

Institution: University of Sheffield		
Unit of Assessment: C-19 Business and Management Studies		
Title of case study: Designing for Democracy: Strengthening public engagement to tackle political disaffection, improve democratic accountability and enhance service efficiency in the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2002–2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Matthew Flinders	Professor of Politics	2000–present
Kate Dommett	Senior Lecturer in the Public Understanding of Politics	2012–present
Leanne-Marie McCarthy-Cotter	Postdoctoral Research Associate	2015–2017
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Professor Matthew Flinders' research explores the roots and causes of political disaffection, the evolution of state structures and forms of parliamentary scrutiny. He has used his research findings to engage with central government and their key stakeholders resulting in demonstrable impacts that have: (i) improved economic efficiency; (ii) increased transparency and strengthened accountability; (iii) established new and innovative forms of public engagement; (iv) led to legislative amendment; and (v) shaped public debate and promoted public understanding of politics. Beneficiaries include HM government, the Houses of Parliament, the BBC, community groups and the public. Flinders won the ESRC's 2018 'Impact Champion' award.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>With approximately £500k in support from funders including the ESRC, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the House of Commons, Flinders' research has focused on a wide range of topics that are united in addressing democratic disaffection. The research examined:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How to tackle coordination and control dilemmas in British central government through collaborative research methods based in the Cabinet Office; 2) How to design new forms of deliberative public engagement that can facilitate the analysis of complex constitutional questions; and 3) How to ensure that plans for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster include an emphasis on public engagement and democratic innovation. <p>Major gaps in the existing research base surrounded each of these topics and were addressed through an approach that combined interdisciplinary insights with the co-design of research with practitioners and/or affected communities. Flinders has used a mixed methods approach (including interviews, case studies, ethnography, and experimental methods) to lead major debates on the depoliticisation of public services; the evolution of British democracy and reconceptualising the parliamentary decline thesis. His research has also posited and explored the existence of an 'expectations gap' between the governed and the governing [R1, R2].</p>		

Flinders' ongoing engagement with a range of user-communities to address these challenges is built upon four key research findings.

F1. The public are not generally disengaged or disinterested in politics but no longer understand how to engage with political processes in an efficient and effective manner. [R1, R2, R3, R4]

F2. Deliberative mechanisms, specifically Citizens Assemblies, allow the public to play a role in complex constitutional policymaking. Traditional (indirect) representative democratic structures can use these (direct) democracy tools to improve public engagement. [R2, R4, R5]

F3. The physical design and structure of political spaces (hard/soft, informal/formal/on-stage/off-stage, online/offline) shapes the subsequent behaviour of individuals within those institutions. This has significant implications for generating democratic renewal. [R4, R5]

F4. Plans for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster would benefit from 'intelligent design' insights while also recognising the benefits of proactive public engagement from the outset of the project. [R1, R2, R4, R5]

Research from the Cabinet Office Whitehall fellowship on delegated governance shows that the British state is 'walking without order' by accepting the logic of delegation, without any detailed or principled consideration of the administrative or democratic consequences of this process. Flinders' findings uncovered that many arm's-length bodies had effectively become disconnected from their parent departments in terms of control and oversight; this had led to administrative chaos, political confusion and economic inefficiency. His core recommendations focused on tighter scrutiny systems and a new taxonomical framework to analyse arm's-length bodies [R3, R6].

Flinders subsequently secured approximately £250,000 ESRC funding (£192,746 urgency grant plus £50k for knowledge exchange; part of the total £500k) to bring together a consortium of universities and potential research-users to assess the potential value or limits of deliberative methods such as citizens' assemblies to explore complex constitutional issues. The result was the 'Democracy Matters' project [R4]. What might be termed 'the problem of democracy' in terms of the emergence of large numbers of 'disaffected democrats' was the core societal challenge that this research sought to understand and address. A distinctive element of this research revolved around its dual focus on both supply-side variables (i.e. what democratic politics can realistically achieve or deliver) and demand-side variables (i.e. what the public expects from politics and how these expectations are shaped).

Flinders' research on Parliament's Restoration & Renewal project [R5] brought an interdisciplinary awareness of not only the manner in which structure shapes behaviour in public buildings but also – and critically – his research has drawn upon historical and comparative insights that have underlined the risks and potential inefficiencies of the current policy trajectory. Flinders' research drawing out these points has made a distinct and material difference in re-framing the nature of the (external) public debate and (internal) policy scrutiny.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Flinders, M. (2002). Shifting the Balance? Parliament, the Executive and the British Constitution. *Political Studies*, 50(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00357>
Winner of the Political Studies Association's Harrison Prize for the Best Article.

