# Power

## To the People

**The report of Power:**
An Independent Inquiry
into Britain's Democracy

The centenary project
of the Joseph Rowntree
Charitable Trust and the
Joseph Rowntree
Reform Trust

# Contents:

# Foreword

This is not a report simply about constitutional change. It is a report about giving people real influence over the bread and butter issues which affect their lives. The disengagement from politics described in these pages cannot be dismissed as the preoccupation of the chattering classes. Its substance has come from the voices of thousands of people around the country who feel quietly angry or depressed. When it comes to politics they feel they are eating stones. Principle and ideas seem to have been replaced with managerialism and public relations. It is as though Proctor and Gamble or Abbey National are running the country. And in answer to this malaise, the parties seem to believe that all problems will be solved by having a new face replace the one that has fallen out of favour alongside the colonising of each other's policies.

However, the blame cannot all be put at the door of politicians and when people are moved beyond the first wave of emotion about political lying and politicians' self interest or ruminations about the fault of the media, a very different public complaint surfaces. The disquiet is really about having no say. It is about feeling disconnected because voting once every four or five years does not feel like real engagement. Asking people set questions in focus groups or polling is a poor substitute for real democratic processes. Voting itself seems irrelevant to increasing numbers of people: even supposing there is a candidate you like, if you are in a constituency

where the outcome is preordained and your favoured choice is not IT, there is no point turning out to the draughty church hall and inserting your vote in the ballot box. It is also about feeling that there is no choice, despite our living in the era when CHOICE is the dominant political mantra – there is very little on offer as the main parties now seem to be much the same. It is about a belief that even Members of Parliament have little say because all the decisions are made by a handful of people at the centre and then driven through the system. Politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the hands of privileged elites as if democracy has run out of steam.

The world has changed immeasurably in the last fifty years. When I was a child our politicians were grainy photographs in the newspapers, distant voices on the radio, ghostly figures on television. We knew next to nothing about their wives or their children or their sexual predilections. Now we have the Prime Minister and other party leaders sit on the confessional sofas of daytime television and, as though being counselled by a therapist for marital breakdown, apologise for creating distrust and promise a sceptical public that they will do better.

People have changed. Lives are being lived in very different ways but the political institutions and the main political parties have failed to keep up. What was most stark in the Commission's work was that the insiders, the people within the political mainframe, could do the analysis. They could describe the shift away from an industrial society where two main parties represented two clear interest groups but their response was all about strategy. They tell us class has disappeared into a meritocratic land of opportunity when what has happened is a reconfiguring of class with new margins, growing inequality but increasingly ugly consequences. I remember seeing the writing on the wall back in the days of Mrs. Thatcher when a young woman who helped look after my children remarked that my mother and family did not seem working class, having seen my background described in a newspaper. I asked her who she thought were working class and she

said people who did not work. While it is true that people no longer have the same tribal attachments or ways of describing themselves as in the past, class divisions are as defining of life chances as they ever were.

As we took evidence the difference between the public response and the 'insider' response was palpable. The politicos have no idea of the extent of the alienation that is out there. The people round the Westminster water coolers are clearly not having the same conversations as they are everywhere else. Their temperature gauge is seriously out of kilter. When politicians or party managers were asked for ideas for re-engagement, the suggested solutions were almost all about tweaking the existing system, with a bit of new technology here and a consultation there. The result is that no political space is being created for new politics and new ideas to emerge; a new politics – whether in the form of new parties or the genuine revival of the existing parties – will only be born once the structural problems within the current system are addressed.

We have no doubt that concern will be expressed that this report does not deal with certain issues close to the hearts of some reformers. At our meetings and in our evidence, issues as diverse as an English Parliament, the relationship between the civil service and government, and the emasculation of the Cabinet were raised along with others. There are many different problems with the political system, some of which need urgent attention, but we were specifically addressing non-engagement and not all of these problems relate directly to this concern. We do, however, feel that if the programme of change we advocate is put in place many of the other problems will begin to find solutions.

What political leaderships seem to misunderstand is that if you want to unite people around a distinct and common purpose you have to draw people in. Too often citizens are being evicted from the processes.

Ways have to be found to engage people. Markets, contracts and

economic rationality provide a necessary but insufficient basis for the stability and prosperity of post-industrial societies; these must be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty to the community, trust and political engagement. People in Britain still volunteer; they run in marathons for charity; they hold car boot sales to raise funds for good causes; they take part in Red Nose days and wear ribbons for breast cancer or AIDS. They sit as school governors, do prison visiting, read with children who have learning difficulties. They take part in school races and run the school disco. They march against the Iraq war and in favour of the countryside. They sign petitions for extra street lights and more frequent bin collection. They send their savings to the victims of tsunamis and want to end world poverty. What they no longer want to do is join a party or get involved in formal politics. And increasingly they see no point in voting.

This is a travesty for democracy and if it continues the price will be high. The only way to download power is by rebalancing the system towards the people. This is the agenda. Now we need the political will.

Helena Kennedy QC
Member of the House of Lords
February 2006

# Acknowledgements

This report is the product of thousands of people. We would like to thank all those who took part in helping us form and refine our ideas. Those who gave evidence, attended our public sessions, organised events in their communities, discussed ideas with us and who looked through drafts of our report. All of you I hope will find your name listed in the back of the report.

This report would not have been possible without our Power Commissioners: Emma B, Paul Boakye, Phil Carey, Ben Freeman, Bano Murtuja, Frances O'Grady and our insightful Vice Chair Ferdinand Mount. Phillip Dodd was unable to stay with us until the end but his insight and understanding of contemporary Britain helped shape our early thinking and I hope this is reflected throughout the report.

Sadly one of our number, Barbara Gill, the chairman of the Women's Institute, died last November. She was a highly valued member of the Commission, bringing good sense, a refreshing non-metropolitan perspective and a teasing sense of humour to our meetings.

I would also like to say a special thank-you to the team who supported the Commissioners. Especially to Pam Giddy, our Inquiry Director, Sarah Allan, Daniel Leighton, Adam Lent, Natalia Leshchenko, Michael O'Carroll and Caroline Watson.

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## Power to the People
## Executive Summary and Recommendations

Power was established to discover what is happening to our democracy. Why has disengagement from formal democratic politics in Britain grown in recent years and how can it be reversed?

The Commission of ten people from different backgrounds and with a variety of political views believes it is vital to re-engage the British people with formal democracy if the following are to be avoided:

- the weakening of the mandate and legitimacy for elected governments – whichever party is in power – because of plummeting turnout;
- the further weakening of political equality because whole sections of the community feel estranged from politics;
- the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors;
- the weakening of effective recruitment into politics;
- the rise of undemocratic political forces;
- the rise of a 'quiet authoritarianism' within government.

This report presents a detailed analysis of why this disengagement has occurred and a series of recommendations to address the problem. This is a broad agenda for major political reform. Although the election of new leaders to the political parties and the resulting strategic repositioning has generated some renewed public interest in the drama of Westminster, it is our view that this is unlikely to have more than a cosmetic and short-lived effect. The problems run too deep. The response to this problem should be about a rethinking of the way we do politics in Britain so that citizens and their concerns are at the heart of government.

## Analysis of the Problem of Disengagement

**The Myth of Apathy**

Three fundamental characteristics of political disengagement in Britain have been particularly influential in *Power*'s thinking about the causes of the problem.

- Contrary to much of the public debate around political disengagement, the British public are not apathetic. There is now a great deal of research evidence to show that very large numbers of citizens are engaged in community and charity work outside of politics. There is also clear evidence that involvement in pressure politics – such as signing petitions, supporting consumer boycotts, joining campaign groups – has been growing significantly for many years. In addition, research shows that interest in 'political issues' is high. The area of decline is in formal politics: turnout for general elections has declined very significantly since 1997; turnout for other elections has remained stubbornly low for years; party membership and allegiance has declined very severely over the last thirty years; elected representatives are held in very low esteem and widely distrusted.

- *Power's* own research and experience over the last eighteen months has established that the level of alienation felt towards politicians, the main political parties and the key institutions of the political system is extremely high and widespread.

- The problem of disengagement from formal democracy is not unique to Britain. Nearly all of the established democracies are suffering from similar problems.

**Red Herrings**

Based on these three characteristics and its own research, *Power* placed in doubt some of the analyses it has heard which claim to explain the rise of disengagement. Disengagement is NOT caused by:

- an apathetic and uninterested public with a weak sense of civic duty;

- a widespread economic and political contentment;

- the supposedly low calibre and probity of politicians;

- the lack of competitive elections (this may have a minor impact on election turnout but it needs to be set in the wider context of an electoral system which is widely perceived to lead to unequal and wasted votes);

- an overly negative news media;

- lack of time on the part of citizens.

**The Reality**

*Power* concluded that the following explanations stood up in the face of the evidence:

- citizens do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions – this includes party members who feel they have no say in policy-making and are increasingly disaffected;

- the main political parties are widely perceived to be too similar and lacking in principle;

- the electoral system is widely perceived as leading to unequal and wasted votes;

- political parties and elections require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies;

- many people feel they lack information or knowledge about formal politics;

- voting procedures are regarded by some as inconvenient and unattractive.

**The Rise of New Citizens**

Many of these problems are hardly new. So why have these factors led to the problem of disengagement now? And why is this a problem across many established democracies?

The deeper cause behind these factors is the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. Post-industrialisation has had two major impacts relevant to the issue of disengagement. The first is the creation of a large section of British society which is now better educated, more affluent, expects greater control and choice over many aspects of life, feels no deference towards those in positions of authority, and is not as bound by the traditional bonds of place, class and institution that developed during the industrial era. The second is the creation of permanently marginalised groups in society which live in persistent poverty, with low educational attainment, poor working and living conditions and a multiplicity of other deprivations associated with life on low or very low incomes.

However, the British political system is structured as though the lifestyles, expectations and values of the industrial era are still in place. Citizens have changed.

This profound shift has caused two major disjunctions between the system and citizens.

- The British parliamentary system of elected representation and considerable executive power was built in an era of very limited educational provision and in which deference and rigid hierarchy and static social relations were taken for granted.

- The British party system is based on the dominance of two parties constructed around the pursuit of the interests and ideological leanings of the two dominant classes that existed during the industrial era.

This explains why so many British citizens now no longer feel formal democracy offers them the influence, equality and respect they believe is their due and why the main parties are widely regarded as unattractive or irrelevant despite the parties' efforts to reinvent themselves. Alienation from politics takes many forms for different groups – women, black and minority ethnic communities, those on low incomes, young people – ranging from a general sense that the system is out-of-date to a deep disgust at the fact that politics has failed to bring about fundamental improvements in the lives of the most disadvantaged. Fundamentally, however, all of these alienations are exacerbated by a political system that cannot respond to the diverse and complex values and interests of the individuals which make up our post-industrial society.

The response of the political system to post-industrialism and to political disengagement has been either technocratic or self-interested in the sense that the parties have adapted their policies and campaigning simply to win elections. The political strategy of "triangulation", for example, is democracy by numbers. It is a mathematical equation that secures power but in the end drives down people's desire to be politically engaged. It hollows out democracy because it inevitably means by-passing party members who want debate and neglects the democratic channels of engagement which might get in the way of the strategy.

By contrast, the *Power* Commission has developed a response to disengagement which is democratic. This has drawn on an understanding of democracy which sees the concept as a set of broad principles which can be applied in a variety of ways beyond a simple focus on representative institutions and elections.

## The Response to the Problem of Disengagement

*Power* has set its recommendations within the context of a changed society. These recommendations primarily aim to create a political system which allows citizens a more direct and focused influence on the political decisions that concern them. It is also an attempt to bring greater flexibility and responsiveness to politics so that new alliances can form and new ways of debating be generated. There have to be real opportunities and spaces where the changing values in our society can be fed into politics.

The recommendations are based on three major shifts in political practice:

- a rebalancing of power away from the Executive and unaccountable bodies towards Parliament and local government;
- the introduction of greater responsiveness and choice into the electoral and party systems;
- allowing citizens a much more direct and focused say over political decisions and policies.

These three imperatives stand or fall alongside each other. The implementation of only one or two of the three will not create the re-engagement with formal democracy which many people now want. Cherry-picking – a folly repeated time and time again by our political masters – will not work.

**Rebalancing Power**

There needs to be a re-balancing of power between the constituent elements of the political system: a shift of power away from the Executive to Parliament and from central to local government. Much greater clarity, transparency and accountability should be introduced into the relationship between the Executive and supra-national bodies, quangos, business, and interest groups. Too much power goes unchecked. The aim here is to allow the freedom for our elected representatives to be the eyes, ears and mouths of British citizens at the heart of government.

**Recommendations**

1. A Concordat should be drawn up between Executive and Parliament indicating where key powers lie and providing significant powers of scrutiny and initiation for Parliament.

2. Select Committees should be given independence and enhanced powers including the power to scrutinise and veto key government appointments and to subpoena witnesses to appear and testify before them. This should include proper resourcing so that committees can fulfil their remit effectively. The specialist committees in the Upper House should have the power to co-opt people from outside the legislature who have singular expertise, such as specialist scientists, when considering complex areas of legislation or policy.

3. Limits should be placed on the power of the whips.

4. Parliament should have greater powers to initiate legislation, to launch public inquiries and to act on public petitions.

5. 70 per cent of the members of the House of Lords should be elected by a 'responsive electoral system' (see 12 below) – and not on a closed party list system – for three parliamentary terms. To ensure

that this part of the legislature is not comprised of career politicians with no experience outside politics, candidates should be at least 40 years of age.

6. There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers from central to local government.

7. A Concordat should be drawn up between central and local government setting out their respective powers.

8. Local government should have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances.

9. The Government should commission an independent mapping of quangos and other public bodies to clarify and renew lines of accountability between elected and unelected authority.

10. Ministerial meetings with representatives of business including lobbyists should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.

11. A new overarching select committee should be established to scrutinise the Executive's activities in supranational bodies and multilateral negotiations, particularly in relation to the European Union, and to ensure these activities are held to account and conducted in the best interests of the British people.

### Real Parties and True Elections

The current way of doing politics is killing politics. An electoral and party system which is responsive to the changing values and demands of today's population should be created. This will allow the development of new political alliances and value systems which will both regenerate existing parties and also stimulate the creation of others.

### Recommendations

12. A responsive electoral system – which offers voters a greater choice and diversity of parties and candidates – should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and local councils in England and Wales to replace the first-past-the-post system.

13. The closed party list system should have no place in modern elections.

14. The system whereby candidates have to pay a deposit which is lost if their votes fall below a certain threshold should be replaced with a system where the candidate has to collect the signatures of a set number of supporters in order to appear on the ballot paper.

15. The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people on lower incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand.

16. The voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).

17. Automatic, individual voter registration at age sixteen should be introduced. This can be done in tandem with the allocation of National Insurance numbers.

18. The citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification.

19. Donations from individuals to parties should be capped at £10,000, and organisational donations capped at £100 per member, subject to full democratic scrutiny within the organisation.

20. State funding to support local activity by political parties should be introduced based on the allocation of individual voter vouchers. This would mean that at a general election a voter will be able to tick a box allocating a £3 donation per year from public funds to a party of his or her choice to be used by that party for local activity. It would be open to the voter to make the donation to a party other than the one they have just voted for.

21. Text voting or email voting should only be considered following other reform of our democratic arrangements.

22. The realignment of constituency boundaries should be accelerated.

**Downloading Power**

We should be creating a culture of political engagement in which it becomes the norm for policy and decision-making to occur with direct input from citizens. This means reform which provides citizens with clear entitlements and procedures by which to exercise that input – from conception through to implementation of any policy or decision.

**Recommendations**

23. All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes.

24. Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.

25. The rules on the plurality of media ownership should be reformed. This is always a controversial issue but there should be special consideration given to this issue in light of the developments in digital broadcast and the internet.

26. A requirement should be introduced that public service broadcasters develop strategies to involve viewers in deliberation on matters of public importance – this would be aided by the use of digital technology.

27. MPs should be required and resourced to produce annual reports, hold AGMs and make more use of innovative engagement techniques.

28. Ministerial meetings with campaign groups and their representatives should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.

29. A new independent National Statistical and Information Service should be created to provide the public with key information free of political spin.

30. 'Democracy hubs' should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.

Change of this magnitude cannot be left simply to elected representatives. An alliance for change needs to be built amongst the most clear-sighted MPs, local councillors, MEPs and members of the devolved institutions, but only a sustained campaign for change from **outside** the democratic assemblies and parliaments of the UK will ensure that meaningful reform occurs. We, the people, have to stake our claim on power.

## "We were struck by the strength of the contempt felt towards formal politics"

# Introduction

All inquiries are a journey. They start with a few apparently simple facts. These offer brief glimpses of a wider landscape that has to be explored. Along the way, however, perceptions change, understandings deepen and those leading the inquiry can end up looking at a very different vista than they first expected.

So it is with *Power*. As with much of the public debate about political participation, the key fact which led to the establishment of the Inquiry was the decline in the numbers voting in general elections in the UK since 1997. However, our journey soon revealed a democratic malaise that has spread far beyond some disappointing turnouts, and which is a cause of grave concern.

It is clear now to the *Power* Commission that the recent downturn in general election turnouts is not merely a 'little local difficulty'. Popular engagement with the formal processes and institutions of democracy has been in long-term decline since the 1960s. Party memberships have been falling continuously since that time to the point where they now stand at less than one-quarter of their 1964 levels. The number of people who say they identify with one of the main parties has followed a similarly severe trajectory. Turnouts for other elections – local and European parliamentary – have remained stubbornly low for decades. Even the new devolved institutions in London, Scotland and Wales have failed to achieve strong turnouts.

Most worryingly, there is now a well-ingrained popular view across the country that our political institutions and their politicians are failing, untrustworthy, and disconnected from the great mass of the British people. This last point cannot be stressed too strongly. We have been struck by just how wide and deep is the contempt felt for formal politics in Britain. A message of disappointment, frustration and anger with our elected leaders and the institutions of politics came through loud and clear in all the different methods of evidence-gathering employed by the Inquiry.

The Commission's sense that this was a more profound problem than the simple fact of declining election turnouts was confirmed when evidence revealed two further factors. Firstly, this is not a problem confined to Britain. The majority of the established democracies are facing similar problems despite the differences in their recent political and economic histories and the variations in their constitutional arrangements. Secondly, British citizens are not turning away from participation in other areas of life. Recent research shows that Britain still has a vibrant culture of volunteering for charitable and community activity. In addition, other forms of political involvement through campaign groups, pressure activity such as signing petitions and consumer boycotts remain innovative and vigorous, and have even grown considerably in some areas over the last thirty years. Participation in formal democracy, rather than participation itself, seems to provoke a unique distaste amongst British citizens.

A hard look at the evidence to discover explanations reinforced the depth of the problem. Explanations which saw disengagement as a short-term problem or the result of relatively straightforward causes simply did not stack up against the wider facts. The great mass of expert, research and public evidence we received did not support the usual theories. For example, the notion that political disengagement was the product of economic contentment or the time pressures of modern life or could all be blamed on a cynical media were simply unpersuasive when fully explored.

Instead, the causes of disengagement which kept appearing in the evidence suggested a deeper, systemic problem. These causes were as follows.

- Many people feel that their views or interests are not taken into account when key policies are developed and key decisions are made even if they do get involved in formal democratic politics.

- The main political parties are widely held in contempt. They are seen as offering no real choice to citizens, lacking in principle and acting as though a cross on a ballot paper can be taken as blanket assent to the full sweep of a manifesto's policies.

- Our system of electing our parliamentary representatives is widely regarded as a positive obstacle to meaningful political involvement. For millions of citizens it seems, voting is simply regarded as a waste of time because the candidate or party you favour is either not standing or has no chance of victory while the candidate or party that does stand a chance of winning is positively disliked.

These are not simple problems. They are causes that go to the very heart of the way politics is conducted in Britain. And, asking ourselves why these problems have developed in the last thirty years or so to their current level of intensity, we believe they reflect an even deeper dichotomy which has arisen between politics and society.

It has become clear to us that while British society has been fundamentally transformed in the last forty years, the political system has not. There has been no strategic or thoroughgoing rethink of the way politics is conducted in Britain despite the fact that our world is now immeasurably different to that which existed when our two-party, parliamentary system took shape.

Put briefly, our political system is structured to reflect the values, expectations and lifestyles of industrial Britain not post-industrial Britain. It is a system dominated by two parties whose values and grassroots networks were based on the values and networks of the two dominant classes of Britain's industrial past. It is a system that prizes a powerful, central executive occasionally held in check by a Parliament whose members are not expected to take much account of popular opinion between general elections: an approach developed in an era of modest educational attainment, deference to authority, limited flows of information and strong popular allegiance to the philosophies of one or other of the two main parties.

The society out of which our political system grew no longer exists. People have changed. The political ideologies and networks of the industrial middle and working classes have lost their hold and gone into decline, just as the economic classes themselves have dwindled with the great loss of large sections of British manufacturing and their replacement by service sector enterprises. In the place of the industrial economic classes, we now have a much more diverse society in which the bonds of place and class are not nearly as strong as they once were. Large sections of British society are now far better educated, expect self-determination and choice over many aspects of their lives from the most mundane to the most fundamental and, as a result, hold themselves in much higher esteem while viewing those in authority with a considerable degree of scepticism. For this group, a system built on old class divides and an inherent assumption of popular deference and trust towards authority has become increasingly meaningless.

It is also true that the unifying visions of what is meant by the 'good society' are less clear. For very many people in the fifties the idea of the good life meant a job, a home with hot water and an indoor bathroom, good healthcare and education and fair prospects for your children. Today, for most, those aspirations are taken for granted but the impoverishment of lives takes other forms. Beyond basic needs, people have very different individualised ideas about what would make a good life and reach for different priorities. The parties in their turn have been unable to capture all those hopes and dreams in one easy package.

While post-industrialism has weakened the bonds and identities of class, this does not mean that great inequalities of wealth and power no longer exist. Alongside the affluence and new freedoms of contemporary Britain, there exists serious marginalisation and deprivation created by the same shift to post-industrialism. Despite the facile claims that we now live in a classless society, class is still with us but it is reconfiguring in different ways. Recent studies have found that it determines life chances of British people more today than at any point since the Second World War. Social mobility has ground to a halt. A child born into a rich family in Britain will almost certainly live and die rich, while a child born into a poor family will almost certainly live and die poor. Globalisation has brought tangible benefits to some – the wealthy are becoming considerably better off – but the growing inequality in society is undermining social cohesion. The middle classes too are changing; no longer enjoying jobs for life because of the new flexible employment market, they feel deep insecurity and are unsure which political party will protect their interests.

Those living in areas hit hard by the loss of manufacturing face long-term unemployment, or the insecure, low-paid jobs available to those without academic qualifications in those areas where manufacturing has been replaced by vibrant new service industries. Levels of crime, illness, drug use and family breakdown are more common amongst these groups than those enjoying higher incomes and status.

These social groups are deeply alienated from and marginalised by the political system. The social, cultural and political organisations which gave the industrial working class major political power and shaped their political aspirations have little or no purchase amongst these newly marginalised groups and as yet no new organisations

have filled the political vacuum. Thus, a wide section of society enjoys only a very limited and fragmented dialogue with those in power.

The transformation of our society in these post-industrial times has serious implications for many aspects of society. Politicians have redesigned large areas of policy to meet the new demands. Choice and flexibility in public services have become watchwords to match the choice and flexibility that people have come to expect from the private sector and now expect in many areas of their lives. Policies designed to achieve economic regeneration and community development and help people back to work in those areas that have not benefited from post-industrialisation have replaced the historical emphasis on short-term unemployment benefit, the expansion of the welfare state and housing programmes.

Yet the political system itself remains unchanged. It still assumes inherently that today's citizens are satisfied with a choice between two main parties, with the rare – once every four years – election of representatives who make decisions without any clear ongoing reference to the people they represent, and with an Executive so powerful and centralised that it can simply choose to ignore popular or even parliamentary opinion in the name of a supposedly deeper understanding of the issues.

To us, it is clear that this is a system significantly out of step with the values, expectations and interests of the individuals and many groupings that make up British society. It is hardly surprising that anger, frustration and disengagement result. This may express itself in the widespread cynicism about politicians and the belief that they further only their own interests and deal in electoral promises which they have no intention of keeping. This is a symptom, however, of the deeper structural problem rather than a cause in itself.

**Why Re-engage?**

Despite this profound problem, we have come across the view that efforts to re-engage British citizens with formal democracy are unnecessary or mistaken. This view seems to be based on a number of different perspectives. The first is that the new, informal forms of participation is where politics is really taking place and that the formal processes and institutions of democracy should be allowed to wither on the vine until they are replaced with something new. The second is a perspective that we have heard from a number of politicians. This is the view that those who rule themselves out of formal politics have forfeited the right to be taken account of, or to be responded to. The third is favoured by those who often describe the country as "Britain plc". They believe that the business of government is now so complex that new times need 'executive democracy', with the constant testing of public contentment through polling, focus groups or public consultations.

We do not believe any of these views are acceptable. This is in part because none is an adequate response to the evidence received by the Inquiry. More significant, however, is the fact that the failure to develop a meaningful response to the crisis of disengagement runs some very serious potential risks.

- Loss of mandate and legitimacy: Clearly, the fundamental feature of any representative democracy is that a government derives its legitimacy and mandate to govern by winning the consent of its community through periodic elections. An ongoing and serious decline in turnout could mean that British governments no longer have a mandate to govern. It is particularly worrying, for example, that while the victorious party at the 2005 General Election polled 9.5 million votes, 17 million registered voters failed to attend a polling station.

- Loss of political equality: A fundamental principle or aspiration of democracy is the notion that all have an equal say or an equal right to participate in government. However, the decline in turnout has varied considerably across different

population groups. Most notably, under-25s, black and minority ethnic communities, less affluent economic classes, and certain regions have lower turnouts than the population as a whole. For example, only 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2005 General Election compared to 75 per cent of those over 65. In the same election, 47 per cent of those from a black and minority ethnic background voted, while 62 per cent of those classed as white turned out. A similar disparity exists for social class, with 54 per cent of those categorised as D/E voting in May 2005 compared to 70 per cent for those in the A/B social class.[1] Very similar variations in turnout exist for the 2001 General Election.[2] This may suggest that, for whatever reason, specific groups and individuals are being excluded from the democratic process, leading to effective disenfranchisement and the undermining of political equality.

- Loss of dialogue: Dialogue between government and governed has long been accepted as a positive outcome of democracy, ensuring ongoing legitimacy between elections, the development of effective policies, and the creation of a sense of trust and ownership of government decisions. However, a decline in involvement in democratic processes means that this dialogue is under threat. Political parties are the institutions which should play a central role in maintaining this dialogue, so their serious decline in membership must be regarded as particularly worrying. There are also deep concerns at the way the parties have been sidelined in policy-making processes – voting for resolutions at party conferences which are then ignored.

- Loss of effective political recruitment: Political parties are the main instruments for recruiting politicians to represent the people and ultimately lead the country. The decline in party

membership means our leaders are increasingly drawn from a much smaller pool than was the case in the past. This may have an increasingly negative influence on the diversity of those being recruited to elected positions at local and national levels, and may, for example, explain why MPs are now far less likely to come from a semi-skilled and unskilled occupational background. It is also pointed out that large numbers of politicians have never been employed outside the world of politics and only join parties as though they were a jobcentre on the way to becoming an MP.

- The rise of undemocratic forces: The damage to legitimacy posed by declining turnouts and the unchecked rise of distrust in politicians may offer opportunities to anti-democratic forces to denigrate democracy because they can claim that they better represent the views of large sections of the British people. It could be argued that recent higher levels of support for the British National Party are early examples of this process. Only Britain's sustained economic growth over the last decade may have saved it from the more significant rise of fascist groups seen in continental Europe in recent years.

- The risk of quiet authoritarianism: The increasing failure of large sections of the population to engage with the political process may lead to a situation where governments are no longer effectively held to account. Over a period of time, this could encourage a gradual growth of 'quiet authoritarianism' in Britain where policy and law is made in consultation with a small coterie of supporters and with little reference to wider views and interests. Under such circumstances, the processes of democracy, including general elections, become empty rituals. The more critical commentators argue that this has already happened.

Given such views, we firmly believe that these risks are far too great and the problem of disengagement now too severe for anyone to be either dismissive or glib about the need for a thoroughgoing and strategic response.

**Towards Recommendations for Change**

In considering the many different recommendations for change put to the Inquiry to address this profound problem, we were clear that there could be no single or simple response. A problem as complex and profound as political disengagement inevitably requires complex and profound solutions. During the course of the Inquiry it gradually became clear that at least three major shifts in the conduct of politics in Britain are required to address the many aspects of disengagement.

Firstly, there needs to be a significant rebalancing of power in Britain to challenge the overwhelmingly dominant position of the Executive relative to Parliament, and of central government relative to local government. Both Parliament and local government should be at the heart of citizen engagement with politics. The former is made up of people who, in theory, represent the views and interests of the 'commons' and the latter is, in theory, the set of institutions which governs the issues and areas which should be of most immediate concern to the great majority of citizens. Yet both bodies have seen their power seriously decline in recent years, making, in effect, the major channels for formal political activity less meaningful and attractive to citizens.

Secondly, the electoral and party systems need reformulating. Most fundamentally, a more open approach to electing our representatives and governments needs to be developed. We currently have a situation where two political parties with severely declining appeal and relevance have managed to maintain their grip on politics purely by virtue of the fact that the electoral system exaggerates their support when votes are translated into seats and removes incentives for voters to support other parties or candidates. Instead, the electoral and party systems need to become truly responsive to the views and demands of British citizens. This means offering voters a wider and more meaningful choice of parties and candidates, so that new political ideas and alliances can develop to represent and shape the emerging values and interests of the post-industrial era.

Thirdly, institutional and cultural changes must be implemented which place a new emphasis on the requirement that policy and decision-making is never undertaken without rigorous, purposeful input from 'ordinary' citizens. At a time when broad parties and grand ideologies have less resonance than they once did and when many individuals expect control over their own lives, it is vital that clear processes exist for citizens to influence and challenge the specific areas of government and policy that concern them.

It is clear to us that there is an overwhelming desire for change amongst the British people. But there has, as yet, been no clear agenda for what such a change might look like. Part Two of this report is an attempt to identify what might be the key characteristics of this new agenda.

**What is this report trying to achieve?**

The *Power* Commission agreed early in its life that while it wanted to develop a clear understanding of the causes of political disengagement, the purpose of this was to develop practical and effective recommendations for change rather than just an analysis.

We were also clear that we wanted to develop an approach that drew on as many public and expert submissions and as much rigorous research as possible. However, we did not want the final report to be a huge tome full of academic detail. The report, the Commissioners agreed, should be accessible and direct.

