevents it from meeting the diverse needs and preferences of the modern citizen;
- Falling rates of political participation, reflected in low turnout at election time and the decline in party membership;
- Negative attitudes to political efficacy (the belief that by participating in politics one can effect real change);
- Unequal political participation, with those who rely most on public services and institutions being the least likely to take part in decision-making.

Despite this growing concern with power and empowerment, the current debate has two major failings.

- First, the debate so far has centred exclusively on the political system, the state and the local community. There has been little sign that politicians have the appetite to discuss the distribution of economic, cultural or ideological power, all of which have a significant impact on people’s lives. The recent Power Inquiry report, for example, focused almost exclusively on the political realm. It is time to go beyond the Power Inquiry and broaden our focus across the range of important sites of social and economic power, and to examine how public accountability mechanisms can be extended into some of these areas. We also need to look afresh at which areas of life citizens actually want to be empowered over.
• Second, politicians rarely justify their policy positions in relation to any explicit definition of power. What mainstream commentary there has been on the distribution of power within the country has been journalistic and anecdotal in approach (Jeremy Paxman, *Friends in High Places*, 1991 and Anthony Sampson *Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century*, 2005). This is deeply problematic because if the redistribution of power is to be central to the next phase of British politics, we need a much clearer understanding of what power is and where it currently lies.

*Who Runs Britain*, a new project from the ippr, will address both of these failings.

**Objectives**

The project has three main objectives:

1. **To develop a measurable concept of power**
   This will be addressed in the first, short, phase of the project and will take the form of a literature review covering recent academic approaches to, and debates on, the concept of power. The project will develop a notion of power that is sensitive to, though not a synthesis of, these academic debates. The aim is to produce a clear IPPR definition of power, informed by the literature, but which is also measurable empirically in the UK context.

Based on our review of the literature so far, we anticipate making a distinction between **five important domains of power**. These are

- **Political power**: the distribution of powers within the British political system, including between the Prime Minister, the cabinet and the civil service; the executive, parliament and the judiciary; the centre, and regional and local authorities, and last but obviously not least, the power available to the average citizen through the political system.
- **State power**: the relationship between the citizen and the state, such as in the way public services operate. This domain is central to current debates around public service reform, which revolve around how the introduction of more choice and voice can more effectively empower the citizen in their use of public services.
- **Economic power**: the ownership and control of economic resources. This includes the role and influence of large corporations, institutional shareholders, government regulators, the trade unions, ‘old’ and ‘new’ money.
- **Cultural and ideological power**: the power to produce and distribute information, knowledge, culture and values. This includes the power of the scientific establishment, those who fund research, old and new media, newspaper proprietors and organised religion.
- **International institutional power**: the power of international institutions with which Britain pools or shares sovereignty, such as the EU and the WTO.

2. **To draw up a new power map of the UK**

This will form the bulk of the project and will itself involve two streams of work. The first will measure the distribution of power within all of these power domains
as well as between them. It will do this by measuring the power of institutions and also by identifying the key individuals in each domain of power. The second will analyse the geographic distribution of power across the UK.

Some of the key questions to be addressed in this part of the project include:

- In which institutions is political power concentrated (the Prime Minister, the cabinet, parliament, the judiciary)?
- What difference have efforts at introducing greater choice into the public services made to the empowerment of the ordinary citizen?
- In which institutions is economic power concentrated (the large pension funds, private companies, the state)?
- What is known about the links between important institutions in different domains (such as political parties and economic institutions, or between the government and the scientific establishment)?
- Are there close connections between individuals at the top of political, economic and cultural institutions that, in effect, amount to ‘an establishment’?
- To what extent is power in all of these domains concentrated geographically in particular parts of the UK?

3. To review, synthesise and add to the data on public attitudes to political efficacy.

This will provide quantitative and qualitative data to inform the debate on whether people do or do not want to be more empowered.

**Methodology**

We propose to deploy three key techniques in delivering this project. In approaching the mapping exercise, we will first develop a set of indicators, derived from our definition of power, which we believe can indicate the existence of power in a number of settings. Researchers in the US have done this, producing a set of 4 key indicators (see William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?*, 2005). These relate to:

- **The distribution and control of income, wealth, assets and credit and of valued experiences and objects.** In any society, this can be viewed as the most visible and stable outcome of the operation of power within the system.
- **The distribution of decision-making authority.** This indicator establishes who occupies important institutional positions or takes part in important decision-making groups, and who is excluded.
- **Conflict outcomes.** Power can be inferred by looking at cases of conflict and determining who successfully initiates, modifies or vetoes policy alternatives.
- **Reputation.** This can be established by asking elite members and the wider public who they believe to be powerful in any given setting.