R2. Flinders, M. (2012). *Defending Politics*. Oxford University Press. **Independent on Sunday 'Book of the Year' 2012; shortlisted for the Political Book Awards 2013; nominated for the George Orwell Prize 2013.** Available on request.

- R3.** Flinders, M. (2008). *Delegated Governance and the British State: Walking Without Order*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199271603.001.0001>. **Winner of the WJM Mackenzie Prize [Best Book in Political Science], 2008.**
- R4.** Flinders, M 2016. *Democracy Matters: Final Report*, Sheffield: University of Sheffield. Available on request from HEI.
- R5.** Flinders, M., Meakin, A., & McCarthy Cotter, L.-M. (2019). The double-design dilemma: political science, parliamentary crisis and disciplinary justifications. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 25(2), 250–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2019.1603224>
- R6.** Dommett, K and Flinders, M. (2015). The Centre Strikes Back: Meta-governance, delegation, and the core executive in the United Kingdom, 2010-14. *Public Administration*, 93(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12121>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of Flinders' research has demonstrated depth and reach by stimulating and informing policy and public debate, enabling effective scrutiny, underpinning amendments to legislation, demonstrating the relevance of the social sciences, and increasing the cost-effectiveness of public services. Each year the ESRC bestows an 'Impact Award' to a social scientist who has achieved 'outstanding ESRC research and success in collaborative working, partnerships, engagement and knowledge exchange activities that have led to significant impact'. Flinders was awarded the ESRC's 'Impact Champion' prize in 2018.

Improving economic efficiency, increasing transparency, and strengthening accountability

In 2014, Flinders was appointed specialist adviser to the Public Administration Select Committee's (PASC) 'Who's Accountable?' inquiry, on the basis of his research [R3, R6, E1]. This research uncovered that many arm's-length bodies no longer had effective oversight from their parent department, leading to a lack of administrative control. Flinders and fellow Sheffield academic, Dr Kate Dommett's, research informed PASC's recommendation that the government adopt a new taxonomy of public bodies to aid public transparency and prevent *ad hoc* bureaucratic growth [R3, R6], [E1p35]. The government noted in its March 2015 [PASC response](#) that its 'Public Bodies Reform Strategy' (see HC1129, 2015, p2-3), is specifically addressing these issues. In particular, this included a strengthened triennial review programme combined with improved sponsorship capacity and capability, as raised by PASC and informed by Flinders' and Dommett's research [R6, E1]. The cost-saving value of the 2010-2015 public bodies reform agenda has been [independently audited as £3bn](#).

Established new and innovative forms of public engagement

During the summer of 2015 and in the wake of the Scottish referendum on independence a major debate emerged about the idea of launching a citizens' convention or assembly on the state of democracy in the UK. Flinders led an alliance of scholars, officials and civil society organisations in a project called 'Democracy Matters'. The project sought to stress-test participatory structures by comparing and contrasting 'pure' and 'hybrid' assembly models. Citizens assemblies were run in Sheffield and Southampton with a focus on English regional devolution [R4].

This commitment to stress-testing new methods of public engagement in politics and policymaking through social science research dovetailed with the fact that most party manifestos at the 2015 General Election proposed the establishment of some form of popular convention to examine constitutional issues. The Assemblies were the first attempt to put those ideas into

practice and revealed that with careful planning and support the public could play a full and positive role in constitutional policymaking and analysis. By engaging with the research, assembly members were shown to have developed more confidence and an enhanced understanding of their own capacity to understand complex political issues [R4]. The findings informed House of Commons Library research briefings about ‘best practice’ in public engagement and acted as a pathway to further subject specific assemblies [E2]. This, in turn, paved the way for the first ever citizens’ assembly to be formally commissioned by and included within a select committee inquiry in 2018 [E2]. The impact of the ‘Democracy Matters’ project was recognised when it was awarded the Political Studies Association’s 2016 ‘Democratic Innovation Prize’. The judges recognised the “*innovative and deliberative ways*” the Democracy Matters project and pilot Citizens’ Assemblies in Sheffield and Southampton engaged with citizens, recognising “*their potential for shaping future democratic reforms and the devolution of power at local and regional levels.*” [E2]

Support parliamentary scrutiny and promote evidence-based public engagement

In June 2017, Flinders was appointed Specialist Advisor to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement [E3] on the basis of his core findings [F1-F3]. Through his Special Advisor role, Flinders was able to embed his research on democratic decline and democratic innovation [R2, R4] with the committee to underpin its recommendation that Parliament’s Restoration and Renewal Project should incorporate outreach and creative public engagement [E3, p.127].

