Gap Analysis:

Participatory Democracy, Public Expectations and Community Assemblies in Sheffield

This paper offers an argument of almost primitive simplicity: politics tends to promise too much and deliver too little. In order to substantiate this argument this paper presents the results of the first attempt to analyse an experiment with participatory democracy through the lens of ‘gap analysis’. This approach focuses attention on the creation, management and fulfilment of public expectations vis-à-vis products, services or experiences. In a historical period in which the fiscal and social resources of democratic politics are severely limited the argument and empirical research set out in this paper offers valuable insights for scholars and practitioners of politics and public policy. Central amongst these is the suggestion that responding to unprecedented levels of anti-political sentiment is likely to demand that politicians pay more attention to the management of public expectations (i.e. demand) and less on how to maximise political outputs in terms of public services (i.e. supply).

Matthew Flinders
Katharine Dommett

Department of Politics
University of Sheffield
Sheffield
United Kingdom S10 2TU
00 44 (0)114 222 1680
m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk

Key Words:

PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS; PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY; COMMUNITY ASSEMBLIES; GAP ANALYSIS; POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT
During the final quarter of the twentieth century a combination of factors including the dissolution of colonial frameworks, the fall of authoritarian regimes, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the resurgence of democracy in Latin America contributed to mass democracy emerging as the dominant form of national regime. Although this was interpreted triumphantly within the ‘end of history’ narrative the situation had changed by the end of the century as an increasing number of scholars highlighted the existence of ‘disaffected democracies’ (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). The dawn of the twenty-first century has not therefore become associated with the global triumph of democracy but with a cross-national decline in apparent contentment and engagement with the institutions, agents and processes of democratic politics. The burgeoning literature on political disengagement and public distrust of politics paints a complex picture of cynicism and despair.

It is in this context that scholars and practitioners around the world have attempted to revitalize politics and re-engage members of the public through the design and implementation of innovative forms of citizen engagement that offer new opportunities for public participation and engagement (for a review see Elstub, 2010). These experiments and the normative arguments that lie beneath them have generally been collected together under the umbrella concepts of ‘deliberative’ or ‘participatory’ democracy (for a review see Goodin, 2008). The degree to which many of these initiatives have actually delivered a deeper form of political relationship in which the balance of power has shifted from the governors to the governed is, however, contested. Many scholars have suggested that deliberative and participatory mechanisms are little more than cosmetic window dressing for the continuation of traditional elite-dominated politics, whilst others, notably James Fishkin highlight their ability to ‘muffle or distort’ public opinion (Fishkin, 2009: 1). It is therefore reasonably straightforward to identify something of a disciplinary schism between those scholars who have tended to adopt a rather sceptical attitude towards deliberative or participatory mechanisms of political engagement (Dryzek, 1992) and those who have embraced a more positive, or at the very least, agnostic, position (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Cooke, 2000; Bohman, 1998). The existence
and identification of such simplistic dichotomies is, however, of little or no value. Political analysis rarely leads to ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers but more commonly delivers shades of grey and it is in understanding the existence of gradations and notably their relationship with public expectations in the context of democratic politics that this paper is principally concerned. We see the analysis of experiments with participatory or deliberative democratic mechanisms as experiments with the redistribution of political power within democratic regimes. And yet, as a vast body of comparative and historical literature testifies, irrespective of their rhetorical claims and discourse, political elites are rarely keen to voluntarily cede power (Lijphart, 2008: 178).

The focus of this paper is therefore on the gap that may emerge between what is promised and what is delivered when public expectations are inflamed through political statements that promise a higher level of democratic engagement and decision-making than is subsequently delivered. We suggest that the notion of an ‘expectations gap’ provides inter alia a number of insights into the complex nature of modern governance, the cultivation of political literacy and the difference between public perceptions and individual experience. It also adds a new dimension and methodological tool to a vast body of literature on deliberative and participatory democracy that has generally adopted a descriptive-prescriptive approach in relation to empirical analysis (e.g. Bohman and Rehg, 1997). As such this paper seeks to make a significant and original contribution at three levels:

(1) At the conceptual level by stress-testing the notions of an ‘expectations gap’, ‘performance paradox’ and ‘perception gap’ within the parameters of attempts to rebuild public confidence and satisfaction with conventional representative politics.

(2) At the methodological level by seeking to import ‘gap analysis’ from the disciplines of consumer economics and business studies and exploring its implications for helping scholars understand political disaffection.

(3) At the empirical level by seeking to substantiate these arguments through original research into the introduction of Community Assemblies in Sheffield.
In order to make these contributions this paper is structured around five core questions that, in turn, inform the structure and flow of the paper (see Table 1).

### Table 1: This Paper at a Glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How can we disaggregate between different forms of participatory engagement?</td>
<td>By understanding the distinction between deliberative and participatory mechanisms and how this impacts upon public expectations.</td>
<td>Democratic Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What can we learn from other disciplines in terms of measuring and understanding public expectations?</td>
<td>The fields of marketing, retail analysis and consumer economics provides major empirical insights and conceptual tools that political science can build upon.</td>
<td>Conceptual Travelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How can we make these insights travel?</td>
<td>By adapting and tying the SERVQUAL framework (developed to measure the creation, management and fulfilment of public expectations in the private sector) to Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’ by designing and applying a DEMQUAL survey.</td>
<td>Methodological Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How can we test if these insights actually work?</td>
<td>Through the application of the DEMQUAL survey to a rhetorically ambitious attempt to re-engage the public through new participatory mechanisms in Sheffield.</td>
<td>Empirical Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>So What?</td>
<td>The empirical case study reveals a significant expectations gap and this has implications for a range of broader debates concerning the future of democratic governance.</td>
<td>Broader Relevance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is clearly a wide-ranging paper and, like painting on a large canvas, this has required the use of a fairly broad brush, in analytical and empirical terms. It is hoped that by highlighting the method of gap analysis and introducing the theme of public expectations within the parameters of debates concerning participative democracy and public engagement that this paper will stimulate more scholarly interest in this topic, thereby filling-in the detail and achieving a more fine-grained understanding. Furthermore, at a time when academics are commonly criticized for saying more and more about less and less this paper does at least attempt to inject a bold and fresh argument into debates concerning the evolution of democratic frameworks. It seeks to confront recent suggestions by a number of commentators, including Peter Riddell (2011) and Tony Wright (2009), that political scientists are to some degree
responsible for falling levels of public trust in politics due to their failure to engage with the public and practitioners about the basic challenges of governing in the twenty first century. Such accusations call for academics to be a little brave, to fly some kites and risk the inevitable misunderstanding and deliberate criticism that attempting to say something different entails. With this in mind the next section briefly outlines the broader terrain within which this paper seeks to make a contribution.