In addition, it also became clear to us that disengagement has very profound social, economic and political roots. Responding to a problem of this profundity and magnitude does not at this moment

require detailed policy formulations. We were unanimous that what was needed was a new agenda for political change that could guide both policy-makers and people who were keen to address the problem.

As a result, this report focuses largely on a set of recommendations. They set out our vision of a new, broad agenda for political reform in Britain designed to re-engage our democracy with the people.

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**How Did Power Work?**

*Power* was established by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to celebrate their centenaries. Its mission was to understand how participation in British politics could be increased and deepened. To do this it established a Commission of ten people from a variety of social and political backgrounds to consider the evidence generated by the following activities:

- a series of seven meetings across the country at which the Commission questioned 35 witnesses about political participation;
- 143 face-to-face interviews with witnesses conducted by the Inquiry's research team;
- a major review of all relevant literature on the subject of political participation conducted by the Inquiry's research team;
- a process of traditional and on-line public consultation which generated over 1,500 responses;
- a further exercise in public consultation which encouraged people to discuss a series of 'key questions' about political participation at self-organised meetings called 'Democracy Dinners' which led to 400 events across the country;
- a telephone survey of 1,025 people who failed to vote in the 2005 General Election;
- a study collating and assessing over 50 'innovations' in democracy and participation from across the world;
- a practical experiment in innovative political participation, called the Open Budget, conducted in partnership with and funded by the London Borough of Harrow and involving 300 Harrow residents;
- a research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which brought together political party, campaign group and community group activists to discuss their perceptions of local political parties in Birmingham, Glasgow and Somerset;
- a 'Citizens' Panel' based in Newcastle-Gateshead which brought together thirty randomly selected people to discuss the same issues as those being considered by the Commission throughout the life of the Inquiry;
- an international seminar co-funded and organised with British Council Brussels bringing together civil servants from across Europe to discuss policy responses to political disengagement.

All of this work generated over a million words of evidence which was collated under thematic headings for the Commission in eight 'Theme Books' which can now be explored at: www.powerinquiry.org. The Commission spent six months deliberating on this evidence and discussing drafts of this report.

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# Part One:
# The Disconnect

# Chapter 1–
# The Myth of Apathy

When we set up this Inquiry we were all acutely conscious of the potential paradox of seeking to engage the public in a debate about why people are politically disengaged. After all, if the average citizen could not even be bothered to vote, why would they bother to talk to a public inquiry with a political theme? We needn't have worried. There is no paradox here: Commission witness sessions drew large, vocal audiences; over 1,500 submissions were sent in by members of the public; the Inquiry's experiment in local democratic engagement in Harrow attracted over 300 participants; our initiative designed to encourage political deliberation on the Inquiry's concerns – Democracy Dinners – generated some level of media ribbing but also 400 meetings across the country; and research projects with members of the public have encountered no difficulty in securing or maintaining witnesses and participants. Thousands more have got in touch with the Inquiry with questions or comments or have registered for its updates. *Power's* early fears proved groundless.

As the Inquiry has progressed, it has become clear why this has been the case. *Power's* research and evidence reveals a nation that is far from apathetic. In a wide range of areas, both political and non-political, large sections of the British population are active and generous in time and support.

Some years ago, there was a fear that Britain was suffering a

crisis of social capital akin to that identified in the USA. However, recent research has revealed that, in fact, involvement in charitable and community activity is vibrant and growing. For example, the Home Office Citizenship Survey has questioned a very large sample of 10,000 people every two years since 2001, and in 2005 found that 50 per cent of British adults – or over 20 million people – volunteer formally or informally at least once a month, an increase of 3 per cent from the same survey in 2001.[3] Among those at risk of social exclusion[4] – who are usually regarded as far less likely to participate – the percentage of volunteers is still a surprisingly high 43 per cent.[5] *Power's* own research found that amongst the supposedly most apathetic – those who do not vote in general elections – 37 per cent were members of, or active in, a charity, community group, public body or campaigning organisation.[6]

The data also shows that in the realm of political campaigning outside formal electoral or parliamentary politics, involvement is still very healthy. The Citizen's Audit of Britain found that over a twelve-month period 62 per cent donated money to a political or campaigning organisation, 30 per cent helped raise money for a political or campaigning organisation, 42 per cent signed a petition, 25 per cent contacted a public official, and 13 per cent contacted a politician in an effort to change laws or policies. Only one person in twenty took part in a public demonstration or attended a political meeting, but in terms of the numbers willing to participate this remains highly significant.[7] The Home Office Citizenship Survey broadly backs these figures, finding that 38 per cent of people had undertaken one of these activities (with the exception of donating or raising money) during 2004/05. This figure was the same for the previous two Citizenship surveys.[8]

*Power's* own research project on political activists found that those involved in campaign groups and community groups enjoy high morale and commitment. Although many activists lament the time and effort sometimes involved in their work and may, on occasion,

feel they are unfairly perceived as do-gooders or extremists, there is no sense, on the whole, that their politics is undertaken in the face of public indifference or hostility. This is vibrant political participation that, as one of the participants in the project put it, "makes a real difference and produces real results that impact on people's lives".

The level of campaigning activity also represents an increase over the last three decades. The World Values Survey found that the percentage of the British population that had taken part in a demonstration rose from 6 per cent in 1974 to 13 per cent in 2000 and those who had signed a petition rose from 23 per cent to 81 per cent.[9] The organisations making use of such techniques have seen a comparable rise in membership: Friends of the Earth has experienced a growth from 1,000 members in 1971 to 119,000 in 2002; Greenpeace has risen from 30,000 in 1981 to 221,000 in 2002. Bodies which combine campaigning and advocacy work with leisure-time pursuits have done even better: the National Trust has seen its membership grow from 278,000 in 1971 to 3,000,000 in 2002 and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has enjoyed a growth from 98,000 to 1,200,000 in the same period.[10]

The last four years have also seen three of the most widely-supported campaign events that have ever taken place in Britain – the Countryside Alliance demonstration in 2002, which drew 400,000 participants;[11] the demonstration against the Iraq war in 2003, which gathered around 1, 500, 000 people;[12] and the Live 8 event in 2005, which was attended by 150,000 people[13] and involved far greater numbers in associated activities and demonstrations around the country, and, indeed, the world. These events were built around the willing involvement of hundreds of thousands of British people in vigorous political activity of national and international significance.

This activity is innovative and imaginative. Increasingly wide use is being made of consumer power, lifestyle choices and digital technology to bring about change.

The World Values Survey found that the percentage of people

who had taken part in a consumer boycott had risen from 6 per cent in 1974 to 17 per cent in 2000. The Citizens Audit suggested an even more significant rise in this area with 31 per cent stating they had "boycotted certain products" during the last twelve months in 2000.[14] Further evidence comes from the Cooperative Bank's research. This found that the total value of boycotts in 2003 rose to £3.2bn, a growth of £600 million on the previous year.[15] This represented a significant increase in the boycotts of brands associated with poor environmental performance or questionable labour practices. The value to these brands, in terms of lost sales, more than doubled to £1.8bn in 2003.

Consumers are also using their political power positively. According to the Co-operative Bank,[16] purchase of ethical products is now worth £24.7 billion a year – an increase of 16 per cent on the previous year. Sales of Fair Trade goods, such as tea, coffee and bananas, increased by £29 million to £92 million – a growth of 46 per cent. Ethical investments and deposits with ethical banks and credit unions rose by 18 per cent to £9 billion in 2003. These facts are even more striking when one considers that, over the same period, UK household expenditure increased by only 4 per cent.

The newest and most innovative area of participation is in the realm of the internet. Hundreds of blogs (simple websites usually written by one person in the form of a diary with space for comments and discussion by visitors) are being established every day and many have a political theme or element. A brief look at the many discussion forums on the internet, including those which are aimed specifically at young people, such as myspace.com, reveal that political and current affairs topics are often among the most popular, sometimes attracting tens of thousands of 'posts' by visitors to the sites.

Although detailed data on blogs and discussion forums on the internet are hard to come by and is rarely entirely reliable, some general figures can be arrived at. Livejournal estimates that there are 78,000 active bloggers in Britain[17] while the UK poliblogs website links to 257 blogs with an entirely political theme[18] of which the most

popular secures approximately 15,000 visitors a day.[19]

While these levels of vibrancy and innovation are obviously welcome and help to explain why *Power* has not suffered the public indifference we feared, there is a need to remain hard-headed about the reality of the phenomena. It is clear that levels of participation vary considerably across different social groups. Your likely participation in the activities mentioned above varies according to your level of education, your income and, in some cases, according to your ethnic background. These varying levels of participation across society have been a key concern to the Inquiry and we shall return to them frequently in the course of this report.

All of this also begs an important question: if so many British citizens are engaged in political and non-political participation, how has the concept of general public apathy emerged? The answer lies largely in the realm of the highly visible formal democratic institutions of elections and political parties. It is here that participation is waning, not in the perhaps less visible voluntary sectors.

General election turnout have reduced significantly since 1992 and dropped to its lowest post-war level in 2001 by 12 per cent (Figure 1). Turnout in the 2005 election rose from that historic low by only 2.1 per cent.[20] In addition, local election turnouts have been very low for decades. For example, elections to English Metropolitan Councils rose above 50 per cent in 1979 only when they were held on the same day as the general election. During the 1990s they hovered around 25 per cent. European parliamentary elections have not seen a serious decline because they have never enjoyed anything other than low turnout since their inception in 1979. The highest turnout was never more than 40 per cent.[21]

Figure 1: General Election turnout 1945-2005
Source: House of Commons[22]
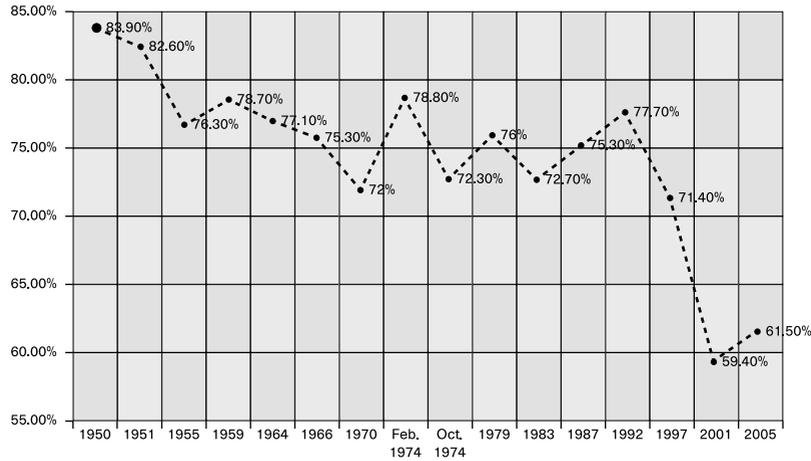


Party membership has experienced an even more striking and long-term decline since the early 1960s. Membership of the three main parties in 2001 was less than 25 per cent of its 1964 level (Figure 2).

Some rightly point out that political party membership figures are notoriously inaccurate, but the trend is clear and cannot be explained by faults in the data alone. In addition, the extent of the decline is clearly supported by qualitative and anecdotal evidence presented to *Power* and others. Focus groups held by *Power* with party activists from across the political spectrum in Birmingham, Somerset and Glasgow found unanimity on the fact that membership had declined, and was continuing to decline, and that efforts undertaken by local parties to reverse this had little or no impact. A selection of quotes from participants is representative of the wider view from the focus group sessions:

*We've tried holding social gatherings for people to come along but they're not interested, are they? (Party activist, Somerset)*

*We do set up stalls in looking to get new people on board but it's hard work to get anyone to talk to you. (Party activist, Birmingham)*

*It might sound bad but increasing our membership is not top of our agenda at the moment. (Party activist, Glasgow)*

Figure 2: Membership of the three main parties 1964-2001
Source: Democratic Audit[23]
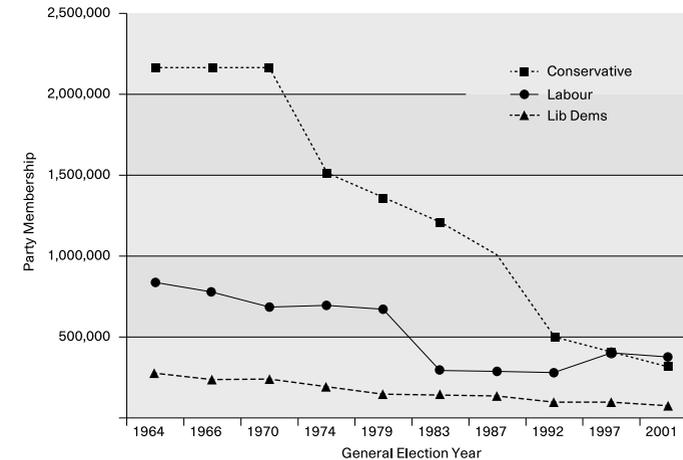


Furthermore, the percentage of the population which does take an active role in party affairs is even smaller than the less than 2 per cent who are party members.[24]

In 1992, only 11 per cent of Conservative Party members reported attending more than five party meetings in the previous year. 77.8 per cent said they spent no time on party activities in the average month.[25] Labour Party members have always been more active than their Con-

servative counterparts. However, by 1999, just 18 per cent of members said they had been to more than five party meetings in the previous year. 65 per cent said they spent no time on party activities in the average month.[26]

Figures tracking Labour members' involvement in the 1997 General Election campaign are also illuminating. Despite the fact that the party was on the brink of its first victory in more than two decades, 76 per cent of party members did not help at all with door-to-door canvassing. Only 20 per cent of members helped more than once.[27]

Research also shows that this low activism of party members is part of a long-term decline. The percentage of Labour members who said they had not attended a party meeting in the previous year rose from 36 per cent (1990), to 54 per cent (1997), to 61 per cent (1999). At the same time the proportion of members attending more than five meetings a year fell from 30 per cent (1990), to 19 per cent (1997), to 18 per cent (1999). Those reporting that they spent no time on party activities in the average month rose from 51 per cent (1990), to 63 per cent (1997), to 65 per cent (1999).[28] It seems fair to assume that figures for the Conservative Party – whose members, as already mentioned, are historically less active than Labour's – would show a similar pattern.

It is now also well-established that, amongst the wider public, identification with and allegiance to political parties has declined severely. In 1964, 43.8 per cent of respondents said that they had a 'very strong' party identification. By 1997, this figure had fallen to 14.7 per cent. At the same time the percentage of people declaring themselves to have a 'not very strong' party attachment rose from 10.7 per cent to 31.5 per cent.[29]

Much of the public debate about apathy has arisen from the decline in participation in these areas. However, when these figures and findings are set against the higher and more energetic levels of involvement elsewhere, asking why British citizens are apathetic seems to miss the point. It is clear that a striking dichotomy has emerged between the involvement of British people in non-political and informal political activity and their involvement in political parties and elections.

A more appropriate question, therefore, would be: why is a population that is active in many political and non-political areas increasingly unwilling to participate in the institutions and processes of formal democracy?

With these data and these questions in mind, it quickly became clear to the *Power* Commissioners that the first issue they had to confront was not how to increase and deepen political participation across the board but to understand why the British people were withdrawing from formal democratic processes and institutions when their enthusiasm for other forms of political participation remained strong. If we could explain this, we reasoned, then we might be in a stronger position to understand whether and how to re-engage people with formal democracy.

However, the flourishing of participation outside of formal democracy was only the first of three key characteristics of political disengagement that struck us as noteworthy. The second is the fact that alienation from that formal democracy is very intense and widespread. The third is that this is a problem afflicting nearly all of the established democracies.

**The Extent of the Problem**

In speaking to many people around the country, considering hundreds of public submissions and looking at the results of commissioned research, we have been struck by just how wide and deep is the popular alienation from formal democratic processes.

The Inquiry put seven questions out for public consultation. One of these asked about elections, another asked about political parties:

- What changes would encourage a larger number of people to

feel it is worth voting?

- How can political party membership and allegiance be made more attractive? And are there more effective ways of involving people in politics than through parties?

The Inquiry received over 1,500 public submissions and the overwhelming impression is that the very great majority had nothing positive to say about parties or elections. It was particularly noteworthy that very few submissions identified any particular party as a problem but instead referred to all the main parties as deeply unappealing.

This highly negative perception was reiterated in the research projects carried out by the Inquiry. A random sample survey of 1,025 people who did not vote in the 2005 General Election, a randomly selected Citizen's Panel based in Newcastle and a series of focus group research sessions run with local party, campaign group and community activists across the country all displayed highly negative attitudes to political parties and elections. In addition, the Inquiry found general agreement – if often more nuanced - with this negative view amongst the 178 experts and practitioners whom the Inquiry interviewed and questioned. The only general exception to this came from the politicians themselves who were, perhaps unsurprisingly, far more positive about the present condition of parties and elections.

As with declining turnout and involvement in parties, this widespread negative view picked up by *Power* is confirmed by other research, particularly that which investigates attitudes to politicians. Surveys consistently display very low levels of trust in politicians at least since the early 1980s. These tend to find that those who say they trust politicians rarely rises above 25 per cent and usually hovers at just below 20 per cent.

There is evidence that these low levels of trust are getting even

lower. When asked whether they agreed with the statement: "British governments of any party can be trusted to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party", those who agreed fell from 37 per cent in 1987 to 16 per cent in 2000 and has only risen slightly since.[30]

As a result, we had first been struck by the dichotomy between the vibrancy of participation outside formal democracy and that within. We had also been struck by just how strong the feelings of alienation from formal democratic politics and politicians were. However, a third factor also proved important in our attempts to understand the causes of the problem. This was the cross-national nature of disengagement.

**A Cross-National Problem**

*Power* commissioners soon faced strong evidence that similar problems of declining participation in elections and parties and a wider sense of distrust and alienation now affect many, possibly most, of the established democracies throughout the world.

- Turnout dropped by an average of 7 per cent in the older democracies during the 1990s and twenty out of twenty-seven established democracies experienced a drop in turnout in the same decade.[31]

- Two separate studies found significant aggregate falls in party membership across thirteen and sixteen established democracies respectively since the 1950s.[32] A cross-national study found that identification with a political party had also dropped across the advanced democracies.[33]

- Low or declining levels of trust in politicians are found across nearly all post-industrial democracies. As Russell

Dalton, the foremost chronicler of this cross-national phenomenon, strikingly concluded: "Regardless of recent trends in the economy, in large and small nations, in presidential and parliamentary systems, in countries with few parties and many, in federal systems and unitary states, the direction of change is the same."[34]

- Two consecutive surveys have also tracked the growing popularity of political participation outside of formal democratic processes across eight established democracies. From the mid-1970s to mid-1990s, the number of people signing a petition doubled from 32 per cent to 60 per cent; demonstration attendance almost tripled from 7 per cent to 19 per cent; and those taking part in a consumer boycott rose from 5 per cent to 15 per cent.[35] Pippa Norris is an influential Harvard-based political scientist, who is also British. She studied political participation closely and has written: "we might expect protest to be strongest in countries without many other opportunities for democratic participation … it is actually strongest in established democracies and in affluent post-industrial societies."[36]

This statistical evidence was backed up by *Power's* own qualitative research. A seminar hosted jointly by *Power* and the British Council with civil servants from seven European countries found that the decline in engagement with formal democracy was now a characteristic of all the nations that were represented. Each government was at least in the early stages of developing policies which they hoped would respond to this problem.

Evidence presented by expert witnesses also supported the observation that disengagement from formal democracy is a cross-national phenomenon. Three scholars of international standing – Professors Vivien Lowndes, Philippe Schmitter and Stuart Weir – all confirmed that the problem of disengagement from formal democ-

racy – particularly in terms of election turnout – was now a factor within every European country with a very small number of exceptions such as Denmark and Norway.

Finally, we were particularly impressed by the analysis presented in the Council of Europe's paper 'The Future of Democracy in Europe'[37] which was drafted by a group of academics from across the continent. This states clearly the depth and breadth of the problem:

> *Today, one of the most striking features of European democracies is an apparently widespread feeling of political discontent, disaffection, scepticism, dissatisfaction and cynicism among citizens. These reactions are not, or not only, focused on a given political party, government or public policy. They are the result of critical and even hostile perceptions of politicians, political parties, elections, parliaments and governments in general – that is across the political spectrum.*
>
> *Political discontent expresses itself in opinions, attitudes and deeds. Some citizens give utterance to their political disappointments or anger through day-to-day talks with friends or relatives. Social scientists try to analyse such opinions through polls, or in-depth interviews. The more intense these opinions or attitudes, the more likely they are to lead to actual deeds. In the political sphere these deeds are often 'non-deeds'. Many disappointed or angry citizens refrain from voting or from joining a political party.*[38]

We were presented, therefore, with three key factors of which any explanation of disengagement had to take account:

- the vibrancy of participation outside formal democratic politics;
- the depth of the alienation from formal democratic politics

and politicians;

- the cross-national experience of disengagement and alienation from formal democratic politics.

"We should not confuse
a changing sense
of civic duty with a
decline in civic duty"
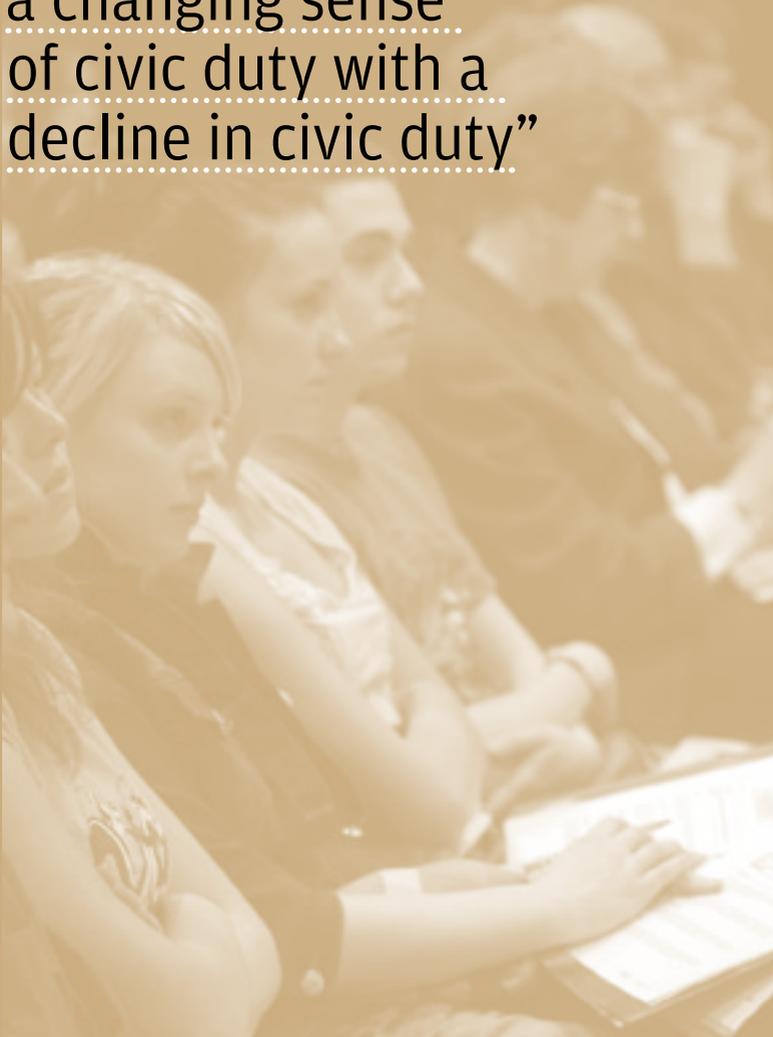
# Chapter 2–
# Red Herrings

The three key facts about disengagement outlined in the previous chapter are important because they immediately cast serious doubt on some of the explanations of disengagement which were being submitted to us.

**Explanations in Doubt: An Apathetic, Uninterested Public with a Weak Sense of Civic Duty**

A series of studies have argued that there is a weak sense of civic duty amongst British citizens. Some of the findings of these studies are quoted below but we feel that when these are placed alongside our own and other evidence, an alternative interpretation is more appropriate.

- 'the norms supporting political activity have weakened over time': in 1959, 70 per cent of those questioned thought a citizen should participate in the "local affairs of his town or district" to some degree; in 2000, only 44 per cent agreed with the statement "every citizen should be involved in politics if democracy is to work properly";[39]

- a comparison of civic duty between those who reached voting age under different governments found a gradual but serious

decline: when asked if they felt it would be a serious neglect of duty not to vote, 79 per cent of those who first got the chance to vote during Macmillan's premiership answered yes; this declined to 70 per cent of the Wilson/Callaghan generation; 53 per cent of Thatcher's generation and only 41 per cent of Blair's;[40]

- this is supported by a survey which found that, while 74 per cent of the whole population agreed it was a duty to vote, this stood at only 58 per cent amongst 18-24 year olds and at 61 per cent amongst 25-34 year olds.[41]

The notion that the British people's failure to engage with formal democracy resulted from apathy, lack of interest or weak sense of civic duty did not, however, sit easily with the evidence (much of it outlined in the previous chapter) which showed a vibrant and innovative realm of participation beyond formal democracy.

An alternative approach is to explain the British sense of civic duty not as weak but as essentially non-political. A major survey asked British respondents to indicate what responsibilities they felt they had as a citizen. Amongst the general population, not political activists, the most popular three choices were: obeying the law, respecting others, and being a good neighbour. Activities which required political activity were the least popular choices.[42]

We felt, however, that none of this data ruled out the very strong findings from the Inquiry's own research that people's disengagement from formal democracy was motivated by frustration and alienation. It is quite conceivable that respondents to the above surveys were expressing not apathy, indifference or a weak sense of civic duty but a broader lack of allegiance to formal democracy resulting from a strong sense that existing institutions and processes offer little meaning.

Indeed, some studies argue that citizens do not have a weakening sense of civic duty but have a *changing* sense of civic duty, the outcome of which is a declining willingness to get involved in the formal political system. For example, Pippa Norris, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, has conducted a detailed cross-national survey of data on political participation. She argues that declines in electoral activity are only part of a wider story which does not suggest a weakening sense of civic duty. Instead, the populations of contemporary societies now engage in a repertoire of political activity which is wider than the traditional and formal modes of political participation. In essence, people are just as comfortable using 'pressure activity' as electoral activity to influence politicians and decision-makers. Young people may actually feel *more* comfortable using pressure rather than electoral activity.[43] Other similar studies concur with Norris's findings.[44]

This analysis receives further backing from studies of people's interest in politics, especially amongst young people. One would expect that if there was a weaker or non-political sense of civic duty, especially amongst young people, that interest in politics would be low or declining. However, most studies have found that such interest is reasonably high and that there is little or no difference between the interest of the general population and young people.[45] One study of the 2001 General Election recorded particularly notable findings. It found that, in 2001, 59 per cent of the population professed themselves interested in politics. This is the same as the percentage that voted. Amongst young people, however, while 53 per cent declared themselves interested in politics, only 39 per cent voted.[46]

The support this gives to Norris's approach may be strengthened further by a separate study of non-voters in 2001. It reported that most non-voters attributed their failure to vote to a conscious decision to abstain rather than to apathy or lack of interest.[47] It is also backed by another study which found that interest in 'national issues' and 'local issues' was very high at 82 per cent and 78 per cent respectively, but was much lower for 'news about elections' and 'politics' at 60 per cent and 58 per cent.[48]

These findings remain true for the 2005 General Election. *Power*

conducted its own survey of 1,025 people who were on the electoral register but did not cast their vote at that election.[49] This showed that:

- Only 19 per cent cited apathy as a reason for not voting when asked the 'open' question: 'what was the main reason for you not voting on 5th May', 36 per cent of non-voters cited political reasons such as a lack of difference between the parties and claims that politicians 'could not be trusted'.

- When asked to choose a factor from a list that might encourage them to vote, most non-voters (54 per cent) chose politicians keeping their promises and listening to people's views between elections. Interestingly, the figure rose to 72 per cent for 18-24 year olds.

- More than 90 per cent of non-voters identified three or more political issues that "really mattered" to them despite the fact that 66 per cent declared themselves as uninterested in politics.

As a result we felt confident that while there inevitably always is some lack of interest or apathy towards politics to be found in society, this explanation could be largely discounted as a primary cause of recent declines in engagement. The key lesson that can be taken from this evidence is that it is important not to confuse changing senses of what constitutes civic duty and political involvement with a decline in civic duty and involvement.

**Explanations in Doubt: A Culture of Contentment**

Occasionally, we would hear the claim that voter turnout has declined because citizens are broadly satisfied economically and politically. The view was expressed most usually by politicians, very occasionally by experts and very rarely in the public submissions. We were not convinced by this explanation for the following reasons.

- If contentment were a key cause, one would not expect to see similar trends of disengagement occurring in other European countries – most of which have not enjoyed Britain's sustained period of economic growth and stability, and some of which have experienced sustained periods of mass unemployment.

- Contentment is suggested as a cause very rarely in the mass of evidence presented to the Inquiry. Against the regularity with which frustration and alienation were cited, contentment fades into insignificance.

- If contentment were a prime cause, one would expect to see declining levels of involvement in all forms of political participation but, as the data presented in Chapter 1 shows, this is only the case with formal democracy.

- Declining turnouts in general elections have coincided with recent economic stability and growth but turnout in other elections (local and European) and political party membership has been consistently low or declining over a series of economic cycles.

- If the logic of the claims about contentment is followed through, one would expect to see lower levels of political engagement amongst the better-off and higher levels amongst the worse-off but, as is well-documented, the opposite is the case. For example, MORI found that turnout in the 2001 election was 68 per cent amongst social classes A and B but only 53 per cent amongst classes D and E.[50]

- The claim is backed by no empirical research evidence. Academic support for contentment as a cause of disengagement could not be found by the Inquiry. Indeed, if it is mentioned at all, it is only in order to be rejected.[51]

We could find no convincing evidence to uphold this explanation and it played little part in our consideration of further evidence and deliberations.

**Explanations in Doubt: The Low Calibre of Politicians**

We have heard a considerable amount of evidence attacking the calibre of British politicians. A fair number of the public submissions claimed disengagement to be caused by the fact that politicians have little or no interest in their constituents' views, are only concerned about their own careers, cannot be trusted to tell the truth, and are corrupt.