Legislative amendment

Flinders’ research has focused on parliamentary reform and modernisation for over twenty years. Since 2016, Flinders has used his findings to increase the public value of the proposed multi-billion-pound Restoration and Renewal Programme for the Palace of Westminster through a focus on supporting parliamentary scrutiny and promoting public engagement [F2-F4, R4]. The programme is a once in a lifetime opportunity to promote a new and inclusive ‘politics of optimism’ about the capacity of parliamentary institutions to recognise the extent and pace of social change and to reconnect with sections of society that for a number of reasons feel alienated and disconnected. Flinders was appointed to a three-year Professorial Research Fellowship in the House of Commons in 2018 and attached to the programme team. This meant Flinders could ensure that the research was included in Commons Restoration & Renewal briefings issued to policymakers [R5, E6]. In March 2019, the *Joint Committee on the Draft Parliamentary Buildings Bill* used Sheffield’s research evidence [E4-E7] as the explicit basis for their final recommendations One, Six and Eleven in HC1800/HL317 [E7]. Without this research base these recommendations would never have been made. The government accepted these three legislative amendments and published *Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019* [E8]. As a result there is now a statutory obligation on the Sponsor Body to promote the public understanding of the Restoration and Renewal project and improve public engagement. More broadly, Flinders’ research has been instrumental in cultivating a critical public debate [E9] around the project and in July 2020 the Sponsor Board announced a fundamental review of the project. Since September 2020, Flinders has been working with members of the Sponsor Board to design a public engagement strategy. This reflects a direct shift in Sponsor Board policy [R5].

Shaped public debate and promoted public understanding of politics

The research has underpinned four major broadcast documentaries. BBC Radio 4’s ‘Analysis’ programme (‘Parliament- A Building Disaster’, October 2017) explained the democratic potential of restoration and renewal and featured Flinders discussing his research [R4, R5, E7, E9]. He wrote and presented a major documentary on viewpoint diversity in higher education (‘University

Unchallenged', 12 Nov. 2018) [E9]. In 2019 the BBC commissioned Flinders to advise on the development of a documentary 'Who needs politicians anyway?' [R2, E7, E9] for BBC Radio 4 (broadcast 13 February) based on his work on political apathy and disengagement [F1-4]. Flinders also featured in the broadcast. Later that year, the BBC commissioned him to write and present a major Radio 4 programme to mark the tenth anniversary of the MPs Expenses Scandal ('Legacy of a Scandal', [R4, E9] broadcast 8 May) [BBC reports typical listening figures of 900,000 for that slot]. All of these documentaries triggered major international debates featured in a range of national and international media outlet (e.g. *The Guardian*, *Breitbart News*, *Blomberg*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Spiked*, *New Statesman*, *San Francisco Daily Digest*, *The Spectator*, etc.].

This case study offers a vibrant range of impacts with both breadth and depth that are united by a focus on political disaffection, the evolution of the state and forms of parliamentary reform and modernisation, while being founded on award-winning research.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. SPECIALIST ADVISER HC 110 '*Who's Accountable? Relationships between Government and arm's-length bodies*' First Report by the Public Administration Select Committee, 2014-2015. Dr Kate Dommett cited 16 times.
- S2. Citizens' Assembly sources: Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit; OECD article; UCL blog and PSA Awards Brochure 2016.
- S3. SPECIAL ADVISER AND CO-AUTHOR '*The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*' **House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement**, Session 2017-2019
- S4. INVITED SUBMISSION to the **Joint Committee on the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster**, First Report of Session 2016-2017, HL41/HC659, p55, p117.
- S5. Flinders, M et al. 2017. *Parliamentary Briefing: January 2017 - The Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster*, Sheffield: University of Sheffield
- S6. RESEARCH FEATURED **House of Commons Library**. *The Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster*, Research Briefing, 078908, Dec. 2018, p51.
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7898/>
- S7. WRITTEN AND ORAL EVIDENCE to the **Joint Parliamentary Committee** on the draft *Parliamentary Buildings Bill*. HC1800/HL 317, p49-50, p60-61.
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtdpbb/1800/1800.pdf>
- S8. Amendments accepted in ***Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019*** [see Section 2 (5) (g) (h); Schedule 1, Part 1, 12(4); Part 3, 6(5)(a) (b), 9(b)].
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/27/contents>
- S9. 'Parliament- A Building Catastrophe' and 'Who needs politicians anyway?', BBC Radio 4, broadcast 23 Oct. 2017 and 13 Feb. 2019, respectively. 'University Unchallenged', BBC Radio 4, 14 Nov 2018. 'MPs' expenses: The Legacy of a Scandal', 7 & 12 May, 2019
- S10. ESRC Impact Prize video 'Building Capacity, Impact & Innovation'.
<https://esrc.ukri.org/news-events-and-publications/impact-case-studies/building-capacity-impact-and-innovation/>