I. Preparing The Canvass

There is now a significant body of longitudinal data demonstrating the extent to which the public have lost faith in the institutions, processes and actors associated with conventional representative democracy. As detailed above, disillusionment is widespread, challenging the orthodox of representative democracy and heralding, for some, the dawning of a ‘post-democratic’ era (Crouch, 2000) or a new stage of ‘monitory democracy’ (Keane, 2009). In response a number of theorists have worked to establish new models of engagement, resulting in a plethora of complementary initiatives and reforms. These ‘thicker’ forms of democracy have emerged within the existing representative system to improve citizen engagement via deliberative and participative methods that envisage greater individual involvement (Elster, 1998). Yet, despite their similar goals, deliberative and participative frameworks are based upon subtly different logics of participation that can be equated with different gradations in relation to the depth and extent of public involvement in political decision-making processes. This is a critical point: the adjectives ‘participatory’ and ‘deliberative’ are commonly used synonymously when in fact they denote quite different assumptions about the intentions and parameters of public engagement.2

Deliberative democracy denotes a thicker or deeper form of democratic engagement revolving ‘around the transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences’, demoting the idea of democratic representation (Ibid., 1). Deliberation relies inherently upon the notions of consensus and inclusion, seeing these principles
to be essential to overcoming apparent public disillusionment with politicians, political institutions and political processes. Through the process of deliberation individuals are deemed able to transcend self-interest and revise viewpoints to prioritize the collective good, replacing hierarchical decision making with consensual discussion (Young, 1996; Benhabib, 1996: 120-30). This transformation is seen to instil responsibility and accountability within the populace at large and to restore citizen engagement by redefining the political power dynamic to ensure citizens are ‘invested with the capacity to decide what is and what is not of common concern to them’ (Cunningham, 2006: 167; Habermas. 1998: 312). Consequently deliberative democracy can be seen to advocate a specific form of deeper decision-making and arguably forms the ‘most influential model of ‘thick’ democracy’ (Meadowcroft, 2001; Carter and Stokes, 2002).

In contemporary politics, what Stephen Elstub (2010) terms third generation deliberative democracy has come to inspire a number of projects aimed at rejuvenating politics. The most instantly recognizable, and frequently evoked, being Citizens’ Juries, Assemblies and Conventions that have been organized across North America and Western Europe (Smith and Wales, 2000; Warren and Pearse, 2008; Flinders and Curry, 2008; Stewart, Kendall and Coote, 1994). Most commonly, but not exclusively, established at the local government level and focusing on specific issues or decisions (e.g. land use planning, resource allocation, etc.) these projects are united by their commitment to shifting power towards the public. However, the utility of such devices is contested with many critics questioning the cost of such initiatives, the degree to which members actually reflect or represent ‘the public’, the agenda-setting role of facilitators and whether members of the public can actually develop a sufficient understanding of complex socio-economic or technical issues within a short timeframe (McLaverty, 2009; Young, 2000).

Participative democracy, by contrast, differs from its deliberative cousin in a number of ways, fundamentally due to the manner in which it seeks to emphasize voice but not necessarily choice. Participatory mechanisms are focused upon supplementing
representative democracy by opening up new channels of public dialogue rather than devolving power exclusively to citizens. In so doing this model accords with the notion that ‘there are limits, both theoretical and practical, as to how far political participation...can be effective in a diverse and large mass public’ (Judge, 1999: 3). Whereas deliberative democracy aims to institute a quite different model of democracy and commonly involves the transfer of executive plenipotentiary powers from elected politicians to new democratic arenas, participatory democracy is more concerned with increasing the flow of information between elected representatives and the public through mechanisms and processes like user engagement events, online discussions, focus groups and assemblies to elicit consent (Pratchett, 1999; Unlock Democracy-Charter 88, 2007; Fishkin, 2009: 76). Therefore although these initiatives can alter the dynamic of politics they do not fundamentally challenge the underlying fabric of representative democracy.

Deliberative democracy is therefore a deeper and potentially more far reaching model of governing than participatory democracy as citizens are integral to the governing process. This distinction matters in the context of democratic innovation because it has rhetorical and ideational implications in terms of the public’s understanding of the aims and intentions of experiments, and it affects how the outputs and outcomes of such experiments are subsequently assessed. If the publicity surrounding an initiative promotes a greater role and transfer of powers than is actually delivered (i.e. rhetorically promises deliberative democracy but in reality delivers participatory democracy) then the public’s perception of politicians as untrustworthy, deceitful and self-interested actors is likely to be reinforced rather than diminished. In order to explore the potential creation of an ‘expectations gap’ the next section focuses on gap analysis.