Expert evidence heard and seen by the Commission has also argued that disengagement has resulted from a decade of sleaze scandals and a long series of misleading statements by ministers (on topics ranging from BSE in the early 1990s to more recently the intelligence for the Iraq War). A similar analysis suggests that in an era where there is decreasing room for genuine policy difference between parties – particularly on economic matters – and when ideological vision is largely absent, the only way politicians can differentiate themselves from their opponents is by attacking competence or probity. Over time, this inevitably leaves the public with a sense that lack of probity and incompetence are characteristics of all politicians.[52]

We could not find nor did we hear convincing evidence that either the calibre or the probity of politicians has worsened in recent years – a necessary condition if the low quality of politicians were to be a genuine cause of declining engagement. This is upheld by the cross-national nature of the problem. If low calibre were to be a cause, then one would have to accept that a similar decline in calibre was occurring across the established democracies. No doubt some would argue that politicians everywhere are cut from a cloth inferior to that in previous generations. We are unconvinced. No such evidence has been presented to or found by us.

There is also some evidence that a popular distrust of politicians reduces when respondents are asked about the calibre of politicians whom they have actually met or with whom they have had dealings. A survey which asked specifically about competence found somewhat better results for a respondent's local MP than MPs in general. When asked whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the way MPs were "doing their job", 32 per cent were satisfied and 36 per cent were dissatisfied. These figures improved however, when people were asked how they felt "your MP is doing his/her job" – 41 per cent were satisfied, only 13 per cent dissatisfied. These findings suggest that the belief that politicians are of a particularly low calibre is not based on direct experience but a more general sense of alienation from politics and politicians.

The linked but slightly different notion that a decade and more of sleaze and spin has caused disengagement is also challenged by the cross-national data. While sleaze and spin have been problems in many European countries, we have not heard that they have reached the same intensity of concern as in Britain since the early 1990s. This again casts doubt on the significance of this suggested cause, although sleaze and spin have probably fed into the general disenchantment.

It is also not clear that low trust in politicians is closely linked to a decline in direct engagement, despite common assertions to the contrary in the media and within politics itself. Of the few detailed academic studies of any such link, all but one[53] broadly conclude that the causal relationship between trust in politics and political participation is "weak and patchy" and "not at all robust" as one study put it.[54]

Our sense on this issue is that low levels of trust in politicians are part of a wider alienation from formal democratic politics resulting from more profound structural issues rather than its cause. As such, the widespread perception that politicians are economical with the truth or of a particularly low calibre is a problem to be addressed rather than to be taken entirely at face value. We have to ask why the perception has taken hold that today's politicians are unworthy. What has brought that disdain into being?

**Explanations in Doubt: The Lack of Competitive Elections**

It has been regularly stated to the Inquiry that disengagement has been caused by the fact that the Labour Party has become so dominant in recent years. This is the "why bother to vote, we know who is going to win" scenario. The theory is that this has driven down interest in politics and made elections appear to be foregone conclusions removing the point of voting for many.

The literature contained strong quantitative evidence to support this claim. Studies have found that:

- the extent of 'political efficacy' reported by survey respondents was very closely related to the difference in share of the vote between the two main parties at the various general elections between 1945 and 2001 in Britain[55] – it did not matter whether this was real or just a perception but voters did weigh up the extent to which their vote would matter in deciding whether to head for the polling booth or not;

- turnout in different countries rises or falls with the size of the share of the vote for the winning party;[56]

- variations in British local election turnouts are closely related to the marginality of the election;[57]

- more competitive general elections and more marginal parliamentary constituencies tend to report higher turnout than safe seats – see table below:

Average turnouts in nine marginal
and nine safe seats in the 2001 General Election
Source: Power Inquiry Research

| | |
|---|---|
| Average turnout in nine marginal seats in 2001 General Election | 65.8% |
| Average turnout in nine safe seats 2001 General Election | 61.0% |

As well as being supported by this data, the approach does seem enticingly logical, but there is strong counter-evidence and a potential alternative explanation for the above findings.

- Once again, the cross-national nature of the problem challenges this perspective. Other countries that have not experienced the electoral domination of one political party in the way the UK has have still experienced disengagement and declining turnouts.

- This analysis can only explain the recent decline in general election turnout. It cannot explain low turnouts in other elections, declining political party membership or low levels of trust in politicians – all of which predate the drop in general election turnout.

- The General Election of 2005 was considerably closer than those fought in 1997 and 2001, and the ruling party's campaign strategy strongly emphasised the closeness of the contest, yet

turnout was in fact 10 percentage points lower than in 1997 and only 2 points higher than 2001.

- Most notably, the obviousness of the result is rarely suggested by people as a reason for not voting. The idea was not a significant feature of the public submissions to the Inquiry on elections and the Inquiry's Citizens' Panel based in Newcastle-Gateshead did not raise it as a reason in their discussions about the 2005 general election. Most strikingly, in the Inquiry's survey of 1,025 non-voters in that election, only 1 per cent raised it as a reason unprompted. This is upheld by a study of non-voters in the 2001 General Election which reported that none of their subjects 'spontaneously' gave the likely closeness of the result of the 2001 General Election as a reason for not voting.[58]

Given this evidence it seems highly likely that the support for this claim is either overstated in its impact or has been misinterpreted. For example, we have heard an alternative interpretation of the data suggesting that closer elections lead to more people being encouraged to vote, not so much because there has been any change in the perception of the contest by the voters, but because the politicians make greater efforts to contact voters in more competitive elections and more marginal seats. We have not seen any hard evidence to support this thesis, but it seems as plausible as the original interpretation.

A much more significant factor affecting turnout indicated by the Inquiry's evidence – as is explained below – is the way our electoral system leads many voters to believe that their votes will be wasted. It seems likely that when seats become more competitive, the perception of waste is lessened because a vote for an opposition party might actually have an impact on the outcome of the contest. This can only be minor factor, however, as even in the closest elections, the great majority of constituencies remain safe.

Our evidence suggests that the causality for declining turnouts is the widening perception that votes are wasted in most constituency contests, not the fact that elections have been less competitive in recent years. This is a significant difference of emphasis. It suggests that we cannot accept the view that we only need to wait for a resurgent opposition to see turnout and participation rise. On the contrary, a way needs to be found to create less wasted votes even when one particular party is in the ascendant.

### Explanations in Doubt: The Media Causes Disengagement

We regularly heard the claim that distrust in, and disengagement from, formal democratic politics is largely or primarily caused by a negative approach to politics and politicians on the part of the media. This view has been most strenuously advanced by the politicians to whom the Inquiry has spoken. As the late Robin Cook stated in evidence to the Commission:

> *If you always serve up to the public the sense of the political process as one of failure, then it's hardly surprising that you lose confidence in your democratic process.*[59]

We would not want to dissent from the view that media coverage of politics can be negative and hostile, and is quite possibly more negative now than it ever was. What is more difficult to gauge is how and why this descent into such mutual antagonism has come into being. Those in political power will always have an ambivalence about their relationship to the media because, while they need it for the dissemination of information and promotional purposes, they also resist its role as critic and lifter of stones. The media has a responsibility to inform; one of its purposes is to shine light in dark corners. It is also part of the public realm where debate on issues of the day should take place. Recent governments, all too aware of the power of the

press, have tried to bend it to their own purposes and in doing so have shown little respect for what journalists ought to be doing in an open democracy. The media is treated as yet another part of the mechanics of government to be bent to governmental will. Not surprisingly this leads to mutual disrespect. The product of this *folie a deux* can be poisonous distortion on both sides.

However, other factors are at work. There is a malevolent streak in the human spirit which wants to see culprits publicly excoriated and victims deified and which wants the Manichean simplicities of good and bad. This encourages the press to be both reductionist about quite complex issues and sensationalist about failure or flaws. Bearing the head of a politician or celebrity on a pole is the ultimate victory in the ratings wars and this feeds into the atmosphere of disdain for those in public life.

Another problem is that ownership of the media in Britain is concentrated in too few hands and the grip of particular hands is especially powerful. The support of The Sun newspaper is deemed so critical to political success that the owner was able to insist upon a referendum on the European Constitution and the government was prepared to do a volte face on its previous policy. This speaks volumes to the people about where power lies and reinforces the view that our votes are not what counts.

There is extremely strong evidence from a variety of sources that higher levels of exposure to news media correlate to higher levels of citizen participation.[60] Clearly people who are interested in politics are likely to read newspapers and watch the news on television. Whether just reading newspapers to fill the journey to work stimulates political interest is anyone's guess. The research shows that people whose only media diet is light entertainment are less likely to be involved in community and political activities.[61] However, none of the evidence suggests that exposure to news media dampens participation as might be suggested by those fearful of the 'corrosive cynicism' of the media.

The seven questions *Power* put out for public consultation included the following: *Some people claim that the media breeds cynicism about politics and politicians which discourages political interest and involvement. Is this true? If so, how can the media play a positive role in encouraging political involvement?* The response to this was interesting. While many submissions were highly critical of the media – particularly of the way it reported politics and its unaccountable influence over government – "The Daily Mail effect"– the view that its negative approach promoted disengagement was very much a minority opinion. Many submissions felt that it was right for the media to hold politicians firmly to account as they were not sufficiently challenged elsewhere in the political system, and they felt that this reflected a wider scepticism about politics and politicians amongst the public at large.

The cross-national data also plays a role here. Few countries have a press or broadcast media quite as challenging and cynical as that in Britain and yet, as pointed out extensively above, disengagement is also a problem in these countries.

Our view is that, as with the popular hostility towards politicians, more profound structural problems have promoted disengagement and alienation, and that negative media coverage is a symptom rather than a significant cause. It seems to us that while there clearly is a problem with the media the answer is where to start and, in light of the evidence, we believe that if we get the political system right this will change the atmosphere and culture and the press will follow.

**Explanations in Doubt: Lack of Time**

Occasionally, the *Power* Inquiry heard claims that an increasing lack of time in the lives of today's citizens has led to the decline in political engagement. In particular, it is sometimes pointed out that because both people in so many couples work, the old pattern of one half of a couple engaging in political activity while the other takes care of dependents and household matters no longer holds true. As a result there is less time for the activism of old.

Research does exist to show that lack of time impacts on other forms of community activity beyond the political. Studies have found that:

- by far the most common cause cited as a reason for not volunteering for charity work or community groups is lack of time – 58 per cent cited this in 1997, an increase of 19 per cent since a similar survey in 1991;[62]

- a survey of 'social capital' in the United States identified lack of time as one of the five main reasons for a decline in community or group activity.[63]

The key fact, however, is that, despite heavy demands on some people's time, many *are* engaged with non-political and informal political activity and seem to prefer this type of time-consuming activity over formal politics. This suggests that the issue may not be lack of time but the priorities that affect how citizens use their scarce time. It is also notable that the youngest citizens – who are less likely to have the work, childcare and household pressures of older people – are, in fact, the age group which are least likely to participate in formal democratic processes and institutions.

It also has to be said that while activism in a political party may be time-consuming, voting is hardly demanding in this respect – especially given the recent ease of obtaining postal votes – and yet this is an area of formal political participation that has seen a serious decline. Indeed, only 1 per cent of respondents in *Power's* survey of non-voters gave lack of time or being too busy as a reason for not voting.[64]

As a result of this, we did not feel lack of time was a significant factor impacting on engagement with formal democracy.

Overall we had identified a series of explanations which we felt could be entirely rejected or which could be judged to play only a minor role in promoting disengagement from formal democracy. However, we also received a number of explanations which did fit more convincingly with the wider evidence we had uncovered. These are dealt with in the next chapter.
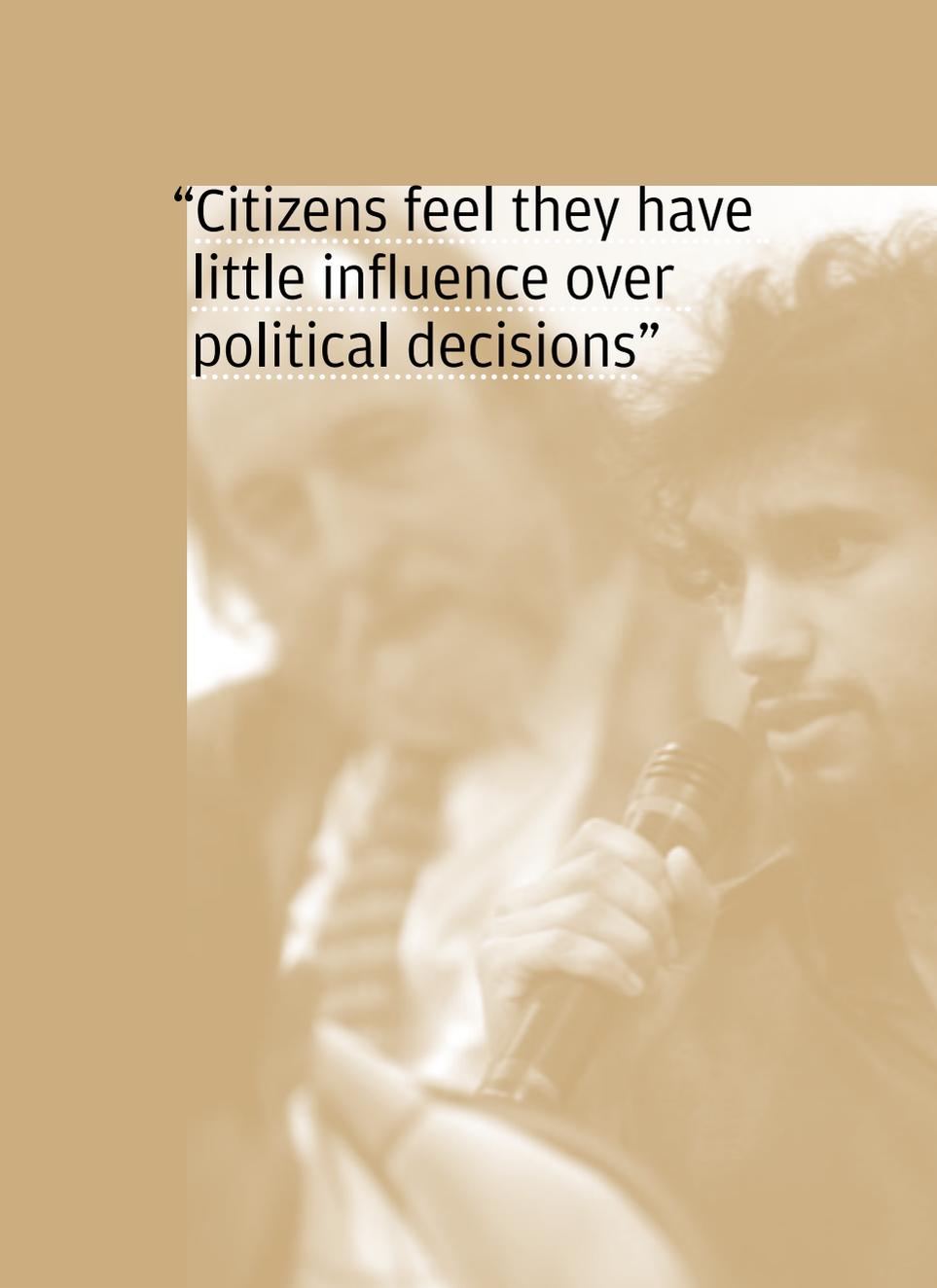
# "Citizens feel they have little influence over political decisions"

# Chapter 3– The Reality

Despite our doubts about the explanations for disengagement outlined in the previous chapter, a series of other explanations appeared regularly and with force in the evidence received by the Commission, and which stood up to closer scrutiny.

**Persuasive Explanations: Citizens do not have enough influence over political decisions**

The one factor felt to cause disengagement that runs through all the strands of our investigation is the very widespread sense that citizens feel their views and interests are not taken sufficiently into account by the processes of political decision-making. It cannot be stressed enough the depth and extent of this perception amongst the British public. Many, if not all, of the other accepted explanations presented here could also be understood as variations on this theme of weak citizen influence.

This view comes through very strongly in the many public submissions received by the Inquiry. The quotes below are indicative of a much wider concern.

*For the most part, people can't make a difference, because our politicians will do what they want to do regardless.*

*We are powerless against unaccountable individuals, why should anyone be interested in politics?*

*To vote, people need to feel that it achieves something more than just exercising a right. People want to feel that their vote makes a difference to their lives; for many this is not felt.*

*People need a feeling that their vote might actually have some effect.*

*It is just the fact people don't really think they make a difference.*

This view also made strong appearances in the Inquiry's own research projects. The survey of non-voters in the 2005 General Election asked respondents to choose an option from a list of twelve factors which might encourage them to vote. The most popular option was "politicians listened to my views between elections" which was identified as 'very likely' or 'likely' to encourage voting by 53 per cent of non-voters. Surprisingly, given the widespread sense of politicians' lack of honesty, this was more popular than the option "politicians' promises could be trusted".[65]

The first session of the Citizens' Panel based in Newcastle-Gateshead concentrated on reasons for lack of participation in formal democracy. A number of reasons were given but the lack of citizen influence on decision-making came through as unquestionably the most common and most passionately felt. Some of the quotes from the thirty-strong panel highlight this.[66]

*I think the politicians pay lip service to the public, they don't put our suggestions into practice.*

*They pretend that we're involved and that, but you're not really.*

*The first thing is, you've got to get somebody who'll listen and this is*

*90 per cent of the problem. You've got nobody to talk to.*

*When I vote I never believe I can make a difference.*

*I voted at the election, I voted at council elections. Your words are still not heard.*

*I feel as though they (politicians) don't want you involved.*

*It (politics) is a closed shop. You don't feel you're being told the truth.*

These views were reflected in the project that held day-long focus group meetings with activists from parties, campaign groups and community groups to discover attitudes towards local political parties. The attitudes of campaign and community group activists were extremely negative and the party activists themselves could not think of many positive things to say about their own organisations. The overwhelming cause of this negativity was the sense that party leaderships do not listen and do not allow 'ordinary' members or citizens a real influence over the decisions they take.

*The main parties are controlled from the top down and they don't actually listen to either their party members or the general public.* (Community group activist, Glasgow)

*At the end of the day, local party reps are puppets on a string. They just listen to the big lads down south and they dance to their tune.* (Campaign group activist, Glasgow)

*In a political party you are severely restricted by who and how much you can lobby. They can't challenge the sources that feed them.* (Campaign group activist, Birmingham)

*They draw up their policies without any consultation ... they say jump and they expect us to say "how high?".*
(Community group activist, Glasgow)

*We have important issues and they have their ivory towers and there's a big gap in between. That's why they can't help us.*
(Campaign group activist, Somerset)

*How much power we have locally is negligible. I don't think we have any say over national policy at all.*
(Party activist, Glasgow)

*I joined the party to be an influencer but I am not naive enough to think that by being part of the political process, even running as a candidate in a local election, that I have any real power.*
(Party activist, Birmingham)

*No, I don't feel local parties have power. I know from experience.*
(Party activist, Somerset)

These findings are upheld by research carried out independently of *Power*.

- The proportion of those who *strongly* believe that 'people have no say in what the government does' rose from 15 per cent in 1973 to 30 per cent in 1994.[67] 56 per cent agreed in 2003 that they have 'no say in what the government does'.[68]

- One study reported a fall from 70 per cent in 1965 to 51 per cent in 1999, in the number of people agreeing with the statement: 'the way that people decide to vote in local elections is the main thing that decides how things are run in this area'.[69]

- Over three-quarters of those questioned in 2000 felt they had little or no power between elections.[70]

- 40 per cent disagreed in 2004 with the statement, 'when people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way the UK is run'.[71]

- Another survey in 2004 found that 90 per cent of respondents felt 'ordinary voters' should have influence over government policies but only 33 per cent felt they actually did.[72]

In the face of such overwhelming evidence, we are in no doubt that the sense that citizens can have little influence over political decisions, even if they do get involved in formal democracy, is a fundamental cause of disengagement and alienation.

**Persuasive Explanations: The main parties are too similar and lack principle**

The previous point explained the hostility towards parties on the grounds that they fail to offer ordinary members and citizens influence. The other attitude to parties that occurs regularly as a cause of disengagement in the evidence is that the main parties are not distinctive enough, particularly in their core economic policies, and that their policies are guided by the search for votes from the centre-ground rather than by deeply held values. Some representative quotes from the public submissions illustrate this view.

*Politics in Britain is like those cheap chocolate boxes: "Six different flavours, one single taste". Where is the choice? What's the point?*

*It was enormously hard to see any real differences between the main parties' agendas at the last election. It was pathetic, quite honestly.*

*People argue against each other just because they're from two different parties, even though they may in principle agree on the same issue. To me that's wasting time.*

*I find it difficult to want to ally myself with political parties when they all seem terribly similar.*

*People don't bother to vote because they believe that all parties are the same.*

This view has also been the most commonly held perspective in the expert evidence on the reasons behind declining engagement and the decline in election turnout in particular.

*We've had a watering down of ideology so that there's not so much differentiation between the parties. Just as people might look at goods on the supermarket shelf, they look around and they decide what it is they want to buy. But if they don't see anything that they like, they don't buy anything. In the same way they look at the parties and they actually don't see that the choice is going to make a great deal of difference to them.*
(Ken Ritchie, Director, Electoral Reform Society)[73]

*There's a level of consensus between the two, and in fact three, major parties about a great deal of things that people like me think are important. So if you're concerned, for example, about the increased involvement of the private sector in public services or the idea that public services are best improved by setting them in competition with one another, that's something that there's broad agreement about across the three parties. Now on the right of politics that applies equally well, for example if you're of the opinion that Britain should withdraw from the EU – that's not an opinion that I agree with, but it's an opinion which polling suggests applies to*

*about a third of the population and certainly no one would doubt that this country is innately Euro sceptic – none of the three major parties articulate that view. So a lot of people only hear differences of nuance if they hear anything at all and I think that as well gives people the impression that there's nothing at stake.*
(John Harris, Author and Journalist)[74]

*I think people believe that the choice is less great than it was. I think probably in the 1980s you had three clear choices and you had fierce competition between different parties, turnouts were higher and in 1992 I think probably people believed again then that there was a really clear choice between John Major's Conservatives, Neil Kinnock's Labour party and Paddy Ashdown's Lib Dems. I would say with the changes Labour had in the 1990s when they decided to move onto a much more conservative agenda, the gap between the Labour and Conservative parties suddenly greatly reduced, compared to the battle you had in the 1980's so there was less choice and less competition.*
(Lord Rennard, Chief Executive, Liberal Democrats)[75]

*Over the last 30 years people decreasingly find it easy to see that whoever gets elected makes a huge amount of difference, because of the degree of consensus. Again, if I go back, the first election I voted in was in 1970 and, at that stage, even if people didn't know much about politics or weren't particularly interested in politics, there was a very strong sense of a real gulf between what Labour stood for and what the Conservatives stood for. And so, even people who weren't particularly interested – and it's partly tribal but it was also very much ideological – people felt very clearly what side of the fence they were on and were much more likely to turn out to vote for that. Now the debate is much more in managerialist terms. Who's going to manage the Health Service better? Who's going to manage the education system better?*
(Sam Younger, Chairman, The Electoral Commission)[76]

These views were replicated in our Citizens' Panel, particularly in the discussion about the 2005 General Election. Almost half of the Panel did not vote and the primary reason given was that elections do not change anything because the main parties are so similar. This was given quantitative support in the survey of non-voters which found that 48 per cent of respondents claimed that more differences between the main parties would make them 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote.[77]

Our evidence on this issue also suggests that the similarity between the main parties lies behind much of the popular distaste felt towards the nature of political debate in Britain. The notion that adversarial debate itself is a cause of disengagement did not feature at all strongly in any of our sources of evidence. Indeed the way political discourse is conducted was raised very rarely, if at all, in our public submissions, our interviews with expert witnesses or our research with non-voters or local political and community activists. Instead, there seems to be a widespread sense that politicians who engage in confrontational debate but do not disagree fundamentally on policy are either engaged in petty point-scoring or are embroiled in a party tribalism with which the great majority of the country do not identify. Indeed, the strong preference arising from our evidence for distinct parties which stood for core principles would suggest that adversarialism (not for its own sake, but with a real purpose behind it) may be positively welcomed and may encourage engagement.

Not only does the similarity of the main parties feature strongly in the Inquiry's evidence but it is not contradicted by the three key factors of disengagement: the intensity of alienation, the vibrancy of participation outside formal politics, and the cross-national nature of the problem.

Only this last factor may need some explaining. Many other European countries do indeed have two or three main parties or a coalition of parties which have tended to gravitate to the centre ground. The reasons for this are not simply electoral – as in Britain – but can also be explained by the decline of the grand ideological positions that dominated the twentieth century and the possibility that the pressures of a globalised economy have removed the 'policy space' within which governing parties can operate.

However, it is significant that most European countries have proportional systems which should provide a wider choice of parties from a more diverse political spectrum who all stand a good chance of winning places in Parliament or even in a governing coalition. This therefore raises the question of whether this factor can be treated as a genuinely significant cause. We feel it still can. Firstly, because it is such a commonly cited factor in all the expert and public evidence received by the Inquiry. And, secondly, because there is recent research to suggest that proportional systems have, on the whole, limited if not halted election turnout declines in comparison to Britain. More detail on this is given in the next section which deals more directly with the characteristics of the first-past-the-post system.

**Persuasive Explanations: The electoral system leads to wasted and unequal votes**

One of the questions the Inquiry put out for public consultation was: *What changes would encourage a larger number of people to feel it is worth voting?* Far and away the largest number of responses identified an electoral system that treated all votes equally. The box below presents a small selection of the public submissions in this area that give a feel of the overall evidence.

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Indicative quotes from submissions to public consultation claiming that 'wasted votes' lead to disengagement.

*The first-past-the-post-system means that most of the electorate (those that didn't vote for the winner in a particular constituency) feel as if their vote has been wasted.*

*The merit of first-past-the-post is stable government. However, except for those living in marginal constituencies, it renders one's vote virtually worthless.*

*Many votes are wasted under the first-past-the-post system.*

*The first-past-the-post system is one of the things that put people off. As a Liberal Democrat voter in Westminster there really is no point me bothering to go to the polling station, it will make no difference.*

*It takes a zealot to bother voting when the vote won't count.*

*Anyone voting in a non-marginal seat knows their vote is wasted.*

*First-past-the-post is also responsible for 'safe seats' whereby in many areas everyone knows that the candidate of party X will automatically be elected; this is a disincentive to anyone – supporters of party X or of the opposition – to voting. Why vote if the result is a foregone conclusion?*

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The expert evidence presented to the Inquiry was more divided on the issue of proportional systems and their benefits or otherwise, but there was a clear majority view that first-past-the-post does not aid turnout. The reasons given for this were varied but the effect of creating so many votes which have no influence on the national outcome and the priority the system gives to the votes of a small percentage of floating voters were clearly identified as major blocks to increasing turnout.

This factor also received backing from the survey of non-voters which found that 49 per cent of respondents said they were 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote if "my preferred party had a real chance to win power".[78]

The issue of 'wasted votes' is not challenged by the key factors of the intense and political nature of alienation from formal democracy nor by the higher levels of participation in other areas. However, as mentioned above, there is the fact of disengagement and declining turnout in countries that use proportional electoral systems. We were persuaded, however, that this need not require the rejection of the wasted votes explanation. This was for two reasons.

- The expert evidence presented to the Inquiry is clear that the problems of first-past-the-post may help explain disengagement but that they are far from an entire explanation. Obviously we believe that the other factors presented here play a significant role and will clearly have an impact even in those countries that use proportional representation.

- Research by Professor Pippa Norris, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, suggests that those countries that do use proportional systems have had historically higher turnouts than Britain and have in most cases maintained higher turnouts despite a general decline. Her study in 2005 of 164 countries found that those with proportional representation had average turnouts of 70 per cent; 10 per cent higher than those achieved by Britain in the most recent general elections.[79]

**Persuasive Explanations: Parties and elections require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies**

There was a cause of disengagement which was mentioned frequently in the public submissions, the research with local activists and the Citizens' Panel, but was not nearly so common in the expert evidence or in the literature surveyed by the Inquiry research team. This was the view that many citizens find parties and elections unappealing because they require individuals to commit to a very broad

==range of policies with which they might not entirely agree==. The box provides some representative quotes from the Inquiry's evidence sources on this theme.

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<u>Indicative quotes from Inquiry evidence expressing the view that parties require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies</u>

<u>Submissions in response to public consultation:</u>

*Parties are irrelevant. I cannot get my views to map on to those of any single party so I can't see how I can ever vote for a party. Why shouldn't we be asked what we think about the important issue of the day and be allowed to vote on them directly? We are an educated and informed population and we no longer need to be 'represented' by politicians, we can do it ourselves (or we could if we were allowed to).*

*People and society have changed now, and their issues have changed but those parties have not. The need to sign up to the whole kit and caboodle of a political manifesto can put people off who have a more sophisticated analysis of political issues.*

*Parties used to attract sections of the population who shared a raft of concerns mostly deriving from their shared social and environmental situation. These days people's concerns on many issues do not fall into the traditional party stereotypes so such clear-cut differentiation is becoming inappropriate… There are probably a dozen issues important to people where their view on one does not predict their attitude on any other. It is therefore unrealistic for a party to offer a manifesto with defined positions on more than a few of these major issues and seek unreserved loyalty to it especially if the party members have had no say in developing the eventual positions*

*taken. And yet this is still what is happening with ever decreasing success in terms of party membership.*

*Parties are restrictive. People can have very particular views and whilst they may agree with a party on some, they may be against them on the rest, and so feel unable to support them. We are perhaps more of a nation of individuals than ever before, and maybe this should be reflected in how we go about politics.*

*I am interested in issues, beliefs and values, problems/solutions and open discussion around any issue area. Political parties are not flexible enough to represent my evolving opinion of a variety of issues.*

*Parties are too broad brush for most people – I agree with some ideas but not others. Political parties give the impression that you must 'sign up' to a whole series of political objectives. Many people don't feel able to do this. They may simply be interested in one particular issue. Their view on this may coincide with that of a particular political party but they don't feel that they can sign up for anything else.*

*The biggest problem is that most people agree with a bit of one, a bit of the other, and a bit of a third, or a fourth, party. No one party encapsulates someone's beliefs entirely.*

*I personally find that there is no party which encompasses all of my political beliefs, therefore I focus on campaigning for certain groups as I feel that this is the only way I can make a difference.*

*Allegiance to any one party would only be attractive to me if I felt that I did not have to support every policy or position that the party*

*has. If someone is a member of a political party, I associate that with them supporting at least the majority of their policies. No one party does that for me. I think more open and collaborative models would encourage me to get involved – techniques like deliberative forums, online debates etc.*

*It seems that many political parties are intolerant of the diversity of views among its members… so if you join you have to sign up to a whole bunch of policies whereas you may only strongly agree with a few of them or even just the general thrust.*

Experts and Practitioners Comments

*Partisan alignment was rooted in a class structure or a set of class and social beliefs in the country. You tended to take your politics from your family and your social background. As that class stratification has become more diverse and more broken down, it's led to a de-alignment of party links and the strength of feeling towards political parties. This has led to people drawing their politics much more from issues, from concerns that they have, and less from simply a set of inherited or adopted views that they have taken from their community and their social group.*
Matt Carter, General Secretary, The Labour Party

*Particularly for young people there's a perception that if you support a party you have to sign up to the whole policy platform. That may not be the case but that is the perception there. Lots of people think "well I may support them in some areas but I don't actually agree with this policy, so I won't join".*
Peter Facey, Director, New Politics Network

*The fact that you can only see yourself fitting 30 per cent of a party's political position is very unfortunate but it may be that is the fact of*

*political life. … It looks as if the younger you are the less likely you'll feel that you're prepared to box yourself in like that. At one level, that's extremely healthy. The other level is if they keep that right through their own personal development, that refusal to be boxed in, we have nobody who's prepared to commit themselves to anything in terms of political allegiance.*
Lord Tyler, Liberal Democrat Peer

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This is an interesting perspective because it may go some way towards explaining the popularity of informal pressure politics over formal party politics. Pressure politics is largely formed around groups that campaign on single issues or groups of closely-related single issues. This would inevitably be more attractive if citizens are less willing to commit themselves to broad programmes of change. Of course, this perspective fits well with the other key factors of disengagement identified above.