There are two benefits of conceiving of power indicators in this way. The first is that all the indicators can be applied to any domain of power (economic, political, cultural, international) and the second is that each is suggestive of data sets and information sources which can furnish an empirical mapping of power, for each indicator, and within and between each domain of power.
Consequently, our power indicators will determine which data sets we use in our power mapping exercise. An indicative list of sources includes:

- The wide array of secondary sources covering the distribution of economic resources, such as Office of National Statistics data on household wealth and income and independent analyses, such as Kevin Cahill’s recent *Who Owns Britain* and *The Sunday Times* Rich List.
- The extensive political science literature on where power currently lies within the political system, including the work of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex, which recently published a democratic audit of the UK (*Democracy Under Blair. A Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom*, David Beetham et al, 2002).
- Interviews with key figures in government, politics, the media, the city, and academia to understand who has a ‘reputation for power’. This can be compared to existing accounts, such as those of Paxman and Sampson discussed above.
- Public opinion data and focus groups to ascertain whom the public believes holds most power in Britain. Uniquely IPPR has an in house public involvement team with a proven track record in carrying out high quality qualitative research, such as focus groups.
- Research for a small number of in-depth case studies within each power network to establish which interests win out across a number of conflicts over time.
- Existing network analyses that show the linkages between powerful individuals across different walks of life, such as John Scott’s *Who Rules Britain?* and Anthony Sampson’s *Who Runs this Place?* Primary research could also be conducted from biographical sources such as *Who’s Who* and the internet.
- The geographical concentration of power can be ascertained in part from the location of the headquarters of major national institutions, such as large companies, big companies, financial institutions, universities and government departments.

Our second key technique in mapping power will be to apply our power indicator framework to two neighbourhood level case studies. In each case, these will ask who owns and controls important neighbourhood assets, who gets to make important decisions affecting the neighbourhood, and where citizens in the neighbourhood believe power lies. This will provide a ‘bottom up’ mapping of power to compliment the higher level conceptualisation and data analysis which will shape our account of the national picture. One of the case study areas will be in an area of concentrated poverty and the other will in a heavily multicultural area. We expect these local power mapping exercises to uncover conditions and attitudes relevant to the procedural fairness of decision making as it affects local lives on issues such as housing and access to public services.

Third and last, we will add to the existing data on attitudes to political efficacy by conducting polling and focus group work on public attitudes to power and greater citizen involvement in exercising it. This will in particular explore which areas of life, such as for instance particular public services, citizens want to be empowered over.
Outputs

Publications and Outputs will include:

- An introductory essay *The New Empowerment Agenda* by Ian Kearns and Rick Muir to set out the rationale for the project and make an early contribution to the public debate.

- Publication of four commissioned papers exploring particular themes, such as the Centre-Local Relationship after Lyons; Scientific Power and Public Accountability; Economic Democracy and the Anglo-Social Model; the New Media Landscape; Political Power and Constitutional Reform.

- Publication of four fact sheets on different elements of the empirical research, including for example public and elite views of where power lies, a diversity analysis of the backgrounds of individuals holding key positions across each domain of power, and an account of ‘who owns Britain?’.

- Publication of an edited book, *Power Politics*, made up of contributions from leading thinkers and figures from different walks of life on the theme of power, where it is located in the UK today, and whether and to what extent it ought to be redistributed and how.

- Publication of two short working papers drawn from the local case studies.

- Publication of a final report, including the full power map, the two neighbourhood case studies, and a geographical representation of where we believe power lies within the UK.

- Launch of an IPPR Power and Empowerment Index (in collaboration with a national polling organisation) to measure public attitudes to power and the appetite for more popular control of key institutions.

Events:

- A major ‘Who Runs Britain?’ conference in January 2007 to launch the project, involving senior politicians, academics and other stakeholders.
- Two other public events/conferences in spring and autumn 2007.
- A series of four high level seminars throughout 2007.
- An evening debate and reception to launch the final report in March 2008.

Why ippr?

ippr has an unrivalled track record in conducting and delivering ground-breaking, high-profile policy research. A recent survey of MPs (2004) showed that ippr was the most highly rated of all wide coverage think tanks. The ippr boasts an interdisciplinary research staff and networks across the highest levels of government, politics, business, journalism and academia. Several ongoing research projects across the institute will also feed existing expertise into this project. These include:

- Work on the role of Voice in Public Service Reform, being carried out by the Democracy and Public Services teams.
- Work on Centre-Local relations being carried out by the ippr Centre for Cities.
- A seminar series on the future agenda for constitutional reform being co-
hosted by the Democracy Team and OpenDemocracy.

- The ongoing work of the ippr Centre for Asset-Based Welfare, which first developed the idea of the Child Trust Fund (now government policy) and which explores a wide range of approaches to spreading assets and consequently economic power throughout society.

The Project Team

The Who Runs Britain? project will be led by Ian Kearns, Deputy Director, with support and input from Rick Muir, Research Fellow and others from across the institute.

Dr Ian Kearns is the Deputy Director of ippr. He supervises the work of research teams across the institute covering work on climate change, transport, social policy, housing, public service reform, health, international policy and democracy. He was previously Associate Director and leader of ippr’s Digital Society, Media and Arts team and has also just completed almost 2 years in the private sector, as a Director in the Global Government Industry practice at Electronic Data Systems (EDS). Previously, Ian was Director of the Graduate Programme in International Studies and Lecturer in Politics at the University of Sheffield. He has published on issues as wide-ranging as conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the expansion of the European Union, e-democracy, digital technology and centre-left values and the politics of conflict and security in Northern Ireland. Ian is an active commentator on public policy issues and recent contributions include the Today Programme on Radio 4, Newsnight Scotland, Radio 5, and contributions to More 4 News.

Dr Rick Muir is a Research Fellow in the Democracy team. His expertise is in the areas of democratic theory and practice, political economy, local government, social capital and community cohesion. He has a doctorate in politics from Oxford University, where he worked as a departmental lecturer and tutor. His recent publications for ippr include Sticking Together. Social Capital and Local Government (editor and contributor). He has published articles in academic journals and in media outlets, including The Municipal Journal and Whitehall and Westminster World.

If you would like further information about this project please contact Rick Muir on 020 7470 6168 or at r.muir@ippr.org.