II. Gap Analysis

Gap analysis, like most academic theories once you scrape away the verbose language that tends to suffocate them, is essentially simple: the reaction and
subsequent behaviour of an agent (e.g. an individual, group, population, etc.) in the context of a relationship will be to a great extent conditioned and shaped by their understanding of what they were promised (i.e. their expectations). Expectations therefore provide a mode of comparison against which subsequent experiences will be assessed. Economic relationships (i.e. transactions) concerning house purchases, for example, will be shaped by the prospective buyer’s expectations of price brackets vis-à-vis a range of variables (area, size, schools, garden, etc.). Similarly, an individual’s expectations of how they should be treated in interpersonal transactions will be based upon an assessment of less tangible but no less important factors (e.g. trust, friendships, social status, wages, duty, obligation, etc.). As such the analysis of public expectations can quite comfortably be located within Albert Hirschman’s (1970) influential work on exit, voice and loyalty. An individual’s view about whether their expectations have been met by a product (object, service or experience) will effect whether and how they deploy: their ‘voice’ mechanism (complain, lobby, protest, etc.); their ‘exit’ mechanism (moving to a different provider or into a different jurisdiction); and may either strengthen or weaken their ‘loyalty’ to a particular school, company, brand or political party. Expectations therefore provide a predictive indicator that shapes subsequent satisfaction levels and acts as a potent driver of political behaviour and choice.

There has, however, been surprisingly little research conducted into the formation, shaping and management of public expectations. Of the limited research that is available the overwhelming focus has been on customer relationships in private sector transactions and a smaller amount has been completed more recently on perceptions of public sector performance. The aim of this section is therefore to briefly outline the existing research base, explore the main insights and suggest that the SERVQUAL (i.e. service quality) framework provides a valuable tool with great potential in relation to understanding and stimulating public involvement in politics.

Within the existing research base on private-sector relationships and expectations the work of Valarie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman and Leonard Berry provides a central
and influential reference point (1986; 1988; 1994). Their approach distinguishes between:

1. Desired service - the level of service representing a blend of what customers believe can be and should be provided.

2. Adequate service - the minimum level of service customers are willing to accept.

3. Delivered service – the perceived level of service that was actually delivered.

An evaluation of a product, service or experience therefore results in degrees of one of two outcomes: satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Satisfaction and dissatisfaction are viewed as opposite ends of a continuum, and a disconfirmation paradigm suggests that positive or negative attitudes will be the sum of a relatively straightforward (in theory at least) calculation concerning anticipated outcomes and actual outcomes (Anderson, 1973; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983; Van Raaij, 1989; Brown and Swartz, 1989). In order to measure desired service and adequate service levels Zeithmal, Parasuraman and Perry (1986) created the SERVQUAL survey which has become the internationally recognised methodological technique for measuring and analysing consumer expectation levels (see Ladhari 2009). The results of studies that have used SERVQUAL in a variety of settings highlight two important epistemological and methodological issues – the ‘performance paradox’ and ‘performance gap’ that are of direct relevance to this paper’s focus on democratic engagement and innovation.

The ‘performance paradox’ relates to the common finding that the public’s perceptions of a product are frequently out of kilter with objective assessments. This is a critical point. Even where objective technical assessments indicate that the standard of a product (e.g. energy efficiency, safety, material strength, etc.) have increased significantly this may not be reflected in how individuals perceive the product. Skoda cars, for example, suffered from a perception gap for some years after they were taken over by Volkswagen. All objective assessments suggested that the mechanical and technological changes made by Volkswagen had significantly
improved the quality of Skoda cars but for many years the public’s perception of this brand lagged far behind these technical and professional assessments (Stockton, 2009). Product attributes by the public, and therefore their normative expectations about the likely quality of a product, may accordingly lag far behind actual changes in its quality.

The ‘performance paradox’ highlights the manner in which services may well improve but the public may not perceive or believe that this has occurred, this flows into the notion of a ‘performance gap’. Research in the private sector on public expectations reveals stark differences in relation to the generic and specific viewpoints held by individuals. As a result respondents will frequently hold negative views about a product or service in general but when asked of their own personal experience with the same product or service frequently give positive responses (Zeithmal, Parasuraman and Perry, 1988). The case of Skoda cars again provides a straightforward example of this phenomenon: general brand attribution responses tend to contain overwhelmingly negative perceptions, even when the respondent’s personal experience of owning or driving a Skoda is positive. Previous prejudices (positive or negative) about a product or brand will therefore interact with current information to create a perception and expectation about the relative costs and benefits of proceeding with a transaction. Overcoming negative associations is incredibly difficult and will generally only be achieved by improving the product alongside seeking to manage perceptions and expectations through the provision of accurate information (Mason and Bequette, 1998).

The value of data on public expectations for private businesses is therefore crucial due to the manner in which it allows them to target and market their services to the very specific expectations of client groups in an increasingly competitive environment. More importantly it suggests that increasing public confidence in a product or service might not actually be delivered by increasing quality (i.e. a supply-focused response) but by managing public expectations in a more sophisticated manner (i.e. focusing on the management of demand). The response of Volkswagen to
the perception gap in relation to Skoda cars, for example, shifted away from modifying the actual cars to increasing public awareness that the Volkswagen brand was now embedded within Skoda products.

In the final decades of the twentieth century the dominant reform paradigm known as New Public Management fuelled a focus on public satisfaction indicators and an interest in public expectations and gap analysis within public sector research, with the most systematic studies being conducted in the United States (see, for example, Roch and Poister, 2006). It is therefore possible to identify a limited body of work that considers expectation formation, individual and group expectations, and expectation rationality in relation to public services (e.g. Manski, 2004). Although it is not possible or necessary to review this literature in any detail within this section it is worthwhile highlighting that the dangers of expectation inflation and the existence of both the ‘performance paradox’ and ‘performance gap’ are frequently identified within this body of work (The Work Foundation, 2008: 5). Oliver James (2009), for example, emphasizes the ‘performance paradox’ when he notes that although local authority performance in the United Kingdom increased during 2001-2004 overall levels of public satisfaction with public services decreased.