Why this should now be the case and how to respond to this seemingly intractable objection to formal democracy is dealt with throughout the rest of this chapter and report.

**Persuasive Explanations: Lack of information and knowledge about politics**

The lack of information and knowledge about elections, candidates, parties and the political system more generally proved a recurring theme of all the strands of the Inquiry's investigation and research.

The majority view is that basic understanding of the system is low and that this leaves people unclear about how to get involved in politics and intimidated about participating in a world they do not fully understand. At a more basic level, the view was propounded that if voters know little or nothing about their candidates and what they

stand for, then they will not feel adequately resourced to enter a polling station to make a rational choice. This latter point was upheld by the survey of non-voters which found that 49 per cent of respondents said they were 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote if they had more information about the candidates in their constituency.[80]

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Indicative quotes from Inquiry evidence expressing the view that lack of knowledge and information reduces participation

Submissions in response to public consultation:

*Local politicians are not known – neither are the facts. Local politicians (of all parties) must go into sixth forms, not as untouchable figures of respect, but as members of a community, who will listen and make a difference.*

*More pragmatically, if schools, voluntary organisations and the mass media were to seriously engage with the 'civic responsibility' and 'citizenship' agendas currently being (poorly) promoted [then engagement would increase].*

*More media and especially television coverage is essential in order to make people more aware how central politics is to everyday life and the big questions.*

*Party membership and allegiance can be made more attractive by individual parties offering a clearer outline of what they are actually standing for. Too many people are unsure of what they are voting for and may support a party more fully if they understand it better.*

*Party membership can only be made more attractive if people*

*understand politics to start with. … I think that parties could be more effective than they are if time is taken to redefine people's stereotypical view of parties as a group of 50 year old men doing boring things that have no tangible impact on an individual's life.*

*I personally find it frightening that most young people (18-24) I encounter have very little understanding of politics and the key issues of the day. They also have a very narrow view of world politics. There needs to be more emphasis on issues and getting debates at school and university to raise awareness and the media have a role to play in raising awareness of issues through documentaries not just the usually facile news reports. Only if people care about the issues will they get involved with any of the parties. Only when you understand the issues can you make a judgement about which party to get involved with.*

*It would be a good start if people knew how to become members. Many people in politics assume the everyday person is aware of how to join and how to vote … this is not so.*

*Most people would have little idea about what they would actually do by joining a political party. Do you go to meetings? How often? What kind of time commitment is involved - and is it easy to get out of if you're no longer interested? Do you have to be completely aligned with the party platform – i.e. indoctrinated with an ideology? Is it a group for healthy debate and dialogue about issues?*

*Trade unions and other collective organisations such as charities have a role to play in re-educating society about the key issues of the day and how each citizen can affect change to benefit others.*

Experts and Practitioners Comments

*I think there is an incredible lack of understanding. I do quite a lot of street stalls with my local party and you find a lot of people who still say, "ah, I don't know if I can vote in this area". Some people don't understand the constituency system. I think there's a whole set of things there that people don't understand and they certainly don't understand that you can still go and vote even without your polling card and that you don't have to give your polling card to telling agents at the polling station. A whole set of things that people just don't know... you will often find as well a lot of people will say to you they've got no idea who is standing.*
Jean Lambert, Spokesperson, The Green Party

*Official information is just appalling. Try finding out where your polling station is for local elections, if you don't happen to have the polling card, it is impossible. It is not even on the web. It is so easy to do that kind of thing particularly with the internet, but using other media as well. The official information for the London elections is atrocious and it is pretty bad for general elections. There is just this assumption that you will know where to go and that you will have filled out your polling card at the right moment and you will think about it and most people don't lead those sorts of lives.*
Professor Helen Margetts, Oxford Internet Institute,
University of Oxford

*There is quite a lot of evidence that people find the voting process confusing, and I think there does need to be a significant effort to make people feel comfortable with it. I think it is an inhibitor, that's what the research tells us. Again, I think it's by no means one of the headline reasons for turnout being lower than one would wish, but it's a further inhibiting factor. The importance to me of looking at things like information about voting methods, how to go about*

*voting, making sure people find it convenient and easy to understand, is that some of these other things about parties being seen as the same, people not trusting politicians, all of that, these are very big things to change, so let's at least make sure we don't fail to change the smaller inhibitors.*
Sam Younger, Chair, The Electoral Commission

*There are two points here and they conflict. The first one is that only 10 per cent of the seats are marginal and only 10 per cent of the electorate in those seats are floating voters and are going to affect the result of the General Election. So the political parties are only going for that 1 per cent of the population and the other 99 per cent is ignored. And so there has been a dearth of information except to that 1 per cent who has been inundated with information.*
*On the other hand the sitting MPs have been able to spend a lot of their money on their computers and their research assistants to help them contact the electorate telling them all about themselves. People probably know more about sitting MPs than they did in the past, but they certainly don't know about the parties and their platforms anything like they used to.*
*...If you went back as little as 20 years you could guarantee that you would have literature from every single candidate in the election in your constituency. And in many cases, more than one piece of paper, I mean you could have several during the course of a campaign. Now I think in a lot of seats that are regarded as safe as opposed to marginal, the people aren't going to get anything!*
John Strafford, Chair, Campaign for Conservative Democracy

This is backed up by independent research which shows very low levels of political understanding amongst the general public.

- 64 per cent felt they knew 'just a little' or 'hardly anything' about how Parliament works – this increased to 81 per cent amongst 15-24 year olds;[81]

- 57 per cent felt they knew 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about politics[82] – this increased to 71.1 per cent amongst 18-24 year olds;[83]

- in a seven-question political knowledge quiz of 2,000 adults only 45 per cent got four or more answers correct and only 3 per cent got all answers correct – only 27 per cent knew that a general election does not have to be held every four years and only 49 per cent knew that the House of Commons has more power than the Lords.[84]

While a number of sources report that these low levels of knowledge dampen political participation,[85] few actually explain why this should be the case. One analyst has suggested that people who feel they know little about politics are less likely to vote because they fear making the 'wrong' choice. This source also suggested that in the past many were guided in their voting – in a relatively unthinking way – by the strong party identification of their family or community. As partisanship has declined, citizens feel less able to make a choice without knowing more about the options on offer.[86]

The most detailed work on knowledge and participation was conducted by Henry Milner. Milner feels that many citizens do not vote because of a prevalent view that "all politicians are the same". He argues that this view is held by two different types of citizen. The first is politically informed and holds that view as a reasoned conclusion. They may be politically active in other 'more meaningful' ways. The second simply comes to that view because they do not possess the information to distinguish among the candidates or parties. Accord-

ing to Milner, evidence shows that the second type of citizen is on the rise and this in turn helps to explain declining turnout and participation.[87] This would also go some way to explaining the common view proposed to the Commission and examined above that the main parties are too similar.

Given that lack of information and knowledge is a relatively prominent feature of the Inquiry's evidence, the fact that it is backed by academic research and that it is not contradicted by the three key factors of disengagement, we feel that it should certainly join the likely causes of disengagement presented here.

**Persuasive Explanations: Voting procedures are inconvenient and unattractive**

A final factor which occurred to a lesser extent in the evidence seen by the Inquiry was the inconvenience and unattractiveness of voting procedures. A number of public submissions mentioned this and the expert evidence highlighted it as a relatively minor cause but one worthy of some consideration. The survey of non-voters found that 44 per cent said they were 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote if they were able to vote by mobile phone or on the internet.[88]

The independent research surveyed by the Inquiry is also reasonably clear that the inconvenience of voting is unlikely to be a significant cause of decline in electoral activity and that change to the way voting is conducted play a small part in increasing participation.[89] One study which compared average turnout in parliamentary elections in 29 countries between 1960 and 1995 concluded that the nature of voting facilities explained far less variance in turnout than the nature of the electoral system and the role of key democratic institutions.[90]

Indeed, even the UK Electoral Commission, the body charged by the Government with helping 'modernise' electoral law states:

*We recognise that it is unlikely that changing the method of voting can achieve major increases in voter turnout unless voters also feel that the election is relevant to them and that their vote matters.*[91]

We accept that voting procedures are not a major cause of disengagement and clearly only relate to the issue of election turnout. However, as the issue was raised in the evidence a number of times, and is backed to a certain extent by independent research, it is an issue we have kept in mind during our deliberations.

The explanations outlined in this chapter were to play a central role in the work of the Commission particularly in its efforts to produce a series of recommendations which genuinely responded to the real causes of disengagement. However, we were also aware of another explanation of disengagement which seemed to frame all others and explain why the problem had arisen at this particular point in history. We felt it was vital to take account of this explanation, if our recommendations were to be as rigorous and informed as possible.

"When participation meets the expectations of today's citizens, they will get involved"

# Chapter 4 – The Rise of New Citizens

The puzzling factor about most of the explanations accepted by the Commission is that they relate to features of the political system in Britain that are hardly new. We explored phenomena which had only developed in the last ten years – in the case of declining general election turnout – and in the last thirty to forty years – in the case of declining party membership and allegiance and low levels of turnout in local elections. Yet most, if not all, of the themes emerging in the evidence do not sit easily with such a recent emergence of the problem.

There have been periods in the past where the main political parties shared similar economic approaches and were eager to poach each other's policies in an effort to dominate the political centre-ground. The most obvious example of this would be the 1950s when the Conservatives adopted and even extended many of the welfarist and mixed economy policies of the Labour Party at a time when the Labour Party itself was ruled by its most centrist elements. And yet this is regarded by many as the heyday of participation in formal democracy, with very high election turnouts, large and highly active memberships of the main parties, and very strong allegiance to and identification with those main parties.

Equally, the hierarchical nature of the British state and the main parties and their failure to offer real influence to ordinary members

of the public are hardly recent characteristics. The Conservative Party has always as a matter of principle been a hierarchical party which invests very great organisational and policy-making power in the office of Leader. Indeed, if anything, the Conservative Party has offered more influence to its members in recent years by extending the franchise for the election of leader to members.

The Labour Party may have historically endured long-running internal battles over policy direction but there have rarely been occasions when the ordinary party member enjoyed any great influence. The most significant challenges to the Party leadership were invariably met with intense resistance and could succeed only with the backing of a handful of union leaders who controlled the majority of votes at the Annual Conference rather than through a groundswell of constituency party votes. As with the Conservative Party, it could also be argued that members of the Labour Party have actually gained more influence in recent years, following the introduction of mandatory re-selection and One Member One Vote for Parliamentary candidates.

In addition, the post-war period up to the 1960s was the high point of a technocratic and paternalist welfarism that embodied an unspoken idea that educated professionals automatically knew better then ordinary men and women. The notion of providing citizens with significant influence over political decisions was not a feature of this period and yet, this was the high point of participation in formal democracy.

The problems of the electoral system, identified by so many, are also, of course, not new. The first-past-the-post system has always left large numbers of voters without any impact on the final outcome and there is certainly nothing new in assuming that a voter's mark on the ballot paper indicates support for the full range of policies in a party's manifesto.

For us, therefore, only one explanation presented to the Inquiry could account for the relatively recent, cross-national, intense disengagement and alienation from formal democracy alongside the vibrancy of, and innovation in, other forms of participation. This was the explanation that identified changes in the values, interests and expectations of citizens themselves over the last thirty years. In short, the problem of disengagement arose not so much from changes in the political system but in changes in the citizens.

The evidence and research showed that this transformation in citizens' values and expectations has been brought about by the great shift in social and economic relations since 1945 in the industrialised world. These changes have been documented in detail elsewhere and it is now extremely well established that advanced economies have undergone significant change in the post-war period. While the precise nature and the extent of that change is still hotly debated, it is also widely accepted that it has radically altered the nature of society, culture and politics.

Whereas in the past the advanced economies largely relied on the manufacturing industries, and to a lesser extent agriculture, this has changed since 1945, and particularly since the 1960s. Today, such countries create wealth largely through the provision of services such as banking, retail and information technology.

This analysis is clearly upheld by the figures:

- in the 1940s manufacturing accounted for almost 40 per cent of the UK economy; today it accounts for around 20 per cent;[92]

- at the end of the 1970s around seven million were employed in the manufacturing sector (around 33 per cent of the workforce); today, the figure is around 3.4 million (about 14 per cent of the workforce) and falling;[93]

- by contrast, all service industry sectors have seen their share of the economy and their number of employees rise in the same periods;[94]

- employment in the service sector exceeds 70 per cent in the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, France and the US. The figure is 65 per cent in Germany, Italy and Japan. This represents a major decline of manufacturing employment in all of these countries. For example, 34 per cent of German employment resided in manufacturing in 1980 but fell to 24 per cent by 2000; and fell from 22 per cent to 15 per cent over the same period in the USA.[95]

This establishment of these 'post-industrial' societies across Western Europe, America, Australasia and, increasingly, Japan and South East Asia has vast implications for human life. Some of the most significant are as follows:

- the expansion of professional classes and the shrinkage of the manual working classes – the factory worker has given way to the office worker;

- higher proportions of society are affluent with greater disposable income, rising living standards and more leisure time;

- education, expertise and intellectual skills have become more significant for successful employment than physical capacity and manual skills;

- greater social, occupational and geographic mobility;

- advanced economies have become much more tied in to global networks as the post-industrial nations rely on the import of manufactured goods and raw materials and on the complex production networks established by transnational corporations where different aspects of a single production process are carried out in many different countries;

- the material concerns for many individuals, families and their communities in the industrial era – securing decent and sufficient food, housing, and healthcare – have become less significant, while 'post-material' concerns – securing personal freedoms and rights, satisfactory leisure-time pursuits, access to luxury goods and environmental security – have grown in significance.

However, post-industrialisation has also seen the emergence of a new group in society that has not only suffered from the decline of manufacturing industries but has also not enjoyed the benefits of the rise of the retail sector. A class of people suffering 'multiple deprivation'; "a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown".[96] This desperate collection of disadvantage leads to an inability or prevention from taking part in the wider social, economic, and cultural facets of our society but also, most relevantly here, an exclusion from the political life of the nation.

It has been argued that 'social exclusion' is worse in Britain than in most of the rest of Western Europe and that this situation has deteriorated even further in recent years. Studies have found that:

- the percentage of individuals living in households in income poverty in the UK rose from 15 per cent in 1981 to 24 per cent in 1993/4 and 22 per cent in 2002/03;[97]

- child poverty has fallen roughly in line with government targets, but is still high by international standards – in 2002/03, 23 per cent of children in Britain lived in households earning below 60 per cent of the median income;[98]

- the number of households in temporary accommodation has continued to rise since 1997; in 2002/03, 129,000 applicants for social housing were accepted as being homeless and in 'priority need', an increase of 10 per cent on 2001/02;[99]

- Persistent poverty – defined as living at least three years out of the last four in poverty – is high in Britain compared to the rest of Europe; between 1998 and 2001, 11 per cent of UK citizens lived in persistent poverty. This compares to 5 per cent in the Netherlands, 6 per cent in Germany, and 9 per cent across Europe as a whole.[100]

Assessing the impact of a shift as complex and profound as post-industrialism on political participation in general and formal democratic involvement in particular is never going to be straightforward. However, a number of authors have tried to understand how the wider post-industrial context affects political involvement[101]. Most fundamentally, it can be gleaned from their work that post-industrial society has at one level created a new type of citizen. The findings can be summarised as follows.

- The shrinkage of the manual working class and the expansion of the professional class has greatly increased the number of individuals who no longer hold a strong class allegiance or, at least, identify with the cultural and political forms associated with the economic classes once engaged in the social conflicts of the twentieth century.

- The grand ideologies of the last century, which were based upon broad-brush approaches to traditional class interests and material concerns, have an inevitably reduced appeal for many citizens today, given the decline of historical class divisions and identities. Instead, the political values of today's citizen are likely to be shaped by the more or less unconnected range of post-material concerns mentioned above.

- The rise of a better educated and more socially and geographically mobile population who are valued for their intellectual skills rather than their physical capacity has created individuals who hold themselves in higher esteem and take for granted their right to control their lives and take many decisions, from the most trivial to the most important, for themselves.

- The 'cultural revolution' experienced by Western nations in the sixties partly came about because of the gradual shift to a post-industrial economy. This revolution enhanced the emphasis on individual self-worth and self-determination and greatly reduced popular deference towards established authority. Indeed, it could be argued that the decline of deference and the 'cultural revolution' have created a citizen who automatically exhibits scepticism or even cynicism towards those in authority.

In short, the changes of the post-war era have gradually created citizens who are better educated, have a higher sense of self-esteem, enjoy and expect to make decisions for themselves, and either lack or choose their own geographic, social and institutional bonds.

However, this should be set against the simultaneous creation by post-industrialisation of the section of society that suffers from persistent poverty. This group has not seen its education, self-esteem and freedom of choice rise in recent years. Quite the opposite. As Audrey Bronstein, Director of the Oxfam UK Poverty Programme, testified to the *Power* Commission people on low income are often engaged in a constant, and usually unequal, struggle to assert their rights and decisions against the institutions they rely upon for their

limited well-being – whether that be their employers, the Department for Work and Pensions, the police or the National Health Service.[102] A rising sense of powerlessness rather than self-determination has been the lot of those individuals, families and communities hit hardest by post-industrialisation.

It is our contention that it is this dual outcome of the post-industrial era which has created the growing alienation from formal democracy. Clearly any political system with its roots and design in an era that predates such profound changes would be confronted with a major challenge. The situation has, in fact, thrown up two such challenges for the British system.

1. The British parliamentary system of elected representation and considerable executive power was built and designed in an era of very limited educational provision and in which deference and rigid hierarchy, and static social relations were taken for granted. The Executive and elected representatives relied on these factors to ensure that they commanded the respect of the population and a broad acquiescence in their decisions. However, many citizens, if not all, now exist in an era of increasing educational attainment, popular scepticism and fluid social bonds based around individual choice and self-determination. Many people now expect respect and an adequate response from the very professionals, businesses and public services who once expected the same from ordinary people. There is no obvious reason why the state and elected representatives should be any different.

2. The British party system is based on the dominance of two parties constructed around the interests of the two dominant classes of the industrial era. Yet, as has been made clear already, these two dominant classes and their values and interests have significantly diminished. Instead, we have a far more complex society in which individuals construct their identities and values in a far more fluid and eclectic fashion in tune with a world where social, geographic and institutional bonds are far more open to personal choice. In addition, the organisations that shaped and campaigned for the demands

of the industrial working class for so much of the twentieth century, and ultimately brought them to the very heart of the formal political establishment through the Labour Party, have not proved able to do the same, to anything like the same extent, for that section of society now suffering persistent poverty. As a result, this is a social group that has found even less purchase on formal democratic institutions than the newly confident individuals of the post-industrial era. Their alienation is, in effect, doubled. Not only do they have no strong organisational link to formal politics but the stubborn persistence of their disadvantage has created a sense that politics has nothing to offer them anyway.

This analysis is reinforced when one observes the success of other forms of participation outside the formal democratic process. Many of these have developed during the shift to post-industrial economy and society and have grown organically out of the demands and expectations of today's citizens.

The rise of pressure politics and campaign groups has many origins – not least the fact that they offer an alternative to effecting change without having to take part in the less appealing formal democratic processes and institutions with their composite motions and their meetings in draughty halls. More importantly, however, is the evidence received by *Power* which suggests overwhelmingly that many members of the public value the opportunity to support change in a specific area of policy they care about. This contrasts with the clear distaste that is felt for the fact that active support or involvement in a political party means campaigning for a very wide range of policies, many of which they do not agree with.

The key to much of this is that political parties can no longer rely on traditional ideological or class allegiance to draw citizens to parties. Labour and the Conservatives had, in many ways, an extra selling point beyond their actual policies. They were, respectively, the parties of socialism and the industrial working class and of capitalism and the managerial and professional middle class. Their policies were

but one aspect of organisations that were at the very heart of those ideological and class commitments for many citizens. But with the decline of this particular ideological and class conflict, there is little reason for citizens to simply accept a broad programme of policies as entirely or mostly in accord with their interests or values. New ideologies may be in the making, rooted in different configurations of both well-rehearsed values and new ones, but the old-time political religions have lost much of their power.

Campaign groups, on the other hand, are much more focussed and require only that an individual supports change in one area or, at most, a bundle of related areas for which they feel sympathy.

Then there is the inspiringly vibrant growth of new participatory forms of democracy occurring across the world. Many of these were described and assessed in *Power's* own report last year, *Beyond the Ballot*.[103] These projects differ greatly in their format and goals, but nearly all offer citizens a chance to engage and influence those in power through deliberation and collective decision-making. The most impressive, such as the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia, the Participatory Budget in Porto Alegre in Brazil, or the '21st Century Town Hall' meeting on the redevelopment of Downtown New York after 9/11 involve many thousands in responsible discussion and decision-making.

Many of these techniques are only just starting to be tried in Britain, but initial pilots and experiments are proving positive. *Power* itself organised its own version of participatory budgeting in partnership with the London Borough of Harrow to test out the approach.[104] Against the expectations of the rather cynical elected representatives on the Council, 300 residents turned out for a six-hour Assembly on a Sunday to discuss and choose priorities for the 2006/07 Council budget. 90 per cent of those who attended rated the event either 'very good' or 'good', 80 per cent said they would take more interest in the Council's decisions, and 43 per cent said it had affected their view of the work the Council does for the better (56 per cent said it had not

changed their view).

Why should such methods be expanding and proving so positive? Once again it may be because they deliver citizens the focussed decision-making they demand and which elections and parties cannot offer. More importantly, as in the Harrow case, they appeal directly to citizens' own sense that given the right information, time and structure, they can make decisions that are just as robust and valid as anything chosen by their elected representatives. This is the experience described powerfully by most people who sit on juries in criminal trials, a process which lends legitimacy to our justice system so why not draw upon that inclusive experience elsewhere in our institutions of governance. In addition, as the *Beyond the Ballot* report explained, if people feel that a process may genuinely give them some influence, or at least mean that those in power will have to take account of their views, they are far more likely to get involved. One of the recurring themes of the evidence taken by *Power*, as mentioned above, is that today's citizens feel they have a right to be listened to and taken account of but that the formal processes and institutions of democracy – voting and parties – do not offer a genuine opportunity for that.

As was pointed out in Chapter 2, the relatively new technology of the internet is also providing a platform for burgeoning political expression, information, discussion and activism.

A big part of the appeal of the internet as a tool is the way, once again, it gives today's citizens a chance to exercise their intelligence as freely as possible on a matter that concerns them. It also offers them a direct and immediate route to others who may or may not share their opinion and opens up opportunities for debate.

Where it offers a possible route to influencing those in power internet politics provides a freedom and a respect for the citizen's intelligence which from the overwhelming evidence most people do not believe exists in parties or through the process of simply voting.

Finally, there is the increasing appeal for individuals to express their political values through their daily lives, for example, by us-

ing their purchasing power to 'reward' ethical business and punish 'unethical' business (see Chapter 2). This type of politics is obviously completely in tune with the ethos of individual choice which is so central to the outlook of many twenty first century citizens.

What this has suggested to us is that when participation meets the expectations of today's citizen, those citizens will get involved. The problem for formal democratic processes and institutions is that they no longer meet those expectations. In fact, they work very much against the grain of those expectations. Part Two of this report develops recommendations for change designed to meet head-on the crisis of a nineteenth-century political system facing twenty-first-century citizens. However, before then it is necessary to briefly take account of how politics has responded to the demands of a new type of society and citizen to date.

### How has the Political System Responded?

British governments and parties have tried to meet the challenges identified above through a combination of three responses.

- The existence of a more demanding, self-determined citizen has been met by drives to introduce greater choice and efficiency into the services provided by the state, either through privatisation or the introduction of market mechanisms, performance targets and greater independence for service providers.
- The pressure to respond to service user demands has also led to a trend under New Labour to make much wider use of consultation to discover needs and expectations and apply these to the delivery of services.
- The main political parties have responded to the decline of their traditional class bases by rethinking their identity and electoral strategies with more or less success. As it became clear during the 1980s that mobilising the core vote in the

form of a class base would no longer win elections, the main parties have adopted a process known as 'triangulation' – this involves throwing a handful of policies at you core vote as an appeasement, stealing the political clothes of your opponent in areas where traditionally your own party has been weak, and concentrating electoral energy on the marginal seats which are subject to swing votes. None has done this more successfully and completely than New Labour under Tony Blair with the resulting electoral success. The formula is now being adopted in full by David Cameron, the Conservative leader.

What has struck us, however, is that given the scale of the challenge to the old methods of democratic decision-making, none of these responses is good enough and none engages sufficiently with the citizen. There has been no significant rethink of how citizens might engage with the political decision-making done in his or her name. The first response is primarily about the flexibility of service delivery in response to the demands of the individual user. This may or may not be a good thing but it is not about citizen engagement with collective decision-making, which must be the key purpose of any democratic political system.

It has been argued that more flexible and efficient public services will revive trust in the system and encourage more democratic engagement. However, the notion that dissatisfaction with public services is either a direct or indirect cause of disengagement from formal democracy does not appear anywhere in the evidence received by the Inquiry. As a result, it is not clear to us how such reforms respond directly to the political causes of disengagement outlined above. Neither does our evidence suggest that there has been increased engagement as a consequence of the drives for efficiency and flexibility in public services which have been taking place since the eighties.

The use of public consultations is a wave in the right direction of democracy but such processes have to be real with no predetermined

outcomes. The idea of having a consultation about nuclear power when ministers have indicated that they favour the use of nuclear plants is a dubious form of public participation in decision-making. The complaint made by witnesses about consultations is that they are perceived to be largely cosmetic and designed to support policies which have already been developed. The agenda setting is not coming from the people.

The third response is essentially about how the existing dominant parties can use the vagaries of the British voting system in this new era to their own electoral advantage. A response which might, in theory, allow better representation of popular views but, in practice, has to be measured against the disengagement we have described. It can be argued that the first-past-the-post system is one of the reasons why managarialism has replaced vision. An almost mathematical election methodology combined with good public relations can secure victory without any reference to a philosophy. A central feature of this disengagement is the sense that the main political parties are no longer distinct enough and no longer base their policies on core principles – a result which it might be thought is an inevitable outcome of the highly pragmatic triangulation strategy.

Of course the current Government has introduced measures which are entirely or partly a response to political disengagement itself. All of these are dealt with at various points in this report. However, it is worth just providing some very brief descriptive detail at this point in order to frame the following section. The main governmental response to political disengagement is as follows.

- Alternative voting procedures: The Government has experimented with various alternatives to the traditional method of voting in person at a polling station. A number of pilots were held during the 2001 General Election and the 2004 Local and European Elections, including voting in shops, extending opening hours for polling stations, and holding all-postal ballots. Only the latter seemed to make any significant difference to turnout although this remained under 50 per cent in the areas in which it was piloted. Concerns have also been raised about the integrity of an all-postal ballot.

- More Consultation: One response to the sense of disengagement expressed through opinion polls is to make greater efforts to consult the wider public and/or stakeholders. As such, there has been a recent increase in the use of forums and techniques such as Local Strategic Partnerships, citizens' panels, questionnaire surveys, internet consultation and focus groups. In addition, the Government has established processes such as the Big Conversation and the national debate on genetically modified crops to engage more effectively with the public.

- Citizenship Education: Courses designed to educate young people about civic values, democracy and politics are now part of the National Curriculum. This policy was developed and implemented as a direct response to declining levels of interest, knowledge and involvement in politics and community activity amongst young people.

- Greater Regulation and Scrutiny: A number of reforms have been implemented by the Government in a direct attempt to restore public trust in politicians following many years of political sleaze and scandal. These have included establishing: a Parliamentary Ombudsman to enforce principles of good conduct and probity within Parliament; a code of conduct for local councillors; a compulsory register of donations for political parties; and making the register of interests for MPs mandatory.

**A Democratic Response**

What has been particularly striking to the Commission has been the extent to which none of the above responses, whether to the rise of the post-industrial society or disengagement itself, have been fundamentally democratic in their inspiration. They are primarily technocratic or self-interested electoral responses. At best, one could say that citizenship education and tighter regulation of MPs and Councillors are useful addendums to a democratic system but no-one in government seems to have looked seriously at the principles, practices, or history of democracy as a possible source of answers to the worrying problem of disengagement.

We believe it is vital that this is done. It is our view that going back to first principles is necessary because recent technocratic and electoral solutions seem particularly ill-suited to resolving the problem. At heart, however, we argue for a fully-fledged democratic response to the major challenge of disengagement because we *are* democrats. We believe that at particular times in history it is vital not just to reassert one's faith and trust in democracy but also to rethink it in order to meet new challenges.

To this end, the principle of democracy and the historical practice of democracy have informed this report as much as the hard empiricism of the previous chapters. We have been inspired by the possibility of a much more open approach to democracy than that which shapes current political processes in Britain and much of the rest of the democratic world.

Particularly in Western Europe and the USA, democracy has come to be defined by the institutions and processes of representative parliamentary systems. Freedom House, the influential American body that promotes democracy across the world, defines it as:

> *a political system whose leaders are elected in competitive multi-party and multi-candidate processes to which opposition parties have a legitimate chance of attaining power or participating in*

> *power and that have a universal franchise.*[105]

Few historians of, or thinkers on, democracy accept such a narrow definition. Most refer to an ideal which has existed in different forms at different times and different places. That ideal is most commonly expressed as a system where 'the people' are sovereign, or govern themselves, rather than being governed by an individual or a select group of individuals. The etymology of the word 'democracy' itself reflects this definition, with 'demos' meaning 'people' and 'kratia' meaning 'rule' in the ancient Greek. Academics also commonly cite the famous funeral oration of Pericles – the Greek ruler who established Athenian democracy – in which according to Thucydides, the new system was described as:

> *a government of the people because we live in consideration not of the few, but of the majority.*[106]

However, for some this definition is far too simplistic. David Beetham has proposed a more sophisticated approach based on his historical and philosophical survey of democracy which places greater emphasis on the political equality behind the democratic ideal (see box).

