



Written by [James Heiser](#) on February 4, 2011

Study Exposes “Undemocratic” UK

Compared to other member nations of the European Union and many other nations with free elections, Great Britain is demonstrably less “democratic” — at least according to a study recently released by the University of Zurich and the Social Science Research Center in Berlin.

The study ranked 30 nations on a scale of 1 to 100 and assigned them points on the basis of ten criteria, which included not only the franchise, but also, [according to the Daily Mail](#), “Nine other criteria ... including the rule of law, transparency of government and participation in the political process.” One may certainly question the vagueness implicit in referring to such criteria as forming a “democracy barometer”; nevertheless, such criteria are beneficial for evaluating the relative levels of freedom experienced in different nations. According to the study, Great Britain was in 26th place with a score of 44.6; only France (42.8), Poland (42.0), South Africa (39.8) and Costa Rica (32.7) ranked lower. By comparison, several Commonwealth nations such as Canada (79.4) and Australia (65.5) were demonstrably more “democratic,” and the United States (74.9) remains a relative bastion of liberty, despite the pernicious influence of post-9/11 restrictions on American civil liberties.



The countries which fared the best in the study were often those which were the smallest: The Nordic nations of Denmark (88.3), Finland (87.7), Iceland (83.5), Sweden (82.9), and Norway (82.1), as well as Belgium (85.1) topped the list. Belgium, with a population of under 11 million, was the largest of the nations found to be “most free.” The anonymity — and attendant sense of powerlessness — of the individual citizen over against the might of Leviathan is certainly not the only factor in determining the relative freedom of the citizens of different nations; legal structures, national history, and cultural cohesion are all important factors as well. But when citizens are driven to conclude that their beliefs, freedom, and even their very existence, are of little importance to a distant national elite which purports to rule in the name of the people, it is little surprise that the people lose faith in those who would rule over them.

The *Daily Mail* quotes Wolfgang Merkel, the project leader, as having told *Der Spiegel* magazine:



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It [the study] was designed to go deeper than whether a country holds free and fair elections, but not to go deep into individual governmental policies. ... Our democracy barometer highlights the best practice of some of the most successful democracies, but it does not disguise areas in which progress still needs to be made.

According to the study, the most troublesome problems for Great Britain “lie mainly in three key areas: majority representation in parliament, which creates distortion between votes and actual seats in parliament, a media that is skewed by private-sector interests, and declining trust in the police.”

The matter of the “declining trust in the police” has been a problem for many years; the study covered the years 1995 through 2005, and thus the erosion of civil liberties which has been particularly precipitous in the UK was undoubtedly a significant factor. But the timing of the study’s release has driven this point home in a rather pointed way.

Release of the study has come in the midst of a scandal over a massive database which one branch of the British government had created, ostensibly for the purpose of tracking fraud and money laundering. The ELMER database of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) has been challenged by a report from the Information Commissioner’s Office, which questioned whether keeping records on at least one million citizens (most of whom may be innocent of any crime) is “justified necessary and proportionate.” [As noted in an article](#) for the website of the *London Evening Standard*,

Tory peer Lord Marlesford said: “This database sounds like something used by the Stasi in communist Germany. It is in effect a secret database of suspects — none of whom know they are on it nor can they respond to the allegations. It is most un-British and most undemocratic.”

Under the Terrorism Act 2000 every employee in the finance industry is required to send Soca the details of any customer they suspect of a financial crime, and are asked to include information such as their national insurance number, vehicle registration, account numbers and details of relevant transactions. Without making any attempt to check the allegations, Soca agents log every “suspicious activity report” on the database and store them indefinitely.

Today’s report, seen by the *Standard*, states: “The retention of data on the Elmer database engages concerns about whether this is an unjustified interference with an individual’s right to respect for their private and family life. “Assistant Information Commissioner Jonathan Bamford led a four-month investigation into Elmer, and warned of “the ongoing privacy risks” of data being retained “indefinitely and without justification.” He added: “Many of these entries are of no ongoing interest to the law enforcement community and do not comply with the Human Rights Act or the Data Protection Act.” Former shadow home secretary David Davis, who campaigns on civil liberties, said Soca should remove “all entries that are trivial and unproven.”

The mania for data mining which thrives at the heart of Statism in a post-9/11 world has allowed greater latitude for programs such as ELMER, which once would have been dismissed as an Orwellian nightmare. The nation which unleashed [Jeremy Bentham](#) on the world has endured to see his [Panopticon](#) built one electronic brick at a time.



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