Public sector analyses are also replete with examples of the ‘performance gap’ in which the public frequently fails to perceive or believe that public services have improved even when their own individual experience of those services has been better than expected. This was a key finding of the research conducted for the 2020 Public Services Trust by Ipsos/MORI in 2010. Where individuals hold broadly positive attitudes to public services these attributes are frequently anchored in a high level of direct interaction with the service or institution concerned. Research therefore suggests that a single positive experience with a public service provider, like a trip to a casualty department for a minor injury, is unlikely to overturn negative perceptions but a series of repeatedly positive interactions, such as the provision of long-term care, is likely to forge a positive disposition to public services in general (for a discussion see Appleby and Alvarez, 2003).
The ‘performance paradox’ and ‘performance gap’ pose a series of challenges for those charged with delivering public services. High levels of public satisfaction might reflect the existence of low public expectations rather than particularly good levels of service. Conversely, low levels of public satisfaction may reflect the existence of unrealistically high public expectations rather than particularly poor levels of provision. Social survey data suggesting a decline in public satisfaction, for example, at a time when the British Labour government was significantly increasing public spending (2001-2008) stimulated concern amongst politicians that public services were not failing but that public expectations were simply too high (OPSR/MORI, 2002). And yet this in itself presents an intriguing opportunity (or dilemma) in terms of political approaches to statecraft and rebuilding public satisfaction in politics. ‘If expectations influence satisfaction’, James (2007) notes ‘there may be potential for manipulating expectations rather than improving performance in order to improve satisfaction, which may be seen as an undesirable strategy for public organizations to undertake’. To explore this strategy in greater detail it is necessary to: (1) demonstrate a more robust connection or relevance between gap analysis and democratic innovation; and (2) consider the methodological basis through which the insights emanating from SERVQUAL-based research might be delivered in relation to political relationships. These twin-tasks form the basis of the next section.

III. Gap Analysis And Democratic Innovation

The simple argument of this paper is that politics tends to promise too much and deliver too little; the implication being that political re-engagement and trust might actually be secured (or restored) not by increasing supply but by reducing demand. In this context encouraging the public to participate in new democratic arenas may offer the opportunity to narrow the gap that has apparently emerged between the governors and the governed by creating an arena in which rational and balanced
debates can occur about the distribution of finite resources. Framed slightly differently, the creation of public arenas of dialogue, debate and decision-making may draw upon what John Elster referred to in his book *Deliberative Democracy* (1998: 111) as ‘the civilizing force of hypocrisy’ by making it hard for participants to appear to be motivated solely by self-interest. At the same time, however, the promotion of new forms of public engagement risks reinforcing existing negative attitudes if the public’s expectations are heightened by political commitments to devolve power but then dashed by a disjuncture between rhetoric and subsequent reality. In order to develop this argument this section locates the theme of an ‘expectations gap’ squarely within the parameters of contemporary concerns regarding democratic performance; it then disaggregates public expectations along two pathways and reflects upon why reform along one path is more difficult for politicians to manipulate than the other; before seeking to further develop and refine the potential of gap analysis by redesigning the SERVQUAL framework into one that can be applied to democratic engagement (i.e. DEMQUAL) and then demonstrating how this approach dovetails with Arnstein’s influential and widely applied ‘ladder of participation’.

Research suggests that public expectations are shaped *ex post*, through connotations that have been shaped and embedded by previous experiences, and *ex ante*, by information and commitments that seek to attract custom in terms of either votes or money, and that negative societal attributes can be particularly hard to elude. Although a focus on public expectations and the existence of various ‘paradoxes’ and ‘gaps’ may not be mainstream within political science their relevance within the context of shrinking, or at the very least limited, financial resources has been emphasized by politicians. As Director of the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit during 1997-2001, for example, David Miliband frequently made reference to the existence 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 modernization agenda for 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 democratic politics could (via the state) deliver (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Expectations Gap**

Not only does Figure 1 resonate with the research of Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (discussed above) but it also suggests that politicians have three main options when it comes to closing the expectations gap:

- **Option 1**: increasing supply (moving the bottom-bar up);
- **Option 2**: reducing demand (moving the top-bar down);
- **Option 3**: a combination of Options 1 and 2 (close the gap from above and below).
Framed in this manner the rather difficult position of politicians becomes slightly clearer; increasing supply, in terms of financial resources, is not an option in the wake of the global economic crisis, and reducing demand is easier said than done in the context of electoral competition. Pushing the issue of public expectations a little further allows us to think of it as a form of linkage that can be divided into at least two distinct forms: public expectations about political behaviour (PPE1); and political expectations about public behaviour (PPE2).

**Figure 2: Disaggregating the Politics of Public Expectations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politics of Public Expectations (PPE)</th>
<th>PPE1 – Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations about Political Behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPE2 – Political</td>
<td>Expectations about Public Behaviour.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The need to secure and maintain public support arguably makes it difficult for politicians to impose their views on the responsibilities of the public vis-à-vis public services (i.e. PPE2). Indeed politicians and public servants who have spoken in favour of placing greater emphasis on the duties and responsibilities of members of the public to society as a whole – like showing evidence of adopting a healthier lifestyle prior to medical treatment, ensuring children have a good night’s sleep (and an appropriate breakfast) before school, or introducing incentives for recycling – risk upsetting those on whose votes they depend (Perri 6, 2010; Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, 2004). Reducing (or at the very least recalibrating) the public’s expectations or promoting significant behavioural change is therefore arguably harder than most people understand. As such the main statecraft strategy used in many countries in
an attempt to ‘close the gap’ has in recent years focused upon increasing supply through the absorption of market-principles within the public and political sphere (Marsh and Gibb, 2009).