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David Beetham on Democracy

> Democracy can be most simply understood as a procedure for taking decisions in any group, association or society, whereby all members have an equal right to have a say and make their opinions count. In life we make many decisions as individuals – where and how to live, what job to pursue, how much of our income to spend and what to spend it on. But as soon as we

join with others in some common activity or enterprise, then decisions have to be taken for the group or association as a whole: who should be a member, what rules should be followed, how any necessary income should be raised or distributed.

In contrast to historically recurrent forms of collective decision making by one or few persons on behalf of the rest, democracy involves the principle that all members of an association or society should have the right to take part equally in the decisions that affect them. Democracy is therefore based on the following key ideas:

- All members have interests that are affected by collective decisions.
- Everyone (by the time they are adult) is capable of reaching a view about what the best or least bad decision would be, both for themselves and the association as a whole.
- The best decisions in the long run will be ones where all such views have been publicly aired and debated.
- Where debate and discussion fail to produce a single agreed outcome, decisions should be taken by a vote of all participating members.
- The principle of 'one person, one vote, one value' reflects a wider conception that all persons are of equal worth.[107]

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John Keane has recently gone one step further and argued that the definition of democracy as "the rule of the people" is a positively dangerous concept which has been used throughout history to justify all manner of despotisms both within systems which might broadly be considered democratic and those which most definitely are not. Keane rejects this "simple democracy" and instead calls for a "com-

plex democracy". This is based on the acknowledgement of the fragmentation of values, identities and interests inherent in political and social systems and within any group and is therefore primarily about how to share power between those fragments in such a way that, in fact, "no body" rules over any other whether they claim to be doing so in the name of the 'majority' or 'the people' or not.[108]

The variation which exists in the definition of democracy is reflected, many historians now accept, in the way the notion has been put into practice throughout history. Ancient Athens itself used two different methods at different times. One was rule by an Assembly in which any Athenian citizen was free to take part and decide on key issues confronting the City. The other was rule by an Assembly made up of citizens from prescribed areas of Athens and its environs who were chosen by lot. Other systems include the consensual and deliberative processes used in parts of Africa for many years, the direct election of leaders and public officials widely employed in presidential systems and municipal government across the world, the use of referendums in many nations (used most regularly in Switzerland), and the more recent innovations in direct public involvement in complex decision-making used, most famously and recently, in Porto Alegre, Brazil and British Columbia, Canada.

However, it is striking despite this diversity of principle and practice that in Britain and many of the other established systems, democracy has become so closely associated with Parliament, parties and elections. This is not new. It was a problem noted many years ago by the hugely influential thinker John Dewey:

*We must renew our protest against the assumption that the idea (of democracy) has itself produced the governmental practices which obtain in democratic states: general suffrage, elected representatives, majority rule and so on. The idea has influenced the concrete political movement but it has not caused it…The forms to which we are accustomed in democratic governments represent the cumulative*

*effect of a multitude of events, unpremeditated as far as political effects were concerned and having unpredictable consequences. There is no sanctity in universal suffrage, frequent elections, majority rule, congressional and cabinet government. These things are devices evolved in the direction in which the current was moving, each wave of which involved at the time of its impulsion a minimum of departure from antecedent in custom in law. The devices served a purpose; but that purpose was rather that of meeting existing needs which had become too intense to be ignored, rather than that of forwarding the democratic idea.*[109]

Indeed, a well-established argument exists to explain why democracy can now only be implemented through representative parliamentary systems. It has been widely asserted for many years that the growth in size and complexity of modern societies compared to ancient civilisations means that the notion that all or even many citizens can take part in political decision-making is flawed. In a society of millions, rather than thousands, where nearly everyone of working age is usually involved in full-time work, decision-making powers must be delegated to a group of freely elected representatives who can devote themselves full-time to the understanding and deliberation of the many complex issues that confront today's societies. This emphasis on the special role of the parliamentary representative taking better informed decisions on behalf of the majority whose sovereignty is expressed only at election time has influenced thinkers as diverse as Edmund Burke, Joseph Schumpeter and the founding fathers of the American republic. It clearly still runs as an influential grain of belief through British politics expressed by politicians as diverse as Lord Hailsham who described our system as an 'elective dictatorship'[110] and Jack Straw who called it an 'executive democracy'.[111]

The *Power* Commission's investigation of the current problem of disengagement in British and other systems has convinced it that this over-reliance on the parliamentary representative in our defini-tion of democracy has now become an obstacle to addressing that problem. We believe that there is now an opportunity as well as a necessity to draw inspiration from the diversity inherent in the principle and practice of democracy and to start being far more open and sophisticated about what the concept can mean in the post-industrial twenty-first century.

A system based largely or entirely on parliamentary representation no longer engages people in the way it once did. Indeed, it may be becoming a positive source of dissatisfaction and disengagement, as the ties and expectations which once led citizens to place faith in their representatives have declined with the end of the industrial era.

There is an opportunity to be seized for change because the factors traditionally raised as barriers to wider involvement in decision-making, and thus the extension of democracy, have been gradually eroding over many years. Citizens are now much better informed and better educated than they once were. The democratic ethos of peaceful deliberation and decision-making is itself now much more widely instilled in the majority of people in Europe than it was fifty years ago. And new technology and new techniques in public engagement raise the possibility of far greater numbers being involved in complex decision-making. In addition, the sites of democratic or potentially democratic decision-making in contemporary society are now many and diverse, encompassing a multiplicity of public bodies, non-governmental organisations, quangos and many civil society groups of varying sizes and types. Thus, the notion that the complexity and size of modern societies make wider participation impossible no longer applies as stringently as it once did.

In short, the contemporary problem of disengagement could be the tipping-point at which the expediency and the ideal of a wider, deeper democracy come together to spur reform.

None of this is to say that parliament, parties and elections are defunct. Far from it. A great deal, even the majority, of this report is about how these established systems can be strengthened and

adapted to re-engage the interest, support and activity of the British citizen. Indeed, two of the three grand shifts recommended by the Inquiry are about empowering elected representatives and re-invigorating parties and elections. But these must go hand-in-hand with the third shift which emphasises the rigorous and meaningful input from 'ordinary' citizens into policy and decision-making between elections. In addition, the details of the first two shifts have been developed in such a way that they lead not simply to greater efficiency or fairness in decision-making but in a way which allows representatives, parties and elections to act primarily as the voice of citizens.

The outcome of these changes would be a democracy which does not limit itself to any one historically specific model but reflects the sophisticated definitions of democracy developed by the likes of Beetham and Keane. This keeps open the possibility of variation and innovation in the never-complete pursuit of political equality, effective participation, enlightened understanding, peaceful power sharing and the other ideals which may be assigned to a truly complex notion of democracy for our truly complex society.

In this spirit, we concur fully with the words of John Dewey:

*The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by introducing more machinery of the same kind as that which already exists, or by refining or perfecting that machinery. But the phrase may also indicate the need of returning to the idea itself, of clarifying and deepening our apprehension of it, and of employing our sense of its meaning to criticise and remake its political manifestations.*[112]

**In Summary**

We recognised the need to develop an evidence-based explanation of the problem of disengagement from formal democratic institutions and processes before deciding on recommendations. In doing this we have assessed the many explanations we have collected against the Inquiry's own research and evidence, existing research and against three key factors about disengagement that are not always given prominence in the current debate. These three factors are:

- the very high levels of alienation from formal processes – particularly the main political parties and elections – on the part of the British people;
- participation in the areas of non-political and informal political activity is vibrant, innovative and growing;
- the problem of disengagement from formal democracy is one afflicting most of the established democracies in the world.

This assessment has led us to conclude that the following causes are significant:

- many citizens feel they do not have enough influence over political decisions;
- the main parties are widely regarded as too similar and lacking in principle;
- the electoral system is widely perceived as leading to wasted votes;
- many citizens do not like the fact that support and voting for a particular party is taken as assent for a very wide range of diverse policies;
- many people feel they or others do not possess sufficient knowledge or information to participate in formal democratic institutions and processes;
- voting procedures are seen by many as unattractive and inconvenient.

However, these causes relate to features of the British political system which have been in existence for many years, including periods when participation in formal democracy was high. Therefore, we

have concluded that a deeper cause exists to explain the rise of these new explanations of disengagement. This deeper cause is the dual impact of the major shift in the developed economies from an industrial to a post-industrial economy and society. This shift has, on the one hand, created citizens that differ from their predecessors in that they are far less deferential to authority, better educated, hold their own views in higher esteem, expect to take many decisions for themselves from the most trivial to the most significant, and are not tied by the older bonds of class, place and ideology. On the other hand, the shift to post-industrialism has also created a social group that suffers persistent poverty and the various problems that are associated with life on a low income. These citizens have not enjoyed more freedom and well-being as a result of economic change, but less.

The key problem, however, is that the British political system – like many other democratic systems across the world – has not adapted to these changes. The approach to government and political decision-making and the structures which enshrine that approach remains predicated on a view of citizenship and social divisions that date back to an industrial era that no longer exists.

Fundamentally, the causes of disengagement outlined in this part of the report point towards the emergence of a population in Britain that wants and requires a more regular, meaningful and detailed degree of influence over the policies and decisions that concern them and affect their lives, whilst a political system continues to exist that has neither the structures, processes or culture to offer that level of influence. Indeed, the elements of the system that are supposed to allow such dialogue between governed and governors and offer the former some measure of influence – the political parties – are now so deeply unsuited to the task in contemporary Britain that they are only exacerbating the tension.

For us, this has meant developing recommendations which will both challenge the blockages to wider and more detailed citizen influence and create new channels for such influence to flourish. In the broadest terms this means instituting three fundamental shifts in the way politics is conducted in Britain.

- A re-balancing of power between the constituent elements of the political system: a shift of power away from the Executive to Parliament and from central to local government. Much greater clarity, transparency and accountability should be introduced into the relationship between the Executive and supra-national bodies, quangos, business, and interest groups. The aim being to allow the freedom for our elected representatives to be the eyes, ears and mouth of British citizens at the heart of government.

- The creation of an electoral and party system which is responsive enough to the changing values and demands of today's population to allow the necessary and organic creation of new political alliances, value systems and organisations which better represent those values and demands.

- The creation of a culture of political engagement in which policy and decision-making employs direct input from citizens. The system should provide citizens with clear rights and processes by which to exercise that input from conception through to implementation.

These three imperatives stand or fall alongside each other. The implementation of only one or two of the three will not create the re-engagement with formal democracy for which many people now hope. Elected representatives need greater freedom, but if they still belong to parties which have lost their connection with the wider public or have no reason to enter into detailed dialogue with that wider public, disengagement will continue. If the electoral system is reformed to create more open, fluid and relevant parties but the representatives

who they support have no real power and have no understanding of how to listen to constituents between elections, disengagement will continue. If new structures and a new culture of public involvement is implemented, but citizens soon find that many of those to whom they talk have very limited power, and the established processes of democracy remain as sclerotic as before, then disengagement will continue.

We accept that those who are broadly sympathetic to this new agenda may like some of its detailed recommendations more than others and may well think that other ideas will prove better at achieving its professed goals. However, we do not believe that the three major shifts outlined above and which have structured the next three chapters can logically be cherry-picked or weakened if the genuine aim is the creation of a newly vibrant democracy for Britain in the twenty-first century.

# Chapter 5–
# Rebalancing Power

It is one of the troubling ironies of recent British political history that just as the country's citizens expect to exercise more influence over the political decisions made in their name, the people who take those decisions have become more remote and less accountable. This is an unhappy paradox that cannot continue without serious consequences. Widespread and intense disenchantment with formal democracy may be just a foretaste.

A major trend of the British constitutional arrangements of the last two decades has been the way unelected and indirectly elected authority has gained powers at the expense of directly elected authority. There are four elements to this.

- The Executive has become more powerful at the expense of MPs in the House of Commons. In particular, the Prime Minister's Office and whoever the PM decides to gather around him or her, has become the most powerful political institution in British politics. Of course, this power is subject to the balance of political forces in the Cabinet and in Parliament and to the standing of the Prime Minister amongst the wider public. However, when those political forces are running in the Prime Minister's favour, the influence of No.10 may well be greater than it has ever been.

- Central government departments have also become more powerful at the expense of local government over the last two to three decades. A number of the powers to determine local services which once resided in the hands of councillors are now either directly administered or determined by central government departments or are directed by central government through tight control of finance and the enforcement of nationally set targets and guidelines.

- Appointed authorities – quangos – have gained extra powers, particularly at the expense of local councillors. Wide areas of public services which were once under the remit of a local council are now governed by committees appointed by ministers or other committees. In addition, business is widely cited by the public as having greater influence over government than citizens. This is an impression that has been enhanced by the increasing use being made of commercial organisations to deliver public services.

- Supranational bodies and processes of international negotiation such as the European Union have gained extra powers and influence at the expense of nationally and locally elected representatives. The direction and sometimes the detail of wide areas of policy are now heavily influenced by, or determined by, decisions taken by appointed officials working in supranational organisations or by politicians and civil servants in negotiations with their overseas counterparts.

The result of these shifts has been to make political decision-making more opaque, hidden and complex. It means that the people who take key decisions are more likely to be geographically, socially and politically distant from the people who are affected by their decisions. It also means that decision-makers are less directly account-able to those who are affected by their decisions and rarely engaged in dialogue with them. The *Power* Commissioners saw at first-hand how a lack of real influence over decision-makers has become a primary cause of alienation from formal democracy, and recognise that those processes which have produced greater distance between governed and governors are a source of deep concern.

One key step in reducing this distance is to expand the capacity of elected power to scrutinise unelected and indirectly elected authority and to initiate change where those authorities refuse to act. In doing this, a basis may be provided for citizens to enter into a new dialogue with the holders of power and hold them to account. The introduction of greater scrutiny of the political firmament will also help citizens to see that power in Britain operates in accordance with the citizens' wishes.

However, for unelected power to be controlled in this way, we cannot stress strongly enough how important it is that such steps are accompanied by the reforms outlined in chapters 9 and 10. It is one of the abiding fallacies of the debate about declining participation in formal democracy that giving more powers to Parliament or local councils will of itself re-ignite engagement. This is massively to underestimate the degree to which citizens are alienated from their elected representatives, their democratic institutions and, in particular, the main political parties. It is also to ignore the fact that many citizens today want a far more focussed and direct say over specific policies than they currently enjoy.

If elected representatives are allowed more influence and authority but the dominance of the main parties remains unchallenged, the electoral system remains rigid and unresponsive, and the emphasis of our democracy remains upon representation rather than participation, then nothing will have been done to combat alienation. Power will simply have been redistributed from one distrusted set of politicians and institutions to another.

As such, we believe the changes proposed in this chapter are a necessary but far from sufficient set of reforms to re-engage citizens with formal democracy.

It is for this reason that we believe it is time to move on from the restrictions of the constitutional reform agenda developed in the 1980s and pursued primarily by the campaign group Charter 88 in the 1990s. Some of the proposals made below bear a resemblance to Charter 88's demands. However, we have only adopted that agenda in part: adapting and extensively developing it to ensure that its primary focus is about the re-engagement of citizens with formal democracy. This was never the primary focus of Charter 88's agenda. It may have been an aspiration or a hoped-for side affect but it was not the main goal. The constitutional reform agenda was chiefly about imbalances and injustices in the relationship between different elements of the polity but there is also a vital need to address, more directly and radically, the relationship between that polity and the citizen.

**Returning Authority to Parliament**

The expert evidence received by the Commission is clear. The Executive in Britain is now more powerful in relation to Parliament than it has been probably since the time of Walpole. The box provides comments from Parliamentarians to this effect from across the political spectrum.

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Indicative quotes from parliamentarians about the rise of Executive power

*You have what I can only describe as the contemptuous attitude of the Executive towards Parliament which was marked in Mrs Thatcher's day, then receded in John Major's day, then resumed, I think it's fair to say, under Mr Blair. … It was the growth of the* concept of presidential Prime Ministers which, I think, is deeply unsympathetic to the process of parliamentary government. In other words, a President doesn't fit into parliamentary government and in order to make it fit into parliamentary government it requires the reduction of the Cabinet to essentially something of a sounding board and of Parliament to not much more than a rubber stamp. All that has happened since 1980/81.
Baroness Shirley Williams

*Parliament has run away from its responsibilities in the sense that it should not allow its programme to be decided by the Executive. It should have a great deal more control over things like the membership of select committees and the way in which it scrutinises the Executive in general. It's run away from those things because the business managers, that is to say the whips, are very powerful. … There are a large numbers of Members of Parliament who have taken eight years to discover that they had an individual right to behave in a particular way.*
Gwyneth Dunwoody MP

*My impression is that for at least two decades and possibly quite a lot longer, government control of parliament has been increasing. So I generally take the view that the power of the Executive over parliament has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished. I am careful not simply to blame Labour. I think that we (Conservatives) in Government truncated parliamentary scrutiny, we guillotined bills, we briefed the media before Parliament was told about important policy developments, and we used the lobby system which is an enormous source of power and control for the Prime Minister of the day. There are very few new precedents in politics. That said I do think that it has got worse over the last eight years. The Labour Party seeing the attractiveness of circumventing Parliament, of using the vast resources of the civil service including*

*government department press officers, to get messages across, has naturally used those weapons. If you make those weapons available to a government and a government knows that using them will help it, and hinder its opponents, ministers are bound to do it. They are the political equivalent of rational economic actors who do what's in their financial interest. Ministers do what they judge to be in their administrative and political interest.*
John Bercow MP

*I think [executive dominance] has changed, in that Parliament has made changes to its rules; but those have until recently been done with the consent of the opposition. In other words, you didn't used to change how Parliament controls the Executive, without the opposition parties agreeing. And we did make changes; we had the Joplin reforms, but those were done in agreement with the Labour Party. What changed in 1997 was that, unilaterally, the party in control made changes to how Parliament processed legislation and now every bill is guillotined. There are more bills but less time to do them. So I think that there has been institutional change driven by the Executive which others probably wouldn't have agreed to, if it had been done in consultation with the opposition parties.*
Sir George Young MP

*I, as a parliamentarian, have a strong impression that, if anything, executive power has increased and parliamentary rights and checks and balances have declined. So, it is not my impression that we've been through a period of democratisation. … I believe in representative government. I think there should be proper debate and not just the occasional rebellion. I certainly see as many changes towards uncontrolled executive power than in the other direction.*
Lord Dahrendorf

*Parliament is basically run by the Executive; what the Executive*

*wants they get through. It's less than two years since I was elected and I feel remarkably cynical about press rumour about rebellion. There may be a great deal of rumour that all these Labour MPs are suddenly going to rebel and vote the way their consciences say they should but, in practice, the rebellion always falls just short of what the Government fears. … I feel less positive about being able to engineer cross-party support to oppose things that are clearly wrong. And that's a frustration to me less than two years into my job.*
Sarah Teather MP

The many public submissions received by the Inquiry also reveal a common fear that all power now resides with the PM and his circle rather than with Parliament.

Submissions in response to public consultation expressing concern about the growth of executive power

*The Executive is becoming more powerful as this present administration progressively undermines the blocks against government power in the constitution. We need a new British constitution; one that replaces the link between basic law and government power and returns democracy to the people. So that we do not once again find ourselves in a position of having our basic rights removed by an authoritarian administration.*

*Currently Parliament seems to have no real responsibility for scrutiny of the legislative proposals made by the Executive or for calling the Executive to account for its actions. It would help if there were a clearer separation of powers – the legislature separate from*

*the Executive and from the judiciary.*
*Government at Westminster is too powerful. Parliament, on the other hand, is far too weak. The House of Lords is dismissed as 'unelected' by the Commons. The Commons has allowed itself to be ignored and is far too whip-led.*

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There is also research evidence carried out independently of *Power* which suggests this imbalance is a cause of popular concern and alienation.

- The statement, "Britain needs a written constitution, providing clear legal rules within which government ministers and civil servants are forced to operate" has consistently won the backing of 70 per cent in opinion surveys carried out between 1995 and 2004, and achieved its highest backing of 80 per cent in 2004.

- In 2004, 83 per cent agreed with the statement "the Prime Minister should be bound by law to seek approval from Parliament before committing Britain to war or other military action".

- 50-60 per cent agrees that Parliament should have greater control of the Executive in five opinion surveys between 1977 and 2000 with another 19-25 per cent remaining neutral on the issue.[113]

There was a broad consensus amongst the parliamentarians and others to whom we spoke that the capacity of the Executive to hold great sway in Parliament is not entirely new. Indeed, it seems widely accepted that the very structure of the parliamentary system makes this more likely. Most notably, the fact that there is no separation of Executive and Legislature in Britain has meant that at least since the era of mass, organised parties, the government has had an in-built majority in the House of Commons. In addition, the way democracy has developed in Britain has been in large part on the basis of the transfer of monarchical powers to a Prime Minister and Cabinet who are accountable to Parliament, rather than in the transfer of those powers to Parliament itself.

However, there was a strong majority view from across the political spectrum of parliamentarians that the Executive has become notably more dominant over Parliament in the last twenty-five years. There were a number of possible reasons given for this.

- The number of MPs who are members of the Government has grown. This 'payroll vote' now delivers to the Executive an increasing and guaranteed slice of parliamentary support. Currently almost one-third (140) of the Parliamentary Labour Party are members of the Government. The big expansion has been in Parliamentary Private Secretaries – the most junior members of the Government – who have grown from 29 in 1979, to 40 in 1989, to 50 today. This, in effect, provides the Prime Minister with a growing patronage power over the very body which is supposed to scrutinise and challenge government policy and decisions.

- The whips have enforced party discipline more forcefully and fully than they did in the past. Many of the longer-serving parliamentarians to whom the Inquiry spoke, mentioned the way the whips now operate with a greater intensity and expectation of loyalty than they had experienced previously.

- The personality and 'vision' of the party leaders has become more central to general election campaigns giving the impression that Prime Ministers possess a personal mandate

of a Presidential kind and that MPs in the majority party owe their positions to their leader's individual success in the national campaign.

- The legislative timetable in Parliament has become ever busier and is now drawn up less on the back of negotiated consensus in Parliament and more to ensure the success of the Government's programme and to dampen opportunities for opposition. In addition, far more debates are now effectively guillotined – even though this is no longer the term used – than was the case in the past.

- Prime Ministers have increasingly drawn a coterie of appointed advisers around themselves who not only owe their positions to their boss, but are also only answerable to him or her. There is a strongly held view amongst the public, shared by significant numbers of MPs, that all power lies in 10 Downing Street with few external influences. This means that parliamentarians feel increasingly closed out of policy debate. There is also a strong belief that the Prime Minister makes decisions and brings them to the Cabinet simply for endorsement. Indeed, there is much evidence in the public domain to support this view. The political conventions of British government – that the Prime Minister is the first amongst equals and that policy is the product of discussion and negotiation within Cabinet – are now seriously eroded. Alongside this, the power of the unaccountable political advisor, who can refuse to be directly questioned or scrutinised in Parliament, has inexorably risen. These developments all feed into the frustration that there is a highly centralised Executive over which the citizen has no influence.

- The convention of individual ministerial responsibility has

also been weakened in recent years. It is now very unusual for a minister to take full responsibility for mistakes made by his or her department. Thus, an important way by which the actions of government could be held to account by Parliament is less effective.

The crucial aim of the *Power* Commission's recommendations was therefore, to change Parliament in a way that would show citizens that MPs and Members of the Upper House could really scrutinise and open up the workings of government. To show that Parliament was not a meaningless rubber stamp of the Executive and that representative democracy is vibrant. Of course, this alone is not enough. For re-engagement to occur, citizens would have to be convinced not just that MPs can speak up for themselves but also that those MPs are speaking up on behalf of citizens, and that citizens have a clear way of telling MPs what it is they want. If those in positions of leadership are forced to re-engage democratically, if there is a re-balancing of power in the ways that we recommend, Cabinet government will also inevitably reassert itself and resist the slide towards a Presidential system.

**Recommendation 1: A Concordat should be drawn up between Executive and Parliament indicating where key powers lie and providing significant powers of scrutiny and initiation for Parliament.**

We believe that the process whereby governments accrue ever greater powers at the expense of Parliament is antithetical to citizen engagement and respect for formal democratic processes. We also believe that the power of Parliament to hold the Executive to account should not fluctuate according to the vagaries of factional or unrepresentative forces within Cabinet and Parliament, rather than on the basis of a genuine dialogue between government, parliament and citizens. This silencing of real debate, is deeply alienating to many people. The more that Parliament seems governed by an executive or by

factional and elite groups within a party, well beyond the influence of 'ordinary citizens', the less likely it is that those citizens will engage with Parliament even if the opportunity is presented.

We, therefore, recommend that action is now taken to draft an agreement between the Executive and Parliament to make it clear where key powers lie and to ensure that Parliament can carry out its role of ensuring accountability, no matter what its political make up.

When the fiasco arose over the sacking of Lord Irvine and the abolition of the role of Lord Chancellor, the senior judiciary was deeply concerned about the constitutional protection of the independence of the judiciary. Although the Lord Chancellor sits in the Cabinet he is also an office holder under the constitution, as Keeper of the Great Seal. This means he must provide another check on Executive power by protecting the judiciary. Replacing the Lord Chancellorship with yet another Secretary of State, who may have no eye to the long term, who may not be a lawyer and who functions purely politically, could have meant a travesty of our constitutional needs. After a struggle, a reformed Lord Chancellorship remains but to secure the independence of the judiciary the senior judges insisted on a Concordat being created, setting down the separation of powers and preventing the encroachment of the Executive. It seemed that in the twenty-first century, aspects of our constitutional arrangements could not rely on gentlemen's agreements. The relationship needed to be formally set out. The event took place without fanfare but it provided the Commission with the template for the reforms we advocate in other parts of the political firmament.

It is our view that while the principle of parliamentary convention is an important and often useful aspect of the British political system, the lack of clarity in the relationship between Executive and Parliament resulting from an unwritten convention has allowed accountability and scrutiny to weaken. It is therefore vital now, for the cause of citizen engagement, that the relationship is put through a process of challenge, agreement and clarification.

A Concordat would have advantages over a written constitution since it is by nature flexible and can be revisited by mutual agreement when necessary. It is thus less likely to become rigid and unresponsive. It would not require all aspects of British political life to be negotiated, agreed and drafted as it would concentrate solely on the relationship between Parliament and Executive. It would also not require quite such a significant break with the British tradition of an 'unwritten' constitution which many value. Of course, there are those who argue that the very benefit of a written constitution is its rigidity, breadth and discontinuity with traditional British political culture. We believe, however, that while these may be strengths in principle, they would in practice fatally weaken the chances of reform being implemented and strengthen the hand of those who oppose greater constitutional clarity and the deeper accountability and parliamentary power that a level of formality could bring. Thus, we feel that a Concordat of the type we propose is far more likely to be agreed and initiated than a written constitution.

The Concordat should be drafted by a body that has the support and respect of both the existing Executive and of Parliament but which is seen by the public as sufficiently independent of government to ensure that its recommendations are rigorous enough for a new balance of power to exist between the two institutions. We suggest a body that includes previous Leaders of the House of Lords and of the Commons, previous Speakers and Deputy Speakers of the Commons, senior backbenchers from across the parties chosen by Parliament, and senior members of the existing government including the Leaders of the Commons and Lords. It is also vital that a fair proportion of this body is made up of political and constitutional specialists with no strong party attachment to ensure that the process does not descend into party conflict and machinations. The report of this body would be debated and voted on by Parliament.

There are many areas of convention, procedure and law that this body may wish to debate and comment upon, and its remit should be

drawn as widely as possible. However, based on its own evidence from both public and expert testimony, it is clear to the *Power* Commission that the area of most urgent attention is that of the prerogative powers of the Executive and how the final say on most or all of the prerogative powers could be placed in the hands of Parliament.

The full list of prerogative powers – only fully and officially revealed in 2003 – indicates quite how significant is the power available to the Prime Minister and Executive without reference to Parliament.

Domestic Affairs:
The summoning, prorogation and dissolution of Parliament
Royal assent to bills
The appointment and regulation of the civil service
The commissioning of officers in the armed forces
Directing the disposition of the armed forces in the UK
Issue and withdrawal of passports
Prerogative of mercy (used to remedy errors in sentence calculation)
Granting honours
Creation of corporations by Charter
The appointment and dismissal of ministers

Foreign Affairs:
The making of treaties
Declaration of war
Deployment of armed forces overseas
Recognition of foreign states
Accreditation and reception of diplomats

It will be up to the body that drafts the Concordat to consider this list and decide how best to allow Parliamentary scrutiny, veto or initiation power over these responsibilities.

We note that there has been a growing debate in recent months on the issue of prerogative powers particularly in relation to the power relating to the declaration of war. For the first time, Parliament was given the opportunity to vote on the decision to go to war before the Iraq conflict began. It is now widely felt that such a vote should always precede any exercise of the power to declare war. However, many MPs believe that the outcome of the vote may have been different had Parliament known of the caveats expressed by the Attorney General in his written legal opinion to the Prime Minister. This opinion was released two years after the vote only when there had been partial leaks of its contents. The Attorney General had provided arguments justifying the war without a second UN resolution but he also expressed reservations and issued warnings about the risks of doing so. This corresponded with the views he apparently expressed to the Foreign Office lawyers.

The question arises as to the function of the Attorney General. If he is the legal advisor to the Government then what is clear is that there are occasions when Parliament should have its own independent legal advice when important matters of law arise if it is to genuinely exercise its role as an independent scrutiniser of the Executive. This should be a matter considered closely by those drawing up the Concordat.

There are two further recommendations from the *Power* Commission which it was felt are particularly necessary to revive public confidence in Parliament and which have a direct bearing on parts of the above list of prerogative powers.

**Recommendation 2: Select Committees should be given independence and enhanced powers including the power to scrutinise and veto key government appointments and to subpoena witnesses to appear and testify before them. This should include proper resourcing so that Committees can fulfil their remit effectively. The specialist committees in the Upper House should have the power to co-opt people from outside**

**the legislature who have singular expertise, such as specialist scientists, when considering complex areas of legislation or policy.**

One of the most important innovations in Parliament in recent years has been the establishment of many more Select Committees so that almost every area of government is now specifically covered by a parliamentary committee. This has greatly enhanced the capacity of MPs to scrutinise the decisions taken by individual departments. However, a number of long-standing demands to enhance the powers and independence of Select Committees, and hence to enhance the power of Parliament to scrutinise the Executive, have been consistently ignored or rejected by governments.