A great deal of this paper can therefore be located within the contours of well-known debates concerning the rationalities of political behaviour. Anthony Downs’ *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) provides the foundation for much of this literature through: modelling political behaviour alongside economic exchanges; and 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 encourages politicians and political parties to exaggerate their capacity for positive change; only for these expectations to be dashed as the elected party either seeks to renge upon certain promises or fails to achieve them. It was for this exact reason that Bernard Crick, in his classic work *In Defence of Politics*, highlighted a tendency for politics to ‘lead to false expectation. It may lead people to expect too much – and the disillusionment of unreal ideals is an occupational hazard of free politics’ (Crick, 1962: 70).

Viewed from this perspective (and linking back to Elster’s arguments in favour of deliberative democracy) the establishment of new modes of democratic engagement could potentially offer mechanisms through which politicians could enhance their capacity to promote their expectations of the public’s responsibilities (i.e. PPE2 on Figure 2 above) and through this seek either to readjust public expectations downwards or draw upon the capacity of local communities in order to enhance the effectiveness of specific policies (i.e. emphasise the notion of individuals as active citizens rather than passive recipients of political outputs). Deliberative techniques, in particular, could help reshape public expectations about politics due to their emphasis on informed
debate, mutual accommodation and enhancing political understanding amongst participants (Ryfe, 2002: 365). At the same time, however, encouraging public participation in specific initiatives on the basis of promises to devolve power or delegate decision-making capacities risks further damaging public trust in politics, particularly amongst those sections of society that are particularly disengaged, if those promises are not perceived to have been fulfilled.

In order to gauge the existence and breadth of an ‘expectations gap’ in relation to new forms of citizen engagement it is necessary to adopt some mode of assessment and the SERVQUAL framework (discussed above) can be adapted to study the generation of public expectations vis-à-vis specific public engagement initiatives. In formulating DEMQUAL the many variants of the SERVQUAL questionnaire where distilled to offer targeted analysis of public expectations and delivery in relation to Sheffield City Council’s Community Assemblies. The SERVQUAL questionnaire is routinely focused upon five concepts: (1) reliability; (2) responsiveness; (3) assurance; (4) empathy and (5) tangible (with four or five questions on each concept). In adapting its structure four concepts (democracy, participation, listening and engagement) were selected and three to five questions were asked in each area. Additional questions assessed the importance of each concept and collated demographic and geographical information. Whilst more simplistic than many SERVQUAL questionnaires this structure allowed the hypothesis advanced here to be analysed, whilst at the same time leaving room for future development.

The important element of the transition from SERVQUAL to DEMQUAL is that the four concepts selected produce data that can then be mapped onto an established approach within political science that has been used to assess a wide range of experiments with public engagement, namely Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation (Table 2), but in a much more sophisticated and fine-grained manner than previous studies (see, for example, Flinders and Curry, 2008).

**Table 2: Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation**
As Table 2 illustrates, this approach adopts a continuum model of participation with eight specific levels of engagement that reintroduces us to debates concerning the distinction between *rhetorical* engagement and *substantive* engagement. Arnstein’s work resonates with that of Carol Pateman (1970) who advocates new forms of public engagement as a way of inculcating democratic values, developing skills amongst the public and nurturing a sense of the collective good. In doing so she distinguishes between pseudo, partial and full participation – categories which to a significant extent mirror the ‘non-participation, tokenism and citizen power’ groupings proposed by Arnstein. Whilst critiqued from some quarters (Dorcey et al, 1994; Jackson, 2001) Arnstein’s model offers a framework against which outputs from the DEMQUAL survey can be analysed to assess the degree to which democratic innovations actually transfer power. With this in mind the paper moves from theory to practice by applying the DEMQUAL method in relation to our case study.

IV. Community Assemblies in Sheffield

This section applies the new DEMQUAL framework to an initiative that has attracted worldwide attention, the creation of Community Assemblies in Sheffield. It is divided into three sub-sections with the first providing a brief overview of the
initiative, the second outlining the methodology on which this paper is based, and the third presenting the results of this research in the context of Arnstein’s approach.

1. Overview - Community Engagement in Sheffield

The City of Sheffield has a distinguished history of community engagement in local politics and throughout recent decades a number of pioneering initiatives have been established - one recent example being Sheffield City Council’s selection as a pilot authority for Community Justice Panels in June 2009. In relation to local community governance the main institutional framework in Sheffield had been structured around a cross-city web of twelve Area Panels (Digantano and Lawless, 1999). These Area Panels had no formal plenipotentiary powers but offered a formalised participatory interface between local communities and the local council. In 2008, however, these Area Panels were abolished by the new Liberal Democrat executive and were replaced by seven new Community Assemblies each covering a populace of around 70,000-80,000 people (Figure 3). Influenced by the ‘new localism’ and devolution agendas the Liberal Democrats moved to, as they asserted, ‘put local communities and their local councillors in the driving seat through giving them much greater power and say’ (Sheffield Liberal Democrats, 2008).
Critically, the Liberal Democrats received significant local and national media exposure for this initiative due to their insistence that ‘powerful community assemblies [will]...decide how local services are delivered. They will ...control service budgets, agree an influential area plan and set agreed, important targets with local people’ (Ibid). The rhetoric therefore promised a deepening of democracy with an emphasis on devolving choice as well as voice (cf. Hirschman, 1970). As such Sheffield Community Assemblies between 2008 – 2010 (when the Liberal Democrats lost power) provide a critical case through which to test and apply this paper’s arguments regarding the politics of public expectations.

2. Methodology
Four phases of research were conducted in order to assess the degree to which a rhetoric-reality gap existed in relation to the Community Assemblies initiative.

**Phase 1** – Documentary analysis of primary documents (leaflets, publicity, websites, etc.) and political speeches (council meetings, press releases, media interviews, etc.) in order to assess the nature of the rhetorical claims and promises being made (i.e. expectation generation).

**Phase 2** – Governance mapping of the relationships and resource distribution between the Community Assemblies and Sheffield City Council (i.e. expectation fulfilment capacity).

**Phase 3** – Interviews with Officers at all levels of the Community Assembly governance structure and councillors which assessed their understanding of the scheme’s aims, successes and failures.

**Phase 4** – DEMQUAL survey of the public in order to assess their expectations of what the Community Assemblies would deliver compared to their subsequent assessments of what was actually delivered (i.e. expectation fulfilment levels).

This four-phase research design replicates SERVQUAL’s original focus on Desired Service and Delivered Service and was implemented in association with Sheffield City Council. The DEMQUAL survey was circulated through the Council’s Community Assembly mailing lists composed of approximately three thousand individuals, one hundred and twenty seven responses were collected, drawn from all seven Assemblies. The survey provided data on the expectations gap in all four of the conceptual areas examined, indicated the relative importance of each concept, provided a range of demographic information including age, gender, and also afforded the opportunity for additional comments. Accordingly the DEMQUAL survey offered both quantitative and qualitative data, with seventy seven respondents leaving textual answers. Using these responses and the wider research techniques it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions.

3. **Findings**

Taking each phase of the research in turn, in terms of expectation generation the extensive documentary analysis revealed a (not altogether unsurprising) emphasis
on inflating the local community’s expectations of how the initiative would alter the nature of local governance. A word cloud representation of the primary documents would therefore be dominated by terms such as ‘localism’, ‘take control’, ‘real power’, ‘community governance’, ‘empowerment’, ‘local initiative’, ‘increasing accountability’, ‘citizen involvement’, ‘reconnecting’ and ‘choice’. The following extracts from two primary sources are therefore representative of a far wider and largely uniform process of expectation amplification.

Assemblies ‘will put local people at the heart of the decision-making process for their community...they will be able to guide and shape services that will improve the quality of life for them, their families and neighbourhoods. Assemblies have been developed to move decision-making away from the Town Hall’ [Sheffield City Council website, statement by Cllr David Baker, Cabinet member with responsibility for Assemblies].

‘[b]y putting local communities in charge, we can move away from the current ‘one size fits all’ approach under Labour. Local services will be shaped according to the needs of local communities. This will start with local library services, local parks and how local streets are cleaned, revolutionizing the Council and improving local services. We want to empower local communities so that they can have a real say, rather than dictate to them’ [Sheffield Liberal Democrats, 2008 Manifesto].

These two passages are clearly attempting to stimulate public interest in the Assemblies project, and yet they have implications in regards to expectations as they suggest that significant powers are to be devolved and that the culture and governance of the council is being recast. When set against Arnstein’s ladder (Table 2 above) the rhetoric surrounding Community Assemblies would appear to offer a standard of Level 6 (‘Partnership’) or 7 (‘Delegated Power’) and yet the second phase of our research revealed a significant rhetoric-reality gap in terms of the simple capacity of Assemblies to deliver these promises. The governance mapping exercise, bolstered by semi-structured interviews clarified the nature of relationships and exposed a rather anaemic structure that in reality had little power and wielded limited resources. Indeed rather than being a citizen-led initiative the Assemblies were firmly rooted in the existing representative democratic system, with the notion
of ‘community’ wedded to local councillors and service providers rather than exclusively to the public. In this sense the initiative offered a rather weak form of community *voice* rather than *choice*, diverging from the promotional material. This is reflected in the structure of Community Assemblies (see Figure 4 below).

**Figure 4: Community Assembly Structure**

![Community Assembly Structure Diagram](image)

Source: Sheffield First Partnership (2009)

The Community Assembly meetings were in reality a forum through which local councillors could listen to the views of the public. In this regard the initiative increased *voice* but not *choice* as Assemblies as a public forum enjoyed no real executive powers. With only one limited exception (discussed below), the decision-making powers resided firmly with local councillors. As one councillor emphasized, ‘they are a waste of time… They are basically council meetings held out and around the city’ (interview, July 2010). Added to this is the existence of a labyrinthine
participatory governance framework (Figure 4 above) in which the rationale for membership of the ‘Partner Panel’ or the role of the ‘Briefing Meetings’ remained unclear.