One way to achieve this enhancement is relatively straightforward but would greatly strengthen the Committees. This is to give Select Committees the power to subpoena attendance and require witnesses to testify at its sessions as in US Senate Committees. The notion that individuals who are very close to senior members of government and closely involved in the development of policy cannot be questioned by Parliament is a clear weakness in accountability, especially in a period when the Prime Minister's office has become ever more powerful. It is a measure of how dominant the Executive has become that even these relatively minor reforms are strenuously resisted or ignored.

A further change is more complex and requires further elaboration. This is the proposal that Select Committees should also have the power to scrutinise and veto the most senior appointments made by the Prime Minister as do Senate Committees in the USA.

The United States Senate has extensive powers to scrutinise and veto Presidential appointments. Officials whose appointments require the Senate's approval include: members of the Cabinet, heads of federal executive agencies, Justices of the Supreme Court, other federal judges, US attorneys, US marshals and top officials in the military service, the Foreign Service (including ambassadors), uniformed civilian services, and other independent agencies.

This provides the Senate with considerable power to hold the US Federal Government to account in a way that does not exist in any comparable sense in Britain. Informal 'confirmation hearings' have been held by Select Committees on occasion, but these have no statutory power.

However, it is also clear that the responsibilities of the Senate go too far. Approximately 4,000 civilian and 65,000 military nominations are submitted to the Senate during each two-year session of Congress. Most are routine appointments and do not receive a formal senate hearing, but this volume causes backlog and appointments take on average 99.5 days to be confirmed.[114]

The aspect of the process that would give most significant weight to Parliament without causing such problems would be for Select Committees to have the power to initiate their own formal scrutiny and approval process for the most senior appointments made by the Prime Minister or government ministers and which appear on a list approved annually by Parliament and drawn up by the House of Commons Liaison Committee. A similar proposal was contained in a Private Members Bill debated by the Scottish Parliament in 2001 and included a list of 75 quangos to be scrutinised by the Parliament.[115]

The area of responsibility held by the appointment would be scrutinised by the Select Committee that covers the same area of responsibility and, in line with the Scottish Private Members Bill mentioned above, appointment would be required to be approved or vetoed within 28 days, or else the appointment would be deemed to have been approved. In this way Select Committees would only scrutinise appointments about which it had concerns. It is likely that the great majority of appointments to bodies on the list would go ahead without any scrutiny process.

However, we feel that Parliament should have the power to scrutinise a wider range of appointments rather than just the heads of quangos. The powers should also include the right to confirm or veto

the most senior officials in the military, the diplomatic corps and uniformed civilian services since considerable policy and decision-making power and influence are invested in these posts which may have a deep impact on the everyday lives of British citizens.

Unlike the US Senate, however, it is felt that powers to scrutinise judicial appointments would compromise the independence of the judiciary and inject a risk of politicisation into their appointment. A judicial appointments commission with lay representation is in the process of being created which will provide public input into the appointment system. As for powers to scrutinise Cabinet appointments these are less necessary than in the US, given that Cabinet members in the UK are Members of Parliament or Lords and have usually been subject to ongoing scrutiny in junior government positions before they receive a Cabinet position. Reforming of the Lords will deal with the spectacle of unelected peers, appointed through Prime Ministerial patronage, being accelerated into key ministerial positions.

This power of scrutiny would not undermine the Commissioners for Public Appointments operating in the UK, whose role it is to ensure that the procedures for a large number of public appointments meet a code of practice. Indeed, the Commissioners may, on occasion, be asked to appear before a Select Committee as expert witnesses when conducting hearings on particular appointments.

These new powers for Parliament would greatly expand its capacity to scrutinise the Executive and hold it to account. A major source of the Prime Minister's power is patronage and the possibility that a Select Committee may investigate an appointment should, in itself, act as a major brake on the ill-conceived use of that power.

However, even with the limited powers they now have, members of Select Committees say they cannot do the job well because they are not properly resourced and do not have the time. This reform will therefore require addressing the issue of funding and the appropriate allocation of MPs' time.

We also feel it would be of great benefit to the legislative process for specialist committees in a reformed House of Lords to have the power to co-opt experts when they are considering complex or highly technical aspects of legislation. This would compensate for the loss of some specialist expertise in the Lords that would result from instituting a largely elected chamber.

Our next two recommendations are dealt with jointly.

**Recommendation 3: Limits should be placed on the power of the whips.**

**Recommendation 4: Parliament should have greater powers to initiate legislation, to launch public inquiries and to act on public petitions.**

Parliament is not an institution designed purely to scrutinise the will of the Executive even if this is what it has become. The Inquiry's evidence is clear that many citizens believe that the primary role of an MP is to act as the voice of their constituents in Parliament.

Many public submissions were scathing about the role that the whips play in ensuring that MPs toe party lines rather than speak for their constituents. The public are aware that promotions, places on committees, foreign 'fact-finding' trips, decent rooms and other benefits are controlled by party whips and the party leaderships to whom they are answerable. Indeed, we received reports of whips blocking not only promotion but any form of preferment, even indicating that there will be no support from the centre at election time – no ministerial visits and photo opportunities in the constituency. We were also told that carrots and sticks of flagship schools and hospitals in the area are also held over the heads of MPs.

*Politicians seem to have more allegiance and loyalty towards their party than to their constituents. Their party leaders, not the constituents, after all, determine the promotional prospects of politicians.*

*The problem is that, in reality, our constitution requires Parliamentary representation of The People, not political parties! Members of the public have been subjected to the unedifying sight of several decades of evidence of MPs, of all political hues, demonstrating self or Party interest rather than that of their constituents. Until that is resolved, and until MPs realise that they are supposed to represent all the people in their constituencies before party loyalty, then the so-called 'silent majority' of the public will have no reason to get involved in Party membership. We can see no benefit to us from such membership but feel that we are merely propping up a morally bankrupt system.*

*...many feel that neither main party is interested in anything except its own pursuit of power.*

*The two main parties function solely with the intention of forming government. They operate in a negative way and power is sometimes achieved by confounding the electorate into voting in the negative sense to select the lesser of two evils. Once in power minority views and consensus are dropped in favour of party dictatorship.*

*Maybe party membership etc would be more attractive if peoples' ideas were taken more seriously (listened to). It would be a long*

*process initially but if people were represented rather than 'governed' then they might take more interest. By actually implementing what people actually want instead of parties ignoring what people say. All parties bulldoze through what they want despite the fact that this may be the exact opposite of what people want. [....] It is ridiculous to expect ignored people not to ignore the parties that ignore them. Mutual ignorance I think it's called.*

*Being a politician should be simple; listen to people, be honest, don't try to alter the democracy and make things less democratic.*

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These views were replicated in our Citizens' Panel. There was strong consensus that parties do not represent the views of the wider public adequately. This is, in large part, attributed to the perception that parties in Parliament pursue their own political agendas and governmental ambitions divorced from the views and interests of constituents.

The evidence from experts and practitioners shows no great desire to turn MPs into delegates of their constituents, but the Burkean notion that MPs must trust more to their own opinions than to those of their constituents now needs some revising for an era of educated, self-confident and less deferential citizens. In truth, of course, Edmund Burke was unaware that an era would arise when MPs sacrificed their own opinion not to that of their constituents but to that of their party leaderships.

This also makes Parliament appear to be an increasingly pointless place with which to engage. Its lack of power to set the agenda or force the government's hand means that only those citizens without a full understanding of the British political system would choose a meeting with a backbench MP over one with a special adviser or senior civil servant.

More will be said later about how MPs can forge greater dialogue with their constituents and about how this may help restrain the power of the whips. Such a cultural shift is the main way to challenge the whips' domination in the Commons. However, we also believe that the power of whips can be curtailed to some extent by requiring all Select Committee Chairs to be elected on the floor of the House rather than be appointed by the Government subject to approval by the House. At the moment the whips acting at the behest of the Prime Minister have too much power to reward backbenchers for good behaviour or punish those of independent mind by choosing who gets to head a committee.

More fundamentally, however, we also propose that Parliament be given greater freedoms to initiate legislation, public inquiries and to act on public petitions. It is clear from our evidence that many citizens are deeply disappointed that Parliament no longer appears to be able to voice with any impact the views of large sections of society at crucial moments, or over crucial issues, that the Executive refuses adequately to address. This power of initiation would not only create an area of legislative function subject to much less control by the whips but would also allow Parliament to carry out its role as a voice for British citizens.

## Initiating Legislation

The initiating, drafting and timetabling legislation in Parliament is now a matter almost entirely for the Executive. Parliament's role is largely to amend and to accept or reject legislation – although full rejection of a piece of government legislation is rare indeed. This approach is only a problem when there is a public desire for legislation on an issue which, for one reason or another, the government of the day refuses to initiate. The only alternative routes by which legislation can be initiated independently of government, in Parliament, is through a Private Members Bill. Such Bills tend to succeed only if they have been given government backing, have been allowed time in the parliamentary timetable, and do not face hostile action by the whips. Other ways by which issues can be raised such as the Ten Minute Rule, Early Day Motions and the Westminster Hall Debates lend even less strength to the actual ability of an MP and hence of citizens to influence governments between elections.

The *Power* Commission feels this is a block on a major route by which citizens should be able to exercise influence over their government through their elected representatives. As has been pointed out elsewhere, it is only the prospect of such influence which will make Parliament a meaningful place with which citizens will engage.

We recommend that the Select Committee on House of Commons Modernisation undertake an inquiry to understand what aspects of parliamentary procedure limit legislative initiative on the part of MPs and how these might be overcome. Such a committee might, for example, explore how those repositories of specialist expertise, the Select Committees themselves, might better be able to bring forward legislation to Parliament that the government refuses to consider.

We strongly agree with the Select Committee on House of Commons Modernisation that governments must be free to pursue their legislative programme as efficiently as possible and would expect parliamentary initiative of legislation to act purely as a 'safety valve' to allow MPs to force action in areas of significant public concern, but on which the Executive refuses to act. We believe that such a 'safety valve' will show citizens that Parliament can indeed act as their voice at the most crucial times and thus renew popular respect, trust and engagement with Parliament.

## Initiating Public Inquiries

In recent years, the establishment of public inquiries has become a source of political dispute and of public disenchantment with the political process. The Hutton Inquiry into the death of David Kelly was, for example, widely perceived as a whitewash, and the Butler Inquiry into the use of security service intelligence in the lead up to the

war in Iraq is regarded as having made little difference to the conduct of government despite the criticisms that it made. The ongoing battle over whether a wider public inquiry should be called into all the issues surrounding the lead up to the war leaves Parliament looking particularly ineffective in that it can do no more than request that the government establishes an investigation into its own behaviour on an issue that is clearly of very great concern to a large section of the British public. Whether this concern is right or wrong is neither here nor there. Deciding on that issue must be the prime reason for establishing a major inquiry in the first place.

We feel that if Parliament were free to initiate its own independent inquiries into matters of concern, the two houses would start to fulfil citizens' hopes that they could act as the voice of citizens on issues of crucial importance that the Executive would rather ignore.

### Acting on Public Petitions

Linked to both these parliamentary powers – to initiate legislation and inquiries – would be the power to act on public petitions and the requirement to consider them. At present, petitions to Parliament are read on the floor of the House of Commons by an MP and are then forwarded to the relevant government department which may or may not issue a reply. Copies of the petition are also sent to the relevant Select Committee. There is no more rigorous procedure for dealing with petitions than this, which may explain why Parliament only receives approximately eighty petitions a year.

We note that the Scottish Parliament takes a somewhat more respectful approach to petitions. A Public Petitions Committee made up of MSPs considers all petitions presented to the Parliament and may invite petitioners to speak to the Committee. It then considers whether the petition should be taken any further by the Parliament or Executive and if so how best to take it forward. Options include having the Petitions Committee itself investigate the issue raised in the petition, requesting that another committee investigate, or rec-

ommending that the petition be debated by the whole Parliament. It is notable that the Scottish Parliament website includes a facility to allow citizens to establish their own on-line petition to attract signatories.

As a result, petitions undoubtedly play a role in the life of the Scottish Parliament and have led to new legislation and decisions by the Executive which may otherwise have gone ignored. Celebrated examples include legislation against the spreading of untreated waste, the fast tracking of compensation claims in the courts for asbestosis sufferers and the extension of planning controls to mobile phone masts.

However, it was clear from the evidence taken by the Commission at our witness session in Glasgow that the petitions process is not as well-known in Scotland as it should be, nor is the Petitions Committee as powerful as it could be.

We therefore recommend that the House of Commons establish procedures similar to those in operation in the Scottish Parliament. However, it is also recommended that considerable resources are made available to publicise and ensure the accessibility of any new petitions procedure and to provide support to those who may wish to gather their own petition. The recommendation on creating a local public resource in the form of 'Democracy Hubs' (see Chapter 7) would play an important role in this last respect. It is also recommended that a House of Commons Petitions Committee has the power to *require* that petitions be considered by government departments, Parliament or other parliamentary committees. The Petitions Committee and Select Committees would be free to use their new powers to initiate legislation and public inquiries if it is felt that the government has failed to take appropriate action in response to a petition of particular significance.

We feel that if the process of the submission, consideration and response to public petitions becomes a serious and well-known part of the culture of Parliament, this will not only help reassert the power

of MPs in the face of an over-mighty Executive but will do so in a way that gives citizens a reason to engage directly with one of the most important democratic institutions in Britain.

**Recommendation 5: 70 per cent of the members of the House of Lords should be elected by a 'responsive electoral system' – and not on a closed party list system – for three parliamentary terms. To ensure that this part of the legislature is not comprised of career politicians with no experience outside politics, candidates should be at least 40 years of age.**

The House of Lords plays a vital role in the legislative and scrutiny procedures of Parliament. In an era when citizens expect and require influence over decisions that affect their lives and expect their Parliament to speak on their behalf, it is obviously foolish to maintain this institution beyond the reach of the most basic democratic process of popular election. The public have a mixed response to the House of Lords, on the one hand admiring its efforts to ensure that the Government is fully scrutinised when the Commons is in supine mood, for example in relation to the rushed Terrorism legislation before the last election, on the other hand seeing it as a repository of the worst kind of political patronage and reward for party donations – the 'Tony's Cronies' allegation. While scandals about the purchase of peerages have existed for aeons, it is joked that they now go for half the price expected in the mid- nineteenth century. Every Labour donor who has given more than a million pounds has received a peerage or a knighthood. According to the statistician Suzanne Evans of Birkbeck College who examined the evidence of honours links to party donations: "Statistics cannot prove cause and effect but the results should arouse concern." (The Sunday Times, 15th January 2006)

In our deliberations on the Lords, we concluded that the best way a reformed chamber could rebuild engagement with the public was to ensure it was independent of the party tribalism and patronage that is such a feature of the Commons, and which alienates so many

citizens from their MPs. The key to this, it was felt, was to employ an electoral system that would allow as wide and diverse a set of candidates as possible and give members of the Lords a reasonable security of tenure to ensure independence from the predations of the whips.

These conclusions coincided very closely with the reform package drawn up by a cross-party group of senior MPs in February 2005 under the auspices of the Constitution Unit at University College, London[116] and explained to the Commission by two of those MPs – Robin Cook and Paul (now Lord) Tyler. We endorse this report and urge the Government to implement its recommendations.

At the heart of the report's proposals is the suggestion that 70 per cent of the members of the Lords be elected for three parliamentary terms (i.e. 12–15 years) by an electoral system which maximises voter choice and is truly responsive to voters' emerging demands and interests (more details of a responsive electoral system are provided in the next chapter). A third of the House would be elected at each general election and someone elected to the Lords would not then be able to stand again once their term is complete. The remaining members would be appointed by a Commission which would itself be appointed by Parliament on the recommendations of a Committee of both Houses. This unappointed element would allow for the inclusion of people such as Nobel Prize winners, former Prime Ministers or party leaders and others whose expertise would be an asset but who are unlikely to stand for election.

Our recommendation that those standing for the Upper House should be over 40 is to bring forward people who have had real experience of other walks of life. It would also mean that more women would be likely to come forward because most have had their children by the time they are 40. One of the criticisms of the Commons is that those now entering politics do so early, the common trajectory being student of politics, political researcher, policy advisor, Member of Parliament. The admired aspect of the House of Lords is that it often brings people with a wealth of experience in different fields into the

legislature. Creating an age threshold for one of the Houses will help maintain this breadth. People who have built up their own businesses may feel more secure about entering politics at this stage of their lives. People who have worked as nurses, doctors, teachers, bankers, hairdressers may feel ready to have a career change. We are conscious that this recommendation goes against the current tide which celebrates youth although in our view 40 is hardly old. Our Commissioner from the Trade Union movement was concerned that the recommendation would offend new regulations to remove age barriers. However our overall view is that an exception could be argued given the purposes for which the threshold is being sought.

The nature and timing of the elections to the Lords is also a vital element in these recommendations. Our endorsement of the view that Lords should be elected for 12-15 year terms would ensure that the chamber had a political make up that was distinct from the Commons and could, therefore, ensure genuine dialogue between one House in which the government has an in-built majority and one in which it does not. Longer terms also sustain greater independence of mind on the part of elected representatives as it reduces their reliance on party machines to secure their re-election. It should allow Lords to act from positions of principle rather than purely electoral calculation – something which many members of the public seem to desire of their representatives and which has arisen many times in our evidence.

The Constitution Unit report also recommends that Peers be elected in large, regional constituencies to ensure that the regions of the UK are represented and, again, to ensure a different make up to the House of Commons.

The *Power* Commission believes that the unfinished reform of the Lords is a unique opportunity for the British polity to begin the vital process of re-engagement between its democratic institutions and the people of Britain. Failure to take this opportunity, by, for example, turning the Lords into yet another source of patronage power and political manipulation for the government will send entirely the wrong message to Britain's citizens. We note that Lords reform is due to be brought before Parliament in summer 2006. The time frame within which our elected representatives can get this right is short indeed.

We see no need to make any significant change in the powers of the Lords. The present powers of delay are sufficient to make the government think again without interfering with the ultimate supremacy of the wholly elected house.

**Returning Authority to Local Government**

One of the strongest aspects of the evidence received by the Inquiry is the extent to which the dilution of the powers of local government has had a major impact on engagement with formal democracy (see box). The local represents the most obvious, easiest and, often, the most immediate focus for many people's engagement with political issues and democratic decision-making. The loss of power of local government, most notably to central government, but also to other bodies not directly accountable to local citizens, has inevitably damaged popular engagement. This is most clearly noticeable in the severe decline in grassroots membership and activity within political parties although other factors have also contributed to this problem.

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Evidence received by the Inquiry on the impact of weak local government on public engagement with politics

Indicative Submissions in response to public consultation regarding the impact of weak local government

*Local councils need to raise the bulk of their own spending rather than relying on a block grant and must have the freedom to spend it without interference from central government. Then the 'little person' can be heard locally even though they would be*

*ignored nationally.*

*Civic virtue is best cultivated in a local forum. If power were more devolved it would encourage people to become involved because they would see that they can effect change in the community they are part of. The power of larger organisations is thus easier to check because political involvement would stem from a sense of what is good for one's local community.*

*I believe decisions should be devolved to the lowest possible authority so that people feel involved in the decision-making process. The worst offenders are appointed authorities who are not accountable and yet are entirely run by tax payers' money.*

*Central government is too powerful. In my own community the local council is frequently overruled, and all the most important decisions affecting our lives are taken by unelected, unaccountable officials from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Who would bother to vote in local elections when our local politicians have no power?*

*The UK is notorious for having an over-centralised, secretive government with excessive patronage. To the greatest extent possible, power should reside at the lowest tier possible, sometimes even below the level of local government e.g. in the running of schools and hospitals. I think that it is self-evident that the closer people are to being able to influence their lives, the greater the chance of their participating to some extent in the political process. If this leads to satisfaction at a local level, perhaps it would be translated into greater involvement in national politics.*

Indicative quotes from experts and practitioners on the impact of weak local government

*People engage rationally. In other words if the organisation or level of government that's asking them to participate doesn't itself have enough power to deliver anything, there's no real point getting involved in a dialogue. So one key reason for the dropping away of support for what local government does is that local government does less and less ... and is seen as having less and less power. If decisions can't really be made at a local government level, there's only so much point entering into a dialogue with them, so that strikes me as the most important single factor. If local government is powerless, there's not much point talking to it.*
Sue Goss, Director of Public Services Development, Office of Public Management

*Local councillors have less influence and therefore you get less turnout. If you gave local government more power and it could actually have a real impact on the quality of local people's lives, we think you'd get higher turnouts. It's quite straightforward I think. You've also had quite a serious decline in the number of people who wish to stand for election to local authorities because councils are not seen as being able to make a difference.*
Ines Newman, Head of Policy, Local Government Information Unit

*I think the short answer is that this disengagement is an entirely rational reaction to loss and the loss is power within local government. Powers get sucked up to the centre but the centre is so distant from the everyday needs of voters that no-one really cares about it and the attraction or outcomes, both of which add up to a loss of power for voters. So this is a rational response by voters to a lack of power. ... Also there is a loss of powers to quangos and a*

*feeling that local government itself has lacked the ability to achieve change and therefore is not worthy of a voter's engagement.*
Jesse Norman, Policy adviser to George Osborne MP

*We've done research over a number of years about general perceptions of the council, attitudes to local democracy and so on and it's certainly the case for the big authorities that there is a feeling of remoteness, and lack of responsiveness. That's one of the drivers behind our devolution policy, getting closer to neighbourhoods, involving people more, trying to break down that feeling of a kind of bureaucratic institution that's nothing to do with people's lives.*
*So that problem is certainly there. I'm not sure that's the full story though in terms of low turnout for elections at the local level because you do have to look at the other factors like the hugely centralised system of government we've got in this country. There are two aspects to it, one is obviously the old complaint that the control of finances in local government is so centralised that why should people bother to vote because the local authority doesn't have the capacity to actually shift priorities.*
*The other one is really the pervasive influence of national party politics, so if you track local election results particularly in a big city like Birmingham, you do find this incredible match with the fortunes of the parties nationally. Particularly, the trend for the party in government to get less and less a share of the vote as they go on in their period in office at the local level.*
Tony Smith, Head of Policy, Birmingham City Council

*My main thesis as to why this has happened is because our local government is neither local nor government and it's on (too big) a scale, when you compare it to virtually all of the other Western democracies, and certainly elsewhere in Europe, the average size of our authorities covers a population of over 100,000, it's at least half that on average in most European countries. Our system has been*

*reorganised in a way which I think has taken it away from people. Secondly, and I think this probably explains the decrease in turnout more recently; it's no longer government. It's largely administration, putting together programmes that central government wants put together. There have been lots of reasons for why people don't vote in local elections but the main explanation, interestingly enough from the survey work that was done in the '70s and in the survey work that was done at the start of this new century, was that basically people thought local government was irrelevant so why would they vote? Because it's not actually addressing things that they think are important.*
Professor Gerry Stoker, Professor of Political Science, University of Manchester

*Everyone knows that we're absurdly centralised in this country. I do have a sense that we need to repair our local democratic system quite urgently and that on any comparative test, this is a huge deficit in our system, and that's going to require some political courage and the will to do that, and some real culture change. I do think that would be an area where you would get some real gains if people felt there actually was someone accountable, locally, for a range of things, and that in turn would have good pay-offs for civic engagement.*
Dr Tony Wright MP, Chair, Public Administration Select Committee

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These findings are upheld by independent research:

- A survey conducted in 2002 by the Local Government Information Unit and MORI found that "councils having more scope to make decisions about what happens locally" would make 66 per cent of people more likely to vote in local elections

and "Councils having more scope to set taxes and charges locally and decide how the money is spent" would do the same for 60 per cent.[117]

- A study carried out by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in 2002 concluded that the main reason Britain had the largest gap in turnout between local and general elections turnouts was because voters simply did not think the outcome of local elections mattered.[118]

However, a key feature of much of this evidence is the clear sense that while greater powers for local authorities is an important aspect of re-engagement, there is a deep distrust of local government. It is widely perceived as inefficient, wasteful and unresponsive to citizens' wishes. Therefore, we are clear that any process of returning powers to local councils from central government will only have credibility if it is accompanied firstly by a continuation of drives to improve the 'best value' of local authorities and by efforts to make councils more responsive and open through the implementation of the recommendations made in the next two chapters.

We believe that many of the tensions which are often claimed to exist between efficiency promotion and increased powers for local government can in large part be resolved by placing the power to assess and modify the performance of local authorities in the hands of local people themselves rather than in the hands of government departments or centrally appointed inspectors. Proposals for such a change in approach are made in Chapter 10, which recommends a much more vigorous and professional culture of public engagement in local government

It is not within the remit of the *Power* Inquiry to discuss the 'best value' of local public services themselves. However, we do reject the simplistic argument that better engagement will automatically follow from better public services. The Inquiry's evidence does not up-

hold the view that dissatisfaction with public services is a cause of political disengagement. In addition, we feel it is wrong to suggest that greater choice for users of public services equates to, or can replace, democratic engagement. We have different views individually on the rights or wrongs of greater user choice but we agree that individual decisions made on behalf of oneself and one's family cannot substitute for mass deliberation in the public realm – which is an absolutely crucial process in a democratic and open society. Indeed, such deliberation often arises from the need to develop a policy response to the aggregated consequences of individual choices. It cannot be assumed that a do what works' policy for local government and public services will necessarily guarantee democracy and engagement.

As such we make the following recommendation.

**Recommendation 6: There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers from central to local government.**

We reject the notion that greater powers and independence for local authorities must be earned or must be very gradually devolved over a long period of time. Leaving aside the fact that the freedom to determine democratically the nature of one's own locality is deemed by some a civil right, the need for decentralisation to be enacted in order to address the urgent problem of disengagement cannot be doubted by any who have considered *Power's* evidence. If this process is undertaken gradually and at the behest of central government, it will not be implemented adequately enough to halt disengagement from formal democracy.

**Recommendation 7: A Concordat between central and local government setting out their respective powers.**

We recommend that alongside the Concordat drawn up between the Executive and Parliament, a similar Concordat is established between central and local government to confirm where key powers lie

and to enshrine the process of decentralisation outlined above. This Concordat could follow similar lines to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which the UK Government ratified in 1998 but which seems to be growing mould on a shelf in Whitehall and to have had limited impact on policy.

The Charter requires all signatories to provide local government with the necessary legal protection and financial resources to "regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population". It also asserts that "public responsibilities shall generally be exercised, in preference, by those authorities which are closest to the citizen".

The Charter is an admirably brief and direct statement of principles already ratified by the Government and as such would form a suitable framework for the negotiations to draw up a Concordat between central and local government. The negotiations could be led by individuals appointed by the national government including relevant ministers, and individuals elected by local councillors alongside senior members of the Local Government Association.

It is expected that the agreement of such a Concordat would be followed by a series of Parliamentary Acts to ensure that its principles are turned into practical effects 'on the ground' by ensuring that democratically elected local authorities maintain or regain significant powers over areas such as education and planning.

**Recommendation 8: Local Government to have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances**

We would also stress that the success of any process of decentralisation enshrined in a Concordat is reliant on central and local government agreeing a far more satisfactory financial arrangement than currently exists. It is vital for the independence of local councils that they raise the great majority of their income locally without reference to central government departments. The surreptitious erosion of further local authority powers through the 'ring fencing' and 'pass-

porting' of funding is deeply undemocratic in its implementation and in its goals, and further removes powers from elected representatives to central government civil servants. While such erosion continues all current government efforts to increase local autonomy and responsibility, through 'neighbourhood governance' for example, will have limited impact.

We note that the Government has undertaken a review of local taxation but that this has yet to report. We feel that as with the wider process of decentralisation, this issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

We believe that the risk of regional inequalities in funding resulting from decentralisation and locally raised finance can easily be addressed by the requirement that a percentage contribution is made by local authorities to a central pot which is then redistributed according to need. Indeed, the Charter of Local Self-Government includes provision for such a process.

Accountability and Transparency for Quangos and Business

Local government has lost power not just to central government but also to quangos and committees of unelected officials over the last three decades. In addition, business, for good or ill, is playing an ever greater role in the delivery of public services, often as a result of policy implemented by those same quangos. A brief look at some key facts makes clear how influential these bodies have become in recent years.

- British government is populated by a vast number of quangos. The House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee reported, in 2000, the existence of 297 executive quangos and 536 advisory quangos in central and devolved government; 5,338 local quangos of all kinds; and 2,295 local partnerships which bring together local authorities, the police and other public agencies, voluntary bodies and private enterprises in a new level of local governance.[119]

- In 2003/04, executive quangos alone spent £32 billion of public money – one fifth of all money spent by public bodies.[120]

- The Government has made attempts in recent years to reduce the numbers of quangos and to improve their accountability, but many observers remain deeply concerned about their role, particularly given that the Government's rationalisation of quangos has led to the vesting of very great power in single bodies which once may have been divided across a number of organisations. The Public Administration Select Committee raised concern in 2003 about the way some quangos remain outside of official scrutiny by not being officially listed as "Non-Departmental Public Bodies" (the government term for quangos). It made particular mention of the way two quangos with close links to business – Partnerships UK and British Trade International – seemed beyond scrutiny. Bodies as diverse as the Public Administration Select Committee, the Cabinet Office and Democratic Audit have all commented on the fact that many quangos are closed bodies, sometimes with limited ministerial oversight, let alone public scrutiny, and which are often dominated by vested interests.

Another major unelected influence on government which was raised many times in the submissions and evidence seen by *Power* was that of business. Some indicative quotes are reproduced in the box.