The limited nature of public control over resources is illustrated by the financial arrangements for Assemblies. Each Assembly had a budget ranging from £297,000 to £610,000 but allocation of this money was decided by councillors not the public. The exception being ‘You Choose’ sessions which offered the public the opportunity to express an opinion on how to allocate up to £5,000 between a number of community projects (but councillors were required to ratify any decisions). Contrary to the promotional material Community Assemblies appeared to offer at best a weak form of ‘Consultation’ (i.e. Step 4 on Arnstein’s ladder). Indeed during the second phase interview programme a significant number of respondents suggested that the creation of CAs was really an act of centralization rather than devolution as the previous Area Panels covered much smaller jurisdictions. Many interviewees also suggested a link between the introduction of an executive cabinet-based model of political leadership at the local level and the introduction of CAs. ‘The Assemblies’ one interviewee noted ‘were created to give all those councillors that did not have an executive position something to do’ (Interview, June 2010). This sense of promises unfilled was also noticeable in broader public discourse. As comments in the *Sheffield Star* indicate: ‘It seemed to me that public input was going to be very distant to the actual decision making process’; whilst another contributor wrote ‘I think the whole Citizen Assembly plan is flawed and doomed to failure, which is a pity as it could have been a real opportunity to engage the population’ (Ibbotson, 2009). In this context Paul Blomfield, formerly Chair of the Sheffield Labour Party and now MP for Sheffield Central may not have been making a purely partisan point when he noted that, ‘They [the Liberal Democrats] raised expectations…only to let people down. Beneath the bold pledges there’s not been much substance’ (*Sheffield Telegraph*, 2010). This qualitative analysis and governance mapping is reinforced by the data generated by the DEMQUAL survey of members of the public which suggests public experience of a rhetoric-reality gap.
The average DEMQUAL score (the figure obtained when subtracting perceptions from expectations, calculating each concept’s average, gap summing those averages and dividing by four) totals -214.305, indicating a negative gap between what the public expected (presumably informed by the associated publicity) and what was delivered by the Assembly initiative. This gap differs in each of the four concepts examined here with democracy (-270.67) producing the largest gap and participation the least (-186.8), yet interestingly the ordering of these gaps does not correlate with the concepts deemed most important by respondents (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Expectations Gap**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Largest Gap:</th>
<th>Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy: -270.67</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement: -210.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening: -189.25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation: -186.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This quantitative survey data suggests the existence of a significant expectations gap but what is possibly more interesting is the articulated level of public criticism expressed within the qualitative data. The statement by one respondent that the Community Assemblies were ‘a facade, just council bodies paying lip service’ encapsulates a general sense of frustration and disappointment in the initiative that spanned each conceptual level (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Illustrative Respondent Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Illustrative Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Community Assemblies are a sham, they are not democratic inasmuch as all decisions are taken by councillors and not citizens, have only a tiny proportion of a city budget to decide on (which means they are not devolving power in any sense) consult very superficially, pay staff huge salaries, and are a diversion of time and energy from bigger issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>They do not reach the general public, only a few activists, the usual suspects. Community Assemblies are a waste of time and especially money (staff resources.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>I feel that local people should be given more influence over how local services are delivered and funded. Less of the small grants dressed up as participatory budgeting and more involvement in the decisions about services that have an impact on the lives of local people. In times of declining budgets tough choices have to be made, let communities help in deciding what is most important in a local area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>They seem to give a few groups and individuals the power and opportunity to fund their own particular interests and council staff and councillors the impression that they are in touch with communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>A line of Councillors, behind the top table, with microphones, facing the public does not look participatory. Community Assemblies must demonstrate that citizens' attendance and participation has real influence on decision making. Far too often councillors prioritise party loyalty over loyalty to their constituents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Applying the DEMQUAL survey in the case of the Sheffield Community Assemblies initiative therefore exposes the existence of a significant expectations gap. In relation to Arnstein’s ladder of participation the DEMQUAL data indicates a level 4 (i.e. consultative form of participation) and thereby reveals a three-step gap between this initiative’s publicity/rhetoric and practice/reality (as illustrated in Table 5). Whilst the precise impact of the publicity on this gap is undeterminable the tone of documents and press interviews can be seen at the very least to have compounded this problem. This indicates the importance of moderating the rhetoric surrounding democratic initiatives if politicians are to exercise some degree of influence over public trust and engagement.
Table 5: Rhetoric and Reality in Relation to Citizens Assemblies in Sheffield

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step on the Ladder</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Citizen control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Delegated Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Placation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Informing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bernard Baruch, an advisor to Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States, infamously told the public to ‘vote for the man who promises least because he’ll be the least disappointing’. This is not quite the argument of this paper but it does at least point to the relevance of public expectations for those interested in the apparent erosion of public support for politics. Expectations shape political attitudes and behaviour and the focus of this paper has therefore been on the gap that may emerge between what is promised and what is delivered when public expectations are inflamed through political statements that promise a higher level of democratic engagement or devolution of power than is subsequently delivered. We suggest that the notion of an ‘expectations gap’ provides *inter alia* a number of insights into the complex nature of modern governance, the challenges of revitalising politics and the difference between public perceptions and individual experience. This aim of the next and final section is therefore to reflect on why this research matters for practitioners engaged in designing and delivering new forms of public engagement before considering the broader implications of this study in terms of the changing nature of governing in the twenty first century.

V. So What?
In terms of the design and implementation of innovations in participatory democracy three practical issues (expectations management, clarity of purpose, and whether people actually want to get involved) deserve brief comment. The first issue raises a rather thorny challenge in relation to the management of public expectations, and one that the case study of the Community Assemblies initiative in Sheffield arguably demonstrates, relates to the need to inflate public interest but not expectations. Setting the bar low (Figure 1 above) is hardly likely to provoke public engagement and yet at the same time setting the bar too high and then failing to deliver risks creating rather than dissipating anti-political sentiment. Managing public expectations is therefore tied to our second theme – clarity. One of the hallmarks of successful participatory and deliberative events is a very clear statement concerning the governance of an initiative (i.e. how various structures and processes are expected to inter-relate) plus a clear understanding of the core aims of the initiative (a point raised by Crawford, Ruther and Thelway, 2003). One of the starkest findings of the research in Sheffield was that a sense of confusion existed with regard to what exactly Community Assemblies were attempting to achieve.