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Indicative quotes from submissions to the public consultation with regards to the power of business over government

*The influence of big companies is endemic whether you look at local or national government as they operate on both levels; they have the time and the money to do so whereas most individuals do not, and even if they do they are individuals and when trying to stand up to a corporation they are usually one voice against many and so the corporations (with their studies, reports and gangs of lobbyists) win – this is democracy – the will of the 'majority'! Devolving power won't change a thing in this regard, and neither will greater powers for elected representatives – they have the power already, what they need is independence from malign influence.*

*The fact that most governments across the world acquiesce in the so called 'globalisation' process ignores the fact that people are better informed today and fully understand that this process is nothing more or less than a mechanism for spreading 'red in tooth and claw' capitalism. Governments seem to be on the side of big business and in fact come across as willing partners in this process. There must be efforts made to control this process which has an enormous affect on the daily lives of the people.*

*It is not just perception that corporate lobbying influences government policy – it is actuality. Until the actuality changes, the perception will not.*

*Local authorities do need to have more power and government policy should not be based on Big Business or Rupert Murdoch; if more decentralisation occurs, small business is empowered and this would have a positive effect.*

*Many people are concerned with issues, and put their concerns into action within non-governmental bodies such as NGOs and pressure groups. As big business is so powerful now, it is arguable whether traditional government can control and contain it, and pressure*

*groups sometimes have greater effect by influencing consumer behaviour.*

*One issue that needs to be addressed is the extraordinary power afforded to corporations and their lobbying groups, often disguised as public-interest NGOs. People genuinely do feel that companies (represented legally as individuals under corporate law) have far more say, particularly over environmental concerns, than the public. People do need to be more involved locally, but in a way that does not clog up the system creating thousands of layers. We have enough admin in our lives!*

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The public submissions to the Inquiry are upheld by independent research. 79 per cent of respondents to the State of the Nation poll in 2004 stated that they felt large corporations had influence over government policies, while only 34 per cent felt they ought to enjoy such influence.[121]

One consequence of this is that lines of accountability and responsibility between these unelected sources of power and influence, and elected bodies, whether they are local authorities or central government, are far from clear. We note, for example, that the involvement of business in service delivery means that many elements of the negotiations leading to key decisions taken by both elected and unelected authorities are often kept hidden on the grounds that they are commercially sensitive information. In recent debates about the cost of ID cards, ministers avoided questions on the basis that bids were still being received and disclosure of such information was impossible. Leaving aside the issue of principle on whether ID cards are a good thing, Parliament is surely entitled to weigh any benefit against potential cost. One of the concerns over many of the big centralised database projects is that they are driven by companies with huge

vested interests in securing the tender.

The growth of unelected bodies is a serious issue in contemporary democracies. We feel that the following recommendation would be a necessary first step in opening-up the world of unelected power and influence, particularly of quangos, to scrutiny and accountability.

**Recommendation 9: Government should commission an independent mapping of quangos and other public bodies to clarify and renew lines of accountability between elected and unelected authority.**

In his research on quangos, Matthew Flinders described the bureaucratic chaos around such bodies and pointed out that Parliament was unable to hold delegated organisations to account because of a basic lack of information on what bodies actually exist. Official reports, parliamentary inquiries and academic studies have largely failed to construct a definitive list.[122]

According to the journalist David Walker, no one ever asks why a particular function is being carried out by a quango rather than a government department. He cites the Environmental Agency:

*If the EA is carrying out agreed public policies then why does it need to be at arm's length from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs? If it is meant to be independent, why is it so close, financially and managerially to Whitehall? And what is the point of worrying who gets appointed to the board of a public body when there is no follow-up procedure in place to see whether that board performs well.*[123]

Those concerns could be raised in relation to many quangos.

We recommend that the Government commission a major mapping exercise to understand exactly where power and responsibility lies in the provision of public services both at national and local level.

This exercise should place an emphasis on identifying failures in lines of accountability between various organisations and recommending how those organisations can be made genuinely accountable to elected representatives. This project should be undertaken by a body that is regarded as genuinely independent of government by the wider public.

We note that many quangos have wide responsibility for policy and spending in public services on which the most marginalised and poorest often have the heaviest reliance. As pointed out in Part One, these groups are the most alienated from democratic engagement and the least likely to participate in any form of political activity. It should be a source of immediate concern that the bodies which most deeply affect the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable are among the least understood and accessible. Citizens, naturally, want the greatest influence over the areas that most immediately concern them. If the areas that most immediately concern you are enormously pressing and yet are controlled by bodies impervious to scrutiny let alone influence, then it is hardly surprising that alienation, despair and disengagement result.

Therefore, we also recommend that citizens and users of particular services are given greater direct power over the unelected officials delivering them through the use of new engagement techniques and the establishment of initiative powers for citizens. This is dealt with in detail in Chapter 8.

It is felt that such participatory power is preferable to the introduction of direct election for the Chief Executives or Boards of public bodies. The evidence received by the Inquiry is that citizens want the power to exercise political control over most public bodies when they feel it is necessary, and to do so in a focussed way on key policies that concern them. No evidence has been presented to us that there is a desire for citizens to take part in an increasing number of elections.

**Recommendation 10: Ministerial meetings with representatives of business including lobbyists to be logged and listed on a monthly basis.**

As detailed above, *Power's* own research and evidence displays that many people feel business has too great an influence over government at the expense of the 'ordinary' citizen. It is clear from the above considerations that developments in recent years will have done nothing to allay these fears. The notion that financial and economic muscle can win influence is a further block to engagement with formal democracy, leaving, as it does, the ordinary citizen feeling too insignificant to make a difference.

We therefore recommend that much greater formality and transparency is introduced into meetings held between ministers and business. We recommend that ministers' meetings be formally logged and listed on a monthly basis in an easily accessible format and without the requirement of a formal request under the Freedom of Information Act. MPs or members of the public should then be given a speedy response when requesting documents relating to any particular meeting or meetings under the Act. The exemptions to ensure that commercially sensitive information remains secret are sufficient to maintain confidentiality where necessary under this new regime.

We note with concern that recent requests to the Lord Chancellor to have Ministers' diaries released under the Freedom of Information Act have not produced any documentation, despite those requests being made many months ago. This is a delay which will only confirm suspicions, rightly or wrongly, that certain citizens, perhaps for reasons purely of wealth and status, have far greater access to power than others.

There is also something deeply unsavoury about former ministers of health, education, prisons, or policing becoming involved soon after office with companies seeking to secure government contracts concerning those very departments. The public perception that self interest moves and shakes those in politics is fed by the accept-

ance of such appointments and does a disservice to the vast majority whose integrity is unimpeachable. We therefore feel there has to be a strengthening of the rules about jobs after office.

Within two years of leaving office all Cabinet ministers must ask the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments whether they should take a particular position in the private sector. Other ministers have no such strictures applied. However, the Committee can only advise politicians as to whether they should wait or decline the offer. The committee is toothless and has no power to bar ministers for taking jobs with inappropriate links to their previous employment. Serious thought should be given to greatly strengthening the Advisory Committee.

With the expansion of privatisation, friends at court are invaluable. To have ex-Ministers from the Commons or the Lords on your board or acting as a consultant is a great boon to companies not only as the provider of know-how and connections but even as a presence in meeting with ministers over privatisations, so that ex-ministers are ostensibly lobbying former colleagues on behalf of new friends. Even simply holding a peerage opens opportunities for the unlikeliest of people being invited into commercial enterprises on the basis that they provide access.

Of course, companies pursue these politicians precisely because they want access to government while politicians delude themselves that they are being sought for their expertise. This happened not only in this Government but in the last. We do not want to prevent ministers from obtaining gainful employment with a company where there is no inappropriate link to their previous responsibilities but we would want clear guidance given to such ministers that they are barred from advocacy or other interventions to government on behalf of their new employers for a period of two to four years.

We feel that this greater transparency – in addition to the other powers of scrutiny and initiation recommended for elected representatives and the public (see below) – will begin to allow much greater

light into the half-world of Executive and quango decision-making. We fear that without such transparency, matters of significant public interest are simply disappearing into a realm of governance dominated by a new technocracy and a new political elite whose fundamental assumptions are that contestability, marketisation and consumer choice are the ultimate goals for any public service. Whether these assumptions are right or not, they cannot ever be removed from the realm of open and transparent public debate since they affect so many lives and are still a matter of contention for many citizens. In particular, they may well be of primary concern to those on low incomes who may be most affected by radical reform of public services and who are currently much less likely to participate in politics than those on higher incomes.

In addition, such assumptions raise very fundamental questions about democracy. We do not believe that the consumer and the citizen are one and the same, as the new market-driven technocracy seems to assume. Consumers act as individuals, making decisions largely on how an issue will affect themselves and their families. Citizenship implies membership of a collective where decisions are taken not just in the interest of the individual but for the collective as a whole or for a significant part of the collective. It is often because the acts of many individual consumers have a wider, sometimes unexpected, impact on many other individuals, that bodies and processes are required to take and enforce decisions as a collective.

This issue has become particularly important in recent years with increasing popular concern about the impact that powerful businesses, in close-to-monopolistic situations, can have on the environmental, economic and social life of communities. Yet it often seems to people in those communities that this power is beyond challenge. This is not to say that the impact of such businesses is automatically to be condemned, but their actions should surely be the subject of open debate, scrutiny and, if necessary, control – a process which the market alone does not provide.

We are concerned, therefore, that if transparency is not introduced into the world of quangos and business a paternalistic marketisation will become institutionalised. This will become just as stifling and undemocratic, and just as destined to reach a crisis of public confidence, as the paternalist welfarism that dominated post-war Britain.

Recommendations dealt with later in this report should also act as important 'partners' to those detailed here when it comes to creating a richer debate about how to hold the market to account. Most notably, the changes to the electoral system proposed in Chapter 7 are designed to introduce a more diverse set of opinions and perspectives into Parliament and to allow new parties and candidates to emerge. This should act as a counterweight to the current consensus that exists on liberal market policies amongst the three main parties, which denies a voice to a large section of the population who have serious qualms about aspects of this policy approach.

In addition, offering the freedom to the public to initiate their own legislation, public inquiries and hearings on public bodies (see Chapter 8) will offer a further chance for those who disagree with the new consensus to place their views before Parliament and, if necessary, the wider public at both a local and a national level.

## National and Supranational Powers

The final sphere towards which power has flowed at the expense of elected representatives in recent years is the supranational. It is now widely accepted that the global has become a significant new realm of governmental activity. Few national problems remain which are not addressed, at some stage, by a supranational body or by a series of multilateral negotiations or treaties. In addition, the increasing speed, intensity and number of global interactions – in economic, social and cultural spheres – means that no government can sensibly avoid immersing itself in the world of multilateral politics if it is to meet the demands of its citizens. As a result, a considerable political infrastructure has arisen and expanded to serve this new world.

In 1909 there were 37 multilateral bodies which established more or less permanent co-operation between governments, and 176 international non-governmental organisations. In 1996, there were nearly 260 multilateral bodies and nearly 5,500 international non-governmental organisations. This growth in international working has been matched by an equally impressive expansion in the number of international treaties governing all manner of human interaction. Some of the these bodies and treaties have become absolutely central features of everyday political life in Britain – the European Union, the United Nations, the G8, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation, to name just five. This has meant, for example, that while there used to be two or three inter-governmental conferences each year, there are now over 4,000.[124] As *Global Transformations*, the leading text book on globalisation states:

> *National government is increasingly locked into an array of global, regional and multi-layered systems of governance – and can barely monitor it all, let alone stay in command.*[125]

We offer no view on the fundamental forces behind these developments or whether they are being handled effectively by the UK Government. However, on the issue of democratic engagement, evidence submitted to the Power Commission suggests that the relationship between national government and supranational bodies often gives citizens a sense that they have little influence or ownership of government decisions or policy which is perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be set by the World Trade Organisation, the European Union and a variety of other bodies (see box).

### Indicative submissions in response to public consultation

*I think that many people do think that real political power is in the hands of Transnational Corporations (TNCs), the American Government or the EU. Although the government has power, it is only able to exercise it within the parameters that these powerful international bodies allow. If the elected officials within the country had more autonomy then perhaps people would feel that voting influenced governance more.*

*International organisations, such as the UN or NATO, are very remote from ordinary people and it is difficult to see how they could be more accountable, except to national parliaments.*

*People will not vote if they feel their vote won't count. For many years turnout in local elections has been poor, because voters realise councillors have little power to affect local decisions. Now the same thing applies to national Parliament. MPs have given so much power to the corrupt Brussels octopus that they no longer can set the laws of the land. 60-70 per cent of laws now come from the Brussels oligarchy. Subconsciously, voters realise MPs have lost control, although Ministers NEVER admit this.*

### Expert and practitioner comments:

*What's changed in the period of the last thirty years, particularly through entry to the European Union, is the diffusion of accountability and responsibility. And that can be a real problem, because many politicians now play the game whereby they say well we are defending your interests in public but then they go to Brussels and because the process isn't transparent they bargain and compromise and have a different set of outcomes.*

*So I think the loss of accountability which we've had does create difficulties in holding politicians to account.*

*If we think back to the 1950s and how democracy was thought to work in Britain, you basically had a party which put forward a manifesto, politicians stood on that in elections, they argued collectively for the policies and, if in power, because the winning party had the majority in parliament, there was little which could stop them implementing these policies and being held to account if they failed. There weren't international institutions that would bind their hands in the same way. Parliamentary sovereignty really was both nominal and real. Nowadays that's just not the situation.*
Professor Pippa Norris, McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics, Harvard University

*Even for someone who is well-disposed towards the European Union, there is no question that there are huge democratic issues associated with it and, whatever we might say, we know that the idea of democratic Europe is not really one that we can sustain. There is no organic connection between people who get elected to sit in the European Parliament and their electorates. They do their best, but no one can really pretend that people chosen on a regional party list system sitting in some institution which no-one understands, is doing much for our democratic process.*
Dr Tony Wright MP, Chair,
Public Administration Select Committee

*I think Westminster has been singularly ineffective in its handling of European issues, European legislation. That's not particularly Europe's fault. It is for Westminster to develop the right procedure and even to show sufficient interest in the content of European legislation.*

*But there's an added problem of course, particularly in Europe and other areas as well, in that ministers go along to the Council of Ministers and decide things in secret and then come back and nobody can quite see what the British minister's role has been. Parliament has in some cases developed techniques to deal with this by, for example, having a debate about the British standpoint before the meeting of the Fisheries Council. There's a lot more that could be done.*

*When you are negotiating with other countries it's rather a nuisance to have to satisfy Parliament at the same time but it needs to happen. Other countries do it differently. The Danes for example always have members of parliament at the United Nations, and they have members of parliament alongside negotiating ministers in Europe as well. A number of other countries make pretty sure their parliament is involved in this process and ministers don't become detached from it when they go to negotiate.*

Alan Beith MP

*Parliament should have the right to amend the views of the Government on European issues. It's a very simple solution but it would give real power back to the Chamber. You should be able to put down an amendment to the existing government resolutions on European institutions or European legislation and directives, and it should be open to a vote in the main Chamber. That would totally, totally revolutionise what the House of Commons does about European legislation.*

Gwyneth Dunwoody MP, Chair, Transport Select Committee

*We haven't quite found a way yet to devise institutions which provide the checks and balances which we want to have for decisions beyond the nation state.*

*... I think the House of Lords European Committees which are the envy of the other member States of the European Union are as good*

*an institution as you're likely to get. These committees do have the time to scrutinise European legislation. So, it can be done if one thinks of an appropriate system. Denmark is another example of a Parliament which has quite a good system of checks and balances of European decisions. In the Danish Parliament Ministers are virtually given a mandate before they go into a Council meeting and that means they cannot move in the Council.*

*... But it doesn't solve all problems because it's not just Europe that is the problem. It's wider international decisions, financial markets and their regulation or, indeed, something like the WTO which is quite rightly in the news at the moment. Where are the checks and balances? What are these institutions? What do these decisions mean? How come Mr. Blair can go around and say Africa needs more money? Who decided that?*

Lord Dahrendorf, Professor,
Social Science Research Centre, Berlin

*The political parties at national level have conspired to prevent the European elections being about European choices. And that has meant people have seen less and less connection between the act of voting at the European level and a strategic outcome in terms of policy choice and even less in terms of executive appointment. The answer to your question of how do you make the European polity a reality will be whether the political forces will allow their parties at European level the space to develop their own alternatives. Governments are very clever at playing different bits of the democratic control system against each other, the better to avoid effective scrutiny. There is absolutely laughable scrutiny of decision-making in this country, and in others as well. And they don't allow the European Parliament to have full and effective scrutiny.*

John Palmer, Political Director, European Policy Centre

We accept that a global debate about the democratisation of supranational bodies is ongoing and involves many complex legal, practical and political considerations. These matters are well beyond the remit of the Commission and certainly not in the gift of the British Government or British people alone. However, we do feel that the introduction of greater transparency into the relationship between the British Government's dealings with supranational bodies and the expansion of the powers of Parliament to consider directives from supranational bodies would give a greater measure of influence over these bodies and reassure citizens that their views were part of the complex and often opaque multilateral negotiations in which the Government is engaged.

**Recommendation 11: A new overarching Select Committee should be established to scrutinise the Executive's activities in supranational bodies and multilateral negotiations, particularly in relation to the European Union, and to ensure these activities are held to account and conducted in the best interests of the British People.**

It is recommended therefore that an overarching House of Commons Select Committee be established to scrutinise the decisions taken by supranational bodies, to monitor the British Government's role in these decisions and, most importantly, to recommend whether a decision or policy should be debated by the House. The Committee would draw its members from those select committees already touching on these areas in a more fragmented fashion – the European Scrutiny Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, the International Development Committee and the Trade and Industry Committee. The combined expertise of such a committee with its precise focus would greatly enhance the capacity of the Commons to scrutinise the Executive's dealings with global bodies.

We note that the Austrian, Danish, Finnish and Swedish Parliaments all provide the power to their members to scrutinise and even mandate executive objectives and positions *before* their respective governments enter into multilateral negotiations specifically in relation to the European Union. The Danish Parliament's powers are particularly strong in this regard. We feel that similar measures would greatly enhance the accountability of this sphere of governmental activity and bolster citizen confidence in the area. We recommend, therefore, that any new Select Committee established to scrutinise multilateral activities, and the European Scrutiny Committee itself, explores this approach and understands the different ways it is applied in each country and then brings detailed recommendations to Parliament.

We also note that one particular proposal of the European Constitution would be worth revisiting, despite that constitution's demise, to provide the British and other Parliaments with greater scrutiny power over the decisions taken by their executives. This proposal would require the European Commission to revise any of its draft proposals if one-third of the Union's national parliaments objected to a measure on grounds that it went against the principle of subsidiarity. The same would apply to proposals which were judged to act against freedom, security or justice, but in this case the threshold is only one-quarter of national parliaments. The great benefit of this idea is that it would offer a scrutiny power to the British Parliament over EU proposals which the Executive has never been inclined to offer. This, in itself, could introduce considerably greater transparency to the relationship between the Executive and the EU than currently exists.

By way of conclusion, it should be mentioned that there has been considerable discussion in recent months and years about the need for Parliament to make itself a more accessible place for visitors, to communicate its work more effectively to the public and to undertake significant education programmes to explain the role of Parliament and how it operates. Such an approach would undoubtedly go some way towards responding to the *Power* Inquiry's finding that many people would welcome greater knowledge and information

about the political system and that the lack of this is indeed a cause of disengagement.

However, as Chapter 3 displayed, *Power* has found a number of other causes of disengagement from formal democracy which are almost certainly far more significant than the issue of education and information. A Parliament which puts efforts into improving its communication and education strategies but does nothing to address the fact that citizens feel they have no effective influence over its deliberations and decisions is clearly only addressing a small part of a much wider and deeper problem.

We are aware from our evidence that the majority of MPs hold Parliament in deep regard, but it is a sad fact that *Power's* own and other research shows they are practically unique in this respect. It is striking, for example, that the recommendations made in this chapter will almost certainly be regarded as radical, if not bordering on the absurd, by many MPs and ministers. But, as *Power's* research has discovered, these recommendations are regarded by most 'ordinary citizens' as almost unquestionably necessary reforms. This is a dangerous dichotomy which cannot be ignored for much longer.

The recommendations made here are designed to create a more open Parliament which can show British citizens that it is a place of real influence over government and a place that can act as the 'voice of citizens' when governments cease to take full account of their views. In doing this, Parliament, may once again become a meaningful place with which to engage.

However, as was stressed at the start of this chapter, these changes alone will not be enough. A Parliament with real power to scrutinise and challenge the Executive, and a local government with real freedom to act on its local citizens' wishes will still be a Parliament and local government dominated by parties that are widely disliked. They will also remain dominated by a culture which does not value serious engagement with citizens between elections. It is these areas to which this report now turns.
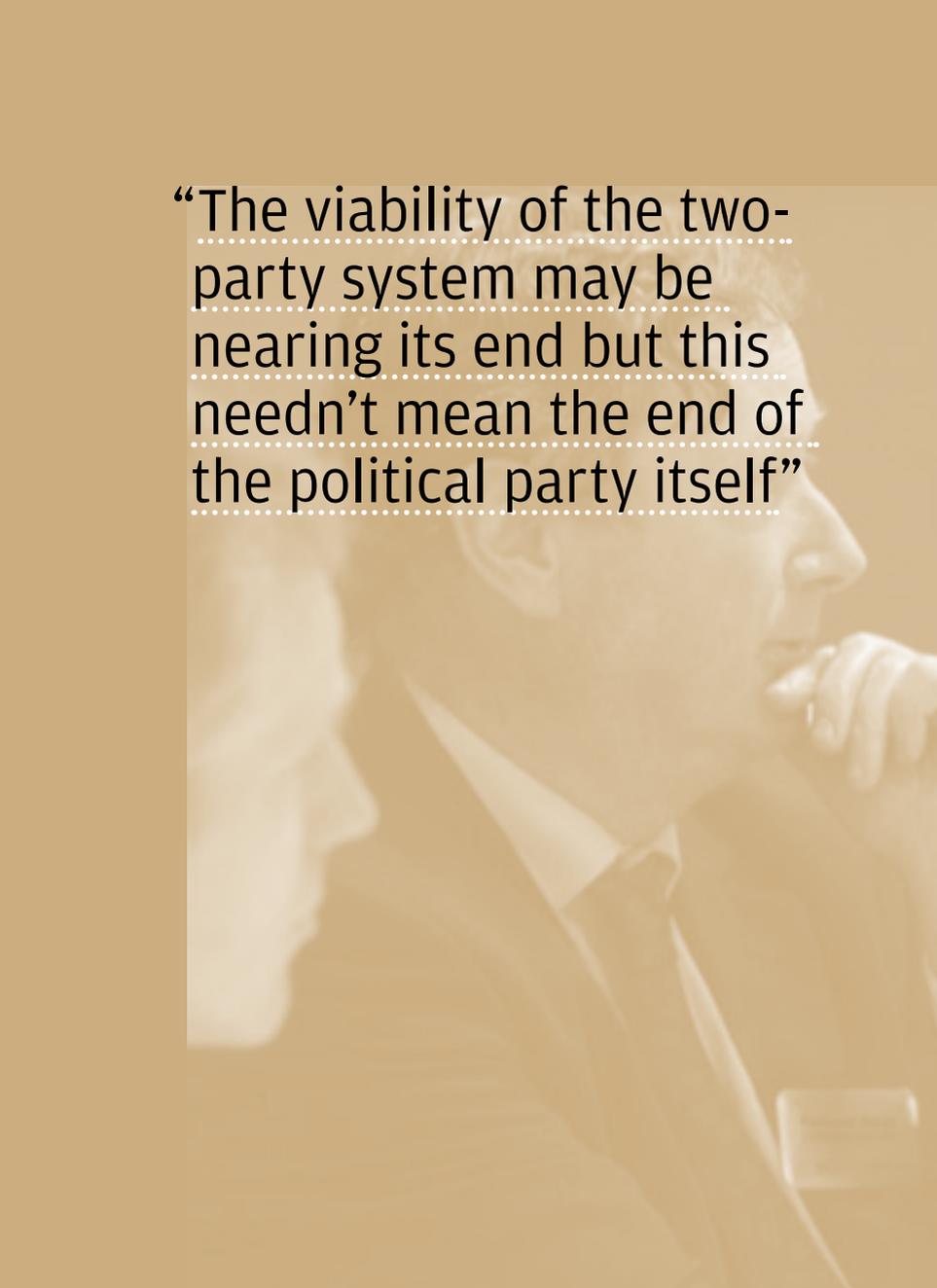
> **"The viability of the two-party system may be nearing its end but this needn't mean the end of the political party itself"**

# Chapter 6–
# Real Parties,
# True Elections

Few aspects of the political system investigated by *Power* received more hostile comment than the main political parties. The expert and practitioner evidence, the public submissions, and all of the research projects reveal a widespread sense that, at best, the main parties are failing in the basic function of connecting governed and governors, and, at worst, are serious obstacles to democratic engagement.

As Chapter 5 showed, the public submissions and research projects carried out by *Power* with members of the public display two significant negative perceptions and experiences of political parties.

- The main parties are very widely regarded as too similar in their core policies – particularly on economic matters – and are driven solely by the search for centre-ground votes rather than by basic principles.

- Many people find it difficult to express support for very broad programmes of policies, feeling that, while they may support some policies, they do not necessarily support them all.

In addition to these major problems we can also add the findings of *Power's* research project with local political and community activists.

This found that those active in single-issue campaigns, community groups and even the parties themselves regarded the lack of influence and autonomy granted to local parties and party members as a very unattractive feature of the main parties. There was also a strong sense that local parties lack relevance and do not offer serious local activists a meaningful way to effect change. It should be stressed that we were surprised at quite how negative were the attitudes of local campaign and community activists towards local parties, and at how low morale was amongst local party activists. Extracts from *Power's* evidence expressing these views were presented in Chapter 5.

Inevitably, such hostility towards the main parties will feed alienation from the election process. The attraction of voting is bound to be severely reduced if the main parties vying for the vote are widely regarded as profoundly unappealing. This was a view upheld by *Power's* survey of those who did not vote in the 2005 General Election. The survey found that approximately 45 per cent of those who do not vote, do so because they do not like the main parties on offer.

This is a situation compounded by the electoral system. As Chapter 3 revealed, by far the most common reason cited for low turnout within submissions received from the public was the fact that so many votes have no chance of having an impact on the final outcome. Again, this is upheld by the non-voters survey which found that 49 per cent said they were more likely to vote if their preferred party had a 'real chance to win power'. Thus not only are the main parties unappealing to many voters but the electoral system ensures that casting a vote for a preferred alternative is widely seen as a waste of energy. The simple calculation made by millions of citizens is that the choice at election time is to vote for a party one dislikes or vote for a party that stands no chance of parliamentary representation, let alone a place in government. With such options it is not surprising that many make the rational decision to do something more meaningful with their Thursday.

Clearly, this alienation from the main political parties and the elections they dominate is a relatively new feature, like much of the disengagement explored by *Power*. We believe it is important to understand why the alienation has emerged now if effective recommendations are to be developed. As argued in Part One, we are most convinced by arguments which assert that the alienation is a function of the shifting identities, values and lifestyles of citizens in the post-industrial era. As we argued earlier in this report, the dichotomy represented by the two main parties reflects an industrial era division between the working class and managerial and professional classes which grew when manufacturing was at the heart of the British economy and when the public sector was rapidly expanding as a response to the problems and tensions generated by that division. In addition, those two parties were upheld in that era by a wide allegiance to the ideologies of democratic socialism on the one hand and to an anti-socialist conservatism which was more favourable to the free market on the other. The main parties thus clearly played a highly significant role in representing and shaping the interests and outlooks of vast swathes of the country's citizens. As a result, party allegiance was strong, membership was high and activism was widespread and energetic during the highpoint of the industrial era in the first sixty years of the twentieth century.

Whatever the exact trajectory of the decline of the industrial era and the rise of a post-industrial society in Britain over the last forty years, it is clear that the economic classes of that era and their associated identities and widely supported ideologies and values do not exist to anything like the same extent in Britain in the early twenty-first century.

Not surprisingly the two main parties have been stripped of the very characteristics which made them popular and which rooted them deeply in the society they governed. It is notable, with regard to those roots, that for many years the political parties were closely enmeshed in a wider network of equally vibrant civic associations which drew their own mission, identities and values from one or other of the big

classes of the industrial era. For Labour it was the trades unions, working men's clubs, co-operatives, socialist societies and non-conformist churches amongst others. For the Conservatives, it was institutions like the Women's Institute, the Rotary Clubs and, to a certain extent, the Church of England. It is significant that all of these organisations have seen a slow decline in their own memberships and political influence in roughly the same time frame as those of the main parties. Some indicative figures are presented below:

- in 1983, half of the British workforce belonged to a union, this dropped to one-third by 2001;[126]

- in 1972, 27.6 per cent of the male population belonged to working men's or social clubs, this dropped to 17.9 per cent by 1999;[127]

- membership of the National Federation of Women's Institutes has dropped by 46 per cent from 442,000 in 1972 to 240,000 in 2002.[128]

Clearly, the decline of the ideological and class appeal of the main parties helps explain not only the decline in party allegiance but also why so many are now less keen to vote for the broad programmes offered by the parties. There is a school of thought that contemporary individuals are inherently more fragmented and eclectic in their outlook and naturally shy away from 'grand narratives' or 'big ideology'. There may be some truth in this. However, it may also be that the main parties no longer have the 'pitch' that persuades large sections of population that their broad programmes of change can be trusted as a whole because they are based on a shared ideology or a shared class interest.

This latter approach may help explain why the other chief negative perception of parties – that they are too similar and lack principle

– has arisen. It may be that people are not necessarily hostile to a broad programme based on core values – indeed they may well be seeking it – but they either feel the parties do not offer this or that parties base their programmes on core values they do not find appealing.

In effect, this might suggest a citizenry in transition. The old political identities, allegiances and values have withered with the decline of the old social and economic conditions. However, no new political formulations have yet been developed which effectively represent and shape the new interests and values emerging in our post-industrial society. We have no doubt that such new philosophies will blossom because the yearning for compasses and lodestones to guide people through complex political thickets is very powerful. As it is, the parties are intentionally light on ideology.

None of this would necessarily be a major contribution to disengagement, was it not for the fact that our electoral system ensures that the two main parties are still the only serious contenders for power on offer to the electorate. It is as though two companies both selling an essential product maintained their dual grip on the market, even though their brands were widely perceived as inferior by the buying public. In such a market, one would not expect anything other than annoyance from the people forced to purchase those products.

Of course, the electorate does attempt to break the monopoly on occasion when the rare opportunity presents itself. This can be seen in the sudden and often unexpected bursts of support for independent candidates or small parties that effectively engage with the public and are perceived as standing a chance of winning. It can also be seen in the rise of tactical voting, as sections of the electorate realise that in some constituencies they can, at least, vote meaningfully against something they don't like, even if they can't vote meaningfully for what they do like.