This sense of uncertainty amongst those charged with delivering community engagement may explain the fact that the experiment with Community Assemblies in Sheffield did cast some doubt on whether the public actually wanted to engage. Most Community Assembly meetings attracted less than twenty members of the public and in some areas the attendance was measured in single figures (not merely amongst the public but also from councillors – those supposedly at the centre of the project). This level of public interest is by no means reserved to South Yorkshire; as Chris Mullin notes in his ministerial diaries – ‘The Government keeps talking about public participation but the public don’t want to participate’ (Mullin, 2010). The absence of a strong appetite amongst the public to actually get involved is reflected in the 2010 Hansard Society/Electoral Commission’s Audit of Political Engagement which seems to identify its own rhetoric-reality gap. Although a significant majority of surveyed respondents expressed a desire ‘to have a say in how the country is run’ very few were actually willing to engage in energy-intensive activities such as taking
part in a consultation or attending public meetings. This ‘wanting to be heard but not wanting to act’, as McHugh (2006) describes it, and the thought of local officials and councillors presiding over numerous sparsely populated community events has echoes of the 1970 film steering John Cleese and written by Peter Cook, *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer* in which the public become so fatigued by consultation meetings that they beg the Prime Minister to simply take all the decisions. This satire therefore seems to strike a contemporary chord for those who advocate deeper forms of democratic engagement, highlighting some of the broader socio-political themes and practical issues raised by this paper.

The first of these relates to the impact of the global financial crisis on the nature of public services. Politics over the short to medium term will be focused on managing the process of reducing the public’s expectations of what the state can and should provide: on reducing the ‘expectations gap’ from above rather than from below. And yet it should be remembered that crises bring with them opportunities and, as such, should never be wasted. The global financial crisis is going to force many governments to address difficult questions about the future of public services and what it is realistic to expect the state to do in the twenty-first century. Difficult decisions will have to be taken by politicians, but the opportunity exists to use these challenges to generate a more realistic set of expectations amongst the public. Although they can be a selfish master to serve the public understand that in the wake of the global financial crisis the economic situation is not positive and that around the world significant cuts within the public sector will have to be made.

What is particularly interesting, however, for the focus of this paper and its focus on public expectations and participatory democratic mechanisms is the manner in which the British government under David Cameron launched a major public engagement strategy in the summer of 2010 to ‘help shape the forthcoming spending review’. This in itself raises fundamental questions about the basic essence of politics and the manner in which participatory innovations can be grafted onto the ‘thinner’ structures of traditional representative democracy. In a sense participatory
mechanisms risk misleading the public by suggesting that they can play a relatively clear, observable and rational role in relation to decision making. And yet politics is by its nature far more complex than this naive caricature suggests. It is messy, compromise-based and often opaque in terms of how and why decisions are made because it is concerned, as Gerry Stoker argues, with the tough process of ‘squeezing collective decisions out of multiple and competing interests and opinions’ (Stoker, 2004: 82). We are not arguing that politics is necessarily ‘destined to disappoint’ but we are arguing that orchestrating national debates about where severe financial cutbacks should be made is, just like local events concerning the location of a new prison, energy plant or waste dump, unlikely to reach a public consensus. Rather they may well raise public expectations instead of accepting the simple fact that the role of a politician is generally invidious as they are frequently forced to rob Peter to pay Paul, and must decide which particular constituencies to represent, protect or assail at any given time. Politics is, as Tony Wright argued in his 2009 Political Quarterly lecture, a ‘messy business of accommodating conflicting interests, choosing between competing options, negotiating unwelcome trade-offs, and taking responsibility for decisions that may often represent the least worst option’.

This point brings the paper back full circle to its opening statement about politics tending to promise too much but deliver too little. Creating new participatory mechanisms can be seen as a rational political response to the challenges of unrealistic public expectations due to the manner in which it offers a degree of blame-shifting potential. And yet the simple fact that democratic politics cannot ‘make all sad hearts glad’, as Crick put it, may well explain the accusations that participatory and deliberative arenas are frequently interpreted as little more than public relations exercises or attempts to manipulate the public into supporting a decision that has actually been made elsewhere. We have, nonetheless, argued that if expectations shape satisfaction then there may be some potential for managing expectations, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis, rather than improving performance in order to close the expectations gap that has apparently emerged.
The deployment of participatory mechanisms and forms of public engagement may provide a tool through which levels of public understanding about the complexity of governing in the twenty-first century and the limits of the state might be increased but at the moment the existing body of research is far from clear on how this might actually be achieved. Questions also exist concerning whether any attempt to more carefully manage and control public expectations should actually be undertaken. High public expectations could be interpreted as the social manifestation of social dynamism, energy and vivacity that ought not to be smothered. It is for this reason that Hay warns that ‘such a rational recalibration of our expectations might lead us to lose our sense of political ambition, animation and engagement’ (Hay, 2007: 7). This, we would argue, 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.
James, O., 2007, ‘Evaluating the Expectations Disconfirmation and Expectations Anchoring Approaches to Citizen Satisfaction with Local Public Services’, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 19/1, 107-123.
James, O., 2009, ‘Evaluating the Expectations Disconfirmation and Expectations Anchoring Approaches to Citizen Satisfaction with Local Public Services’, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 19/1, 107-123.
Sheffield Telegraph., 13 May 2009, ‘Assemblies Power to the People…’, Available online at:
http://www.sheffieldtelegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/culture_2_5660/assemblies_power_to_the_people_1_453782.

Sheffield Telegraph., 15 June 2010, ‘Verdict on a Year of Change’, Available online at:
http://www.sheffieldtelegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/culture_2_5660/verdict_on_a_year_of_change_1_453588.


Stockton, G., 2009, ‘Stigma: Addressing negative associations in product design.’ Paper given at International conference on engineering and product design education, (10th & 11th September), Available online at:
http://repository.uwic.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10369/881/1/GStockton_Stigma.pdf.


The Hansard Society., 2010, ‘An Audit of Political Engagement’, Available online at:


This paper focuses upon politically invoked expectation gaps but the impetus for such schisms can emerge from elsewhere. Such causes are not, however, the focus of this paper.

Whilst other forms of participation can be identified (Fung, 2003) deliberative and participatory democracy represent the dominant wings of the literature. This focus is therefore deemed most illustrative but this does not prevent the future expansion of this framework in line with other conceptions of participation.