The recent research of Patrick Dunleavy upholds the view that the two-party system is cracking under the pressure of its failure to represent adequately the more diverse or possibly less well-formed

identities and values of the electorate. His research found that in the 2004 European election, which was held under a proportional system, voters in the "median British region" supported 5.3 'effective' parties. An 'effective' party for Dunleavy is one with a previously significant share of the vote, a potential for legislative representation at some level, office-seeking capabilities, endurance over time, and distinctive ideological positions which were not otherwise represented by differences between Labour and Conservative platforms. For Dunleavy, as he asserted in his evidence to the Commission, this suggested that:

> *We actually have a multi-party polity but the major party leaders are saying something self-evidently untrue to voters that it's a straight choice. It's not a straight choice and people don't like to be told "you must choose between us and them" when they don't want to do that. They want to vote Green or Liberal Democrat. That's a fundamental issue and it's really a difficulty almost unique to British political elites that they can't see any problem with that.*[129]

Dunleavy's assertion that this is almost unique to Britain is given extra support by the recent work of Pippa Norris – detailed in Chapter 5 – which finds that countries with proportional electoral systems, and thus with a wider array of parties and less wasted votes, have not suffered the same low levels of turnout as Britain.

The result of all this is that the *Power* Commission is now convinced that one way of reconnecting the British people with their political parties, and hence their elections, is to introduce much greater flexibility into the monopoly that is the present party system. Some of the Commission were resistant to any move away from a first-past-the-post electoral system until persuaded by the depth of the problem and the manifest change in our citizens. An electoral arrangement is needed that is sufficiently responsive to the much more fluid and diverse identities and values of the electorate. Such a change is necessary to ensure that large numbers of citizens feel there is something

on offer to them at election time.

This proposed reform may be a response to the inherently more fragmented and eclectic nature of today's citizen, or it may be an opportunity for formal democracy to become the crucible within which the unpredictable political alliances and ideologies of the future are recast to replace the withered alliances and ideologies of old. It may be something of both. Whichever it is, the necessary reform is still the same – responsiveness and flexibility on the part of the party and electoral system.

Or to put it another way, maybe it is time to offer voters the same sort of choice in politics that the main parties constantly tell those voters they desire in public service provision. In short, twenty-five years of deregulation in the public sector and the wider economy may be coming home to roost in the politicians' own back yards. Two parties is not much of a choice.

However, while we accept that the viability of the two-party system may be nearing its end, we do not believe that the era of the party per se is over, even if many public submissions to the Inquiry would seem to prefer this. We agree with the evidence provided by most of the experts and practitioners we heard from that parties fulfil a series of crucial functions in a democracy, many of which cannot be as easily or effectively carried out by other organisations.

Most notably, political parties are, when they are at their best, effective at presenting alternative ways to the electorate of aggregating diverse interests within their broad programmes and allocating resources to those interests. Campaign and interest groups do not do this – their goal is, of course, to espouse the supremacy of their particular cause and demand maximum resources to address that cause. They could enter into highly complex negotiations with other interest groups to further such causes, maybe facilitated by the state, but this would seem to be a less democratic, less transparent and possibly unending way of doing things.

Parties also simplify choices at election time – although, as pre-

vious evidence suggests, they oversimplify them at present. They are also effective at organising political debate, opposition and support within Parliament – although, once again, *Power's* evidence seems to suggest that this is currently done too stringently.

In addition, parties have played the vital role, historically, of being the main source of dialogue between governed and governors and in mobilising popular engagement with democracy. However, it is obvious from the wealth of data and evidence presented in Part One that they now fail at these tasks.

The political party as an organising principle cannot therefore be written off. Our political system would be more chaotic and less effective without political parties. None of this is to say, however, that parties as they are currently formulated cannot be radically rethought.

This understanding of parties, we believe, throws into relief those proposals which suggest that the decline in party membership and allegiance can simply be reversed by the use of more imaginative organisational structures and processes, such as primary-style elections for parliamentary candidates or more informal meetings for local parties. While we accept that such innovations may attract some extra members or support to local parties and should not be discouraged, we do not feel these can address the profound structural barriers to rebuilding the relationship between parties and people which are inherent in the wider party and electoral system as it is currently constituted.

The recommendations presented below have been developed primarily with the aim of introducing a greater responsiveness and flexibility into our party and electoral system in order to encourage more engagement between parties, candidates and citizens. A number of other issues have also arisen in *Power's* evidence which have a bearing on elections and parties and these are raised as necessary.

**Recommendation 12: A responsive electoral system should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and local councils in England and Wales.**

Fundamental to the introduction of greater flexibility and responsiveness into the party system is the need for change in the ways our representatives are elected.

There has been a considerable amount of debate for many years in Britain about replacing our first-past-the-post system. The fundamental issue for those who favour change is the way first-past-the-post over-represents the two main parties' vote when allocating parliamentary seats, and under-represents smaller parties, in particular, the Liberal Democrats. Those who are against change point to a series of problems with proportional systems, most notably, that they can produce coalition governments which are unstable and lack a strong sense of direction. Many new arguments and counter-arguments have been developed by both sides over the years with no clear resolution.

From the point of view of the *Power* Commissioners, the need to change the electoral system is not based on arguments about what might make for fairer representation but on the fact that we have now reached a point in our political history where democracy is at risk because our electoral and party system has become such a major block to popular engagement with political decision-making. The argument for change is now as much about what is expedient for the future of democracy in Britain as it is a matter of principle.

The main concern is the way our current system has allowed two parties, which increasingly lack appeal for British citizens, to maintain their dominant political position and, hence, to damage the main ways by which citizens engage with formal democratic decision-making as members or supporters of a party and as voters in elections. This has been discussed in detail throughout this report.

As a result, we recommend that a new electoral system be introduced for the House of Commons, the House of Lords and local government in England and Wales. We note that other voting systems are

already employed for the devolved institutions, for the European Parliament, and for local elections in Northern Ireland and we applaud the Scottish Parliament for its decision to introduce a new voting system for local elections from 2007.

Based on the Inquiry's observations about the need for much greater fluidity and responsiveness in the party system, and the expectation of citizens that they will have influence and choice over the key decisions that affect their lives, we recommend that any new electoral system should be designed to meet the following goals:

- to increase the number of parties or parliamentary alliances competing for the voter's support which have a serious chance of winning representation;

- to enable candidates who have no organisational allegiance a chance of winning a seat in Parliament;

- to allow voters a chance to express their preference for a particular wing of a party or a particular candidate;

- to ensure that all votes count by having some influence on the final outcome of an election.

Current thinking seems to suggest that such goals could be best achieved by the Single Transferable Vote system, but we have no firm views on this.

We have not seen any evidence to uphold the view sometimes heard that a change in the electoral system will automatically improve engagement. It is certainly the case that countries with proportional systems have generally started out with higher election turnouts, but these countries have also faced decline in turnout and share with us the other indicators of disengagement detailed throughout this report. Electoral reform is just one part of a wider 'jigsaw' of change re-

quired to re-engage the British people with their political system in as profound and sustainable a way as possible.

We have also heard the view that an electoral system as open as the one proposed here will lead to the demise of the political party, as candidates will increasingly find it more effective to campaign as individuals with their own programmes than as members of one party with a nationwide platform of change. This is the main reason why some argue that such open electoral systems may be appropriate for more deliberative chambers such as the House of Lords but not for those which seek to form governments.

We accept that such a system would probably lead to parties being looser associations of representatives built around core values or interests. But our evidence suggests that this is precisely what citizens would prefer. We do not, however, accept that it will lead to the loss of the party as a significant structuring feature of authority in Parliament or opinion in the country. This has not been the experience of those assemblies in Australia, Malta, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland which use the Single Transferable Vote.

We also feel that, given the strength of our evidence showing that citizens want both more influence over decision-makers and less stringent whipping in the Commons, it would be wrong to restrict a system which loosens parties and provides voters with significant power, to chambers which do not have a real say over who governs and how.

We are also aware that a significant fear regarding a change to such an electoral system is the possibility that extremist parties may win representation and so gain both influence and a platform for their views. The usual way of dealing with this is to introduce an election threshold which ensures that no party which fails to garner a certain percentage of the vote gains representation. However, given that we have specifically identified the need for a system that allows the emergence of new political alliances and approaches, using a method that might stifle the rise of small parties and independents may not be en-

tirely appropriate.

We admit there is therefore no easy answer to this, except to be extremely vigilant. We note, for example, recent research work on the British National Party carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.[130] This found that in areas where the BNP was building support it had done so because of its efforts to engage with local communities through face-to-face campaigning, unlike the main parties which had a low local profile. This may suggest that a system which reduced the security of safe seats, and thus required all parties and candidates to campaign vigorously, could prevent some of the surges of support for the BNP that have taken place in local communities in recent years. It also upholds the view put in Chapter 7 that the decline of engagement may provide opportunities for populist and anti-democratic forces to win support and that the obvious remedy to this is to take the serious, strategic approach of instituting a more responsive electoral system to reverse that decline.

**Recommendation 13: The closed list system to have no place in modern elections.**

Whatever form of electoral system is introduced, we believe it is vital to ensure that the system is based on open lists. Open lists allow voters to choose between candidates within the same party. This is in contrast to closed lists which require voters to choose a party rather than a candidate when making their mark on a ballot paper, the party leadership having already decided which candidates will enter Parliament should the party secure enough votes.

We particularly reject the use of closed party lists because they deny voters real choice to shape Parliament and other representative bodies in line with their emerging preferences. Closed party lists offer party leaderships just the type of top-down power which is proving so alienating to active members of society who might otherwise join or support a party.

**Recommendation 14: The system whereby candidates have to pay a deposit which is lost if their votes fall below a certain threshold should be replaced with a system where the candidate has to collect the signatures of a set number of supporters in order to appear on the ballot paper.**

One further rigidity in the electoral system that is rarely commented upon is the financial blocks placed on candidates standing for Parliament. Currently all candidates must provide a deposit of £500 which is returned only if the candidate wins 5 per cent of the constituency vote, although the Electoral Administration Bill, currently being debated in Parliament, proposes reducing this to 2 per cent.[131] All other elections in the UK, with the exception of local and parish elections, have a similar deposit and percentage system. The Mayoralty of London is the most stringent, with candidates expected to provide a £10,000 deposit which is lost if 5 per cent of the vote is not achieved.

The evidence provided to *Power* by smaller parties and independent candidates is clear that this acts as a block on their capacity to participate as fully as they would like in the political system. It is certainly an unjust anomaly that as a result of the deposit system the smallest parties bear by far the largest financial burden resulting directly from their attempts to stand for Parliament. At the 2005 General Election, the biggest losers were the the Green Party, the UK Independence Party, and independent candidates who lost £393,000 between them, whereas Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats only lost £3,000 in total (and Labour, in fact, did not lose any deposits at all).[132]

This is a matter of concern, given that the Inquiry has found such hostility towards the main parties and, as mentioned above, the electorate now more regularly takes the opportunity to vote for small parties and independents when they seem to stand a meaningful chance of election. It is also an obstacle to the reformulation of party politics in Britain to allow for more accurate and vibrant representation and shaping of new values and interests in society. What may be a small party today could well be a big party tomorrow if it is allowed

to connect with voters' genuine concerns.

In addition, of course, it is highly questionable whether the freedom to stand in an election should be limited by wealth.

It is recommended, therefore, that the current deposit system is abolished for all elections. However, we accept the reasoning behind the deposit system that there should be some bar to entirely frivolous candidates standing. It is thus proposed instead that the other requirement for candidates – gaining nominations by a small number of electors (ten in the case of elections to the House of Commons) – be expanded. The exact number required is open to debate but we feel the level would probably settle at approximately 0.25 per cent of the registered voters in the electoral area in which a candidate wishes to stand. This would equate to about 150-200 signatures in a Parliamentary constituency. Such a measure would probably require a high enough degree of credibility and effort to deter the frivolous but not enough to deter serious small parties and independents, and it would have the further advantage of encouraging a certain degree of active, face-to-face engagement with the constituency's voters by a candidate prior to actually standing.

**Recommendation 15: The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people on lower incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand.**

As pointed out in Chapter 7, a major element of disengagement is the variable rates of participation in politics across social class, gender and ethnic communities. This applies not only to party membership and voting but also to the holding of elected office. The figures speak for themselves.

In the UK Parliament, the total number of black and minority ethnic MPs was 6 in 1992, 9 in 1997, 13 in 2001 and 15 in 2005; as for women MPs, there were 199 in the 2001 Parliament and 128 in 2005.

If the make up of MPs were accurately to reflect the proportion of the British population there should be 51 MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds and 320 female MPs.[133] The average age of MPs was 51 in 2005.[134] Only 6.2 per cent of MPs come from a manual occupation, the vast majority have a business background (19.2 per cent) or a professional background – mostly lawyers, teachers, journalists or political workers (74.6 per cent). One third of MPs attended a private school compared to 8 per cent of the population as a whole.[135]

In 2002, there were no BME members in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh assembly. However, both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly have achieved over 40 per cent representation for women.[136]

Representation by different groups within local authorities is equally varied. 70 per cent of local councillors in England are male, only 3.5 per cent are from a black minority ethnic community and their average age was 57 in 2004.[137]

The reasons for such variable participation in elected assemblies have been given in Chapter 7. The key debate about how to remedy it has coalesced around those who favour firm positive measures whereby a certain number of constituencies or wards are reserved for candidates from under-represented groups, and those who favour active encouragement, including publicity campaigns, financial support for candidates seeking selection and attempts to make party selection processes less exclusive.

We note that only the Labour Party's use of all-women shortlists in a prescribed number of safe seats before the 1997 General Election has actually had any substantial impact on women's representation in Parliament. We also note that the Conservative Party is now reserving for women half of the positions on a favoured list of candidates seeking selection.

However, neither of these approaches can address the fact that many locally active people, including those from under-represented groups who might otherwise consider candidacy, simply will not

put themselves forward under current political arrangements. Most constituencies and council wards are safe seats held by the two main parties. Hence, the only way that candidates from under-represented groups can secure elected office is to join one of the main parties and then win an internal selection process in one of the safe seats which is becoming vacant at the next election. However, as the evidence presented in Part One showed, the two main parties are extremely unpopular and are regarded by many locally active people as either irrelevant or a positive block to wielding any influence by 'ordinary' citizens.

As a result, both campaigns of active encouragement and a quota-based system will achieve success only to the extent that they encourage candidacy by active members from the shrinking pool of the main parties' grassroots. It is, of course, possible that a quota system might motivate people from under-represented groups to join a party if they feel encouraged by the higher chance of selection, but the evidence to the *Power* Inquiry suggests that far larger numbers of locally active individuals would regard the joining of a party as a step away from their communities and a restriction on their freedom of action to bring about change.

As outlined above, we feel a far more beneficial approach, for democracy and engagement as a whole, is to establish a more responsive electoral system without financial deposits as outlined above. The great benefit of this is that it will allow independent or small party candidates with a reasonable base of support in a constituency to stand and have a chance of actually winning representation without having to align themselves with one of the main parties and without having to pass through an internal selection process. In short, under our proposal, anyone who can muster approximately 150-200 signatures on a nomination form will appear on the ballot paper and will have a serious chance of election.

It should also, however, be noted that in countries where systems such as the Single Transferable Vote are used, political parties tend to put forward a more diverse range of candidates, politically

and socially, within constituencies, since voters are free to choose between candidates from one party. Thus, with Single Transerable Vote the main parties would actually have an electoral incentive to broaden and diversify their candidates rather than opt for the safe candidates which, arguably, first-past-the-post encourages.

This 'loosening' of the electoral and party system would offer a great opportunity to make the active-encouragement approach have a genuine impact. We do not believe that a shift, on its own, to a more responsive electoral system will necessarily address under-representation, but if combined with a well-resourced and active campaign by an organisation such as the Electoral Commission to encourage, train, and support (including financially) candidates from under-represented groups, it should, over a series of elections, have a major impact.

We believe such an approach is preferable to those methods, such as reserving winnable seats for excluded groups, designed to be employed under the current system, which will always struggle against the very significant trend of disengagement from parties of the last thirty years. It is an approach which also has the considerable advantage of offering the chance of representation to those who have laid down deep roots of trust and engagement with a local community rather than those who have simply managed to secure for themselves the endorsement of a political party.

For example, we were deeply impressed by the witnesses who spoke up during our Manchester witness session. These local activists were people who work hard for the communities of which they themselves are a part. Unlike, sadly, most political representatives who have to do 'outreach' work to speak to some of the most disadvantaged communities, these activists live and work in such communities. Giving them a stronger voice within formal democracy and connecting them to decision-makers by making representative democracy work at its best would help address the devastation wrought for some by post-industrialisation, and would be of huge advantage to politics

and society as a whole.

However, it was clear from the testimony heard by the Commission in Manchester, that parties and elections as currently structured will simply not allow that to happen. These highly active, intelligent citizens found today's politics and parties a source of positive alienation:

*The real relationships that people want to build with each other, whether it be the political parties or whatever, are about equity. I don't want anybody just to tolerate me. I find it quite disrespectful, I don't want to be tolerated. We need to have a degree of respect and equity when we deal with each other and I think a lot of the political parties do not come over that way. They come over as very target driven and nobody wants to be a number, nobody wants to be a statistic.*
Mandy Powell, Community Worker, East Manchester
*I can't even remember right now any of the members of my community who got involved in party politics as such. ... I think part of the reason, especially in the locality where I am is that to a great extent political parties are looked at as something for people who have probably made it and who are prepared to put up with the system. If I were a member of a certain political party, I think that I would feel a little bit more alienated from my own community politics.*
Gaafe Ali, Sudanese Community Activist, Manchester

*I have to be honest, I've said it myself and I've said it all the time with my work, that sometimes the political agenda in our cities undermines the good things that we're trying to do. And in fact I can't think of many examples where anything of a more formal political type, as it were, has actually helped.*
Anne Stewart, Community activist working with women and disabled people, Manchester

We believe that the incalculable benefit of a more responsive electoral system combined with genuine practical and financial support for candidates, both inside and outside formal parties, would allow people, like those we heard from in Manchester to find more routes into representative politics. Of course, such a change would have to be combined with the creation of real power and influence for our representatives (as detailed in Chapter 6). For, one thing is very clear from all the community activists and workers to whom we have spoken: people are active because they want change and to have an impact. The holding of office for its own sake has no appeal and ultimately only adds to alienation.

**Recommendation 16: Voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).**

We have been struck by the contrast between the very low involvement of young people in formal democracy and their very active and serious-minded involvement in the innovations in participation explored by the Inquiry, in the experiment in participatory budgeting undertaken by *Power*, and in the deliberations of the Inquiry itself.

Our own experience and evidence suggests that just as with the wider population, when young people are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers them a real chance of influence, they do so with enthusiasm and with responsibility. We recognise that few people take an interest in a sphere of life or an area from which they have been deliberately excluded. Reducing the voting age to sixteen would obviously be one way of reducing the extent of such exclusion for many thousands of young people, and of increasing the likelihood of their taking an interest, and taking part, in political and democratic debate. We believe that given the very low involvement of young people in formal politics and the consequent effect this may have on their involvement in com-

ing decades, it is vital to include them in the political process as early as is reasonably possible in order to sow the seeds of democracy and empowerment that will create a basis for more engagement later in life.

As such, we can see no reason why the voting and candidacy age is currently held at 18 years. The chief objection to lowering the voting age seems to be the assertion that 16 and 17 year olds are less able to take 'mature' decisions about political issues than those aged over 18. We have seen no evidence to support this assertion and our own experience contradicts it.

We have also heard the claim that reducing the voting age to 16 will drive down turnout figures as the youngest age groups have the lowest turnouts. This argument suggests that a significant reform should be rejected on the grounds that its results may embarrass politicians and reinforce the widespread view that the party and electoral system are disliked. This cannot be accepted by the Commission as an adequate reason to reject reform.

We note the recent rejection of a lower voting and candidacy age by the Electoral Commission. However, we also note that this recommendation was made alongside the recognition of the need for a wider review of the issue and an assessment of how 'contextual factors' may change over coming years. We believe that a major shift in attitudes to wider public engagement on the part of the polity and the possibility of rising engagement, following such a change, would be just such a significant contextual factor.

We also feel that the reduction of the voting and candidacy age will make a programme of political citizenship education in schools more effective. At present, those leaving school at 16 not only have to wait until the next election before they can exercise their vote but also have to wait until the next election which occurs when they have reached the age of eighteen. This means those unlucky enough to leave school in a government's mid-term period may have to wait six to eight years before they can cast a vote in a general election. This

is clearly likely to weaken the impact of citizenship education on the political consciousness of young people. Most young people aged 16 and 17 are still members of learning communities, either schools or colleges, where debate around elections and politics can take place. Once people have left education they are less likely to be exposed to any discussion about why voting might matter.

It is also worth remembering that we enlist 16 year olds into the armed forces and expect them to pay taxes if they are earning so they should be able to participate in the selection of those who govern them. We believe that any reform to encourage young people to engage politically will be very severely limited in its effectiveness while the current constitutional, party and electoral arrangements remain in force.

**Recommendation 17: The introduction of automatic, individual voter registration at age sixteen. This can be done in tandem with the allocation of National Insurance numbers.**

Failure to register as a voter is an often overlooked aspect of political disengagement. Although there are no conclusive figures, recent research suggests that almost 4 million people of voting age fail to register and that this figure has been rising since the early 1990s.

In addition, research has discovered that failure to register as a voter varies greatly across different social groups. Those on lower incomes, with lower educational attainment, or living in rented accommodation were more likely to fail to register. Younger people were also less likely to register.[138]

These estimates are a cause of great concern. They suggest not only that low levels of voter turnout are far worse than they currently appear, but also that disenfranchisement is far more likely to afflict those on low incomes and young people than others – two groups that already display the lowest levels of voter turnout.

We note that various reviews of registration have been or are being undertaken by the Electoral Commission, parliamentary committees and the Department for Constitutional Affairs. While we welcome

this work, we believe that one option which is regularly overlooked is automatic national individual voter registration.

The Electoral Commission's recommendations to move away from household registration and towards individual registration, and the reasons given for this, are accepted by *Power*. In particular, it is felt that a system of household registration is wholly out of step with contemporary expectations that individuals should be free to take decisions for themselves and take responsibility for their own actions.

However, we believe more thought needs to be given by the relevant authorities to the possibility of introducing a system of automatic registration. This would undoubtedly ensure that the most basic of barriers to voting – ineligibility due to failure to appear on the register – would gradually dissolve. We believe any approach which ensures that involvement in formal democracy is as accessible as possible is worthy of exploration.

Although there has not been a great deal of public debate on the issue of automatic registration, we accept there will be some significant objections. Firstly, there is the practical matter of how voters' details are to be identified and placed on the register. It is accepted that an attempt to automatically register all eligible voters now would probably require an exercise in data-sharing so vast, expensive and possibly unreliable as to make it unrealistic. However, if the voting age were reduced to 16 years as we propose, then there would be the very great advantage that individuals could be registered while they are still at school. This means that their details could be identified, and individuals then informed of their registration, as part of the same process used to inform them of their National Insurance numbers.

This would mean that automatic registration would take considerably longer to have an impact on the whole population, but it would almost certainly prove far simpler. It also means that the NI number could be the key identifier when voting, as is currently the case in Northern Ireland.

There are, of course, some major legal and ethical objections to using the national databases in this way. These would require investigation by the Electoral Commission and the Department of Constitutional Affairs to see if they could be allayed by the detail of registration procedures. For example, it may be that the Electoral Register need only include details of the constituency and ward in which a voter lives, to allay fears about addresses being made available to government officials.

In this regard, we also accept that those who find the notion of automatic registration too intrusive should be free to remove themselves from the register if they wish. In doing so, they will, of course, lose the right to vote but there should be no bar to them returning to the register in the future.

The ongoing task of electoral registration would not then be to draft people onto the register but to ensure that the constituency and ward identifiers of those on the register were as up to date as possible. This could be done through publicity campaigns to encourage individuals to keep electoral registration officers informed of any change in residence. Such campaigns could be particularly high profile in the lead-up to an election.

Applications for postal votes, proxy votes and, in the future, possibly online or mobile phone voting, would obviously require their own procedures but would also be based on the name, constituency and ward details provided on the national electoral register.

Obviously, it will take some time for this method of registration to become common for the whole population. In the meantime, we welcome the changes currently being proposed in the Elections Administration Bill to make electoral registration more proactive and simpler.

One important aspect of this automatic approach is that it addresses the concern that individual registration will drive down the numbers on the electoral roll. In fact, through this method, electoral rolls would gradually rise until nearly every British citizen of voting age would be on the register.

**Recommendation 18: The citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification.**

The evidence presented in Part One of this report showed that many people feel they do not have adequate information or knowledge about the political system and that this is a block to participation.

We therefore welcome the Government's decision to introduce a citizenship curriculum into schools which contains instruction in politics and the democratic system. However, the Inquiry's own evidence and research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research reveals some worrying aspects of the way the curriculum has developed.

- Citizenship is poorly taught in schools, often by teachers who are not properly trained.
- Citizenship classes are often not taken seriously by pupils.
- The element of the citizenship curriculum that is least taught is that dealing with politics and democracy as opposed to those dealing with personal rights or welfare.
- Many teachers, pupils and educational organisations feel that the citizenship curriculum is wrong not to place a central emphasis on learning through practice.

We therefore recommend that a new approach to political education is taken in schools. To coincide with 16 year olds reaching voting and candidacy age and being automatically entered on to the electoral register, a short, practical course in politics should be delivered to pupils in their final year at school. These three elements would together amount to an 'initiation into democratic politics' for Britain's young citizens centred on their place of learning.

The emphasis of the political education course would be on understanding why and how citizens might get involved in a range of political activities. This could be taught, not through abstract discussion about procedures and structures, but by encouraging pupils to reflect on political issues of actual concern to themselves and to investigate the range of ways they might address those concerns through democratic political activity.

If possible, this short course should be assessed and lead to a qualification. This would help prevent the subject being taken less seriously by pupils.

Party Funding

The ways in which political parties in Britain are now funded have become a major obstacle to re-engaging citizens with democratic processes and institutions. The *Power* Commission identified four aspects of party funding which are proving particularly damaging.

1. There is a widespread perception that donations to parties can buy influence or position. The media and political storms that have surrounded controversies such as the Bernie Ecclestone affair and the continuing claims that peerages are offered to party donors may or may not be unfounded. However, it is clear that a system of party funding that relies increasingly on very sizeable donations from a handful of wealthy individuals or organisations creates an environment in which the perception spreads that democracy can be bought. This can only enhance the widespread view that the ordinary British citizen has an unequal share of influence over government policies and decisions when compared to business.

Professor Patrick Seyd, the leading specialist on party membership in Britain, explained to the Inquiry how this aspect of party funding has a very direct effect on engagement by weakening the citizen's sense of influence:

> *The funding scandals of recent years have impacted badly on parties in general and therefore specifically on party membership. If potential members feel that their contributions to a party will be relatively insignificant, as compared with the 'millionaire donors',*

*then they are unlikely to join a party. Individuals need to feel that
their contribution to a party – whether it be money, time or support
– is going to be of value.*

2. Evidence was also presented to the Inquiry which indicated
that the increasing reliance of political parties on large donations
from individuals and organisations has reduced the need to expand
membership and seek small donations from a large number of indi-
viduals, and that this is thus reducing party engagement with the
wider public. This is a circular process. Clearly as political parties have
found it harder to maintain and win members, they must find money
to fund their now very expensive election campaigns from elsewhere.
As they succeed in this task, the incentive to make serious and innova-
tive efforts to secure new members and financial supporters lessens.

As such, we now face a situation where membership subscrip-
tions play a very small role in party finances. Members' dues now
make up approximately 30 per cent of Liberal Democrat finances, 10
per cent for the Conservative Party, and only 8 per cent for Labour. The
rest is predominantly raised through large donations from organisa-
tions or individuals.[139]

3. Despite the success of the two main parties in securing large
donations, it is clear from the evidence presented to *Power* by special-
ists in this field that wider party activity in Britain is underfunded and
skewed towards the two main parties. The considerable incomes of
the Conseravtive and Labour parties are increasingly spent on election
campaigning and party administration at a national level rather than
local engagement activities designed to promote dialogue between
party leaders, members and the wider public. In addition, while the
two main national parties can draw on multi-million pound budgets,
other parties and the constituency organisations of the main parties
must manage with a tiny fraction of these amounts (see box). This is
yet another rigidity in the political system that maintains the posi-
tion and power of political parties whose declining appeal to British

citizens is not satisfactorily challenged.

Comparative budgets (year ending 2004) of six political parties
with national profiles and representation at national or European
parliamentary levels

|  | Income | Expenditure |
|---|---|---|
| Labour Party | £29,312,000 | £32,109,000 |
| Conservative Party | £20,041,000 | £26,238,000 |
| Liberal Democrats | £5,060,121 | £4,614,418 |
| UKIP | £1,744,659 | £1,702,549 |
| Respect | £497,565 | £589,789 |
| Green Party | £473,224 | £506,543 |

4. These rigidities are exacerbated by the fact that significant
state funds are distributed to those parties which dominate Parlia-
ment. The Electoral Commission has calculated that approximately
£25 million of public funds are given to political parties in a normal
year and £111 million in a year when a general election is called. The
great bulk of this subsidy is distributed in a fashion that benefits the
main parties and weakens the relative capacity of smaller parties and
independent candidates to build their profile.[140]

Most of this state subsidy comes from three areas.

- The Short and Cranborne money distributed to opposition
  parties in the House of Commons and Lords in proportion
  to the number of seats and votes won at the last election.
  Most of this money goes to research support for front bench
  spokespeople, assistance in the whips' offices, and staff for the
  Leader of the Opposition.

- Payment to the Post Office to distribute candidates'
  election addresses.

- Payments in kind in the form of free airtime for the

transmission of party political broadcasts.

It is a matter of concern that only the second of these subsidies benefits smaller parties and independent candidates in any significant way. The first clearly aids those parties which benefit from the distortions in the electoral system which over-represent the two main parties in terms of parliamentary seats and encourages voting for those two main parties at the expense of smaller parties.

Although the third is not a direct state subsidy as the broadcasters receive no payment for the transmission of party political broadcasts, its method of distribution again benefits the established parties. Currently, any party fielding candidates in one-sixth of contested parliamentary constituencies qualifies for a broadcast at election time. In effect, this means that parties who are able to raise and risk losing approximately £50,000 in election deposits can buy themselves significant airtime which would normally cost millions. This clearly benefits wealthier parties, no matter what their genuine levels of support are, nor whether they have any real capacity to widen debate or to engage with citizens. The *Power* Commission's recommendation to abolish the financial deposit system (see above) would help deal with this iniquity.

As a result of these concerns, the *Power* Commission is convinced that a major overhaul of party funding is vital if democratic re-engagement is to occur.

The Commission is aware that there has been a great deal of debate about party finance that has led to a long series of reviews to make the system more transparent, less open to abuse and fairer.

Much of this debate now centres on the desirability or otherwise of state funding of political parties, caps on spending and caps on donations. In coming to its conclusions about these issues, we were mindful of the following factors.

- Genuine efforts to engage by all parties requires money, but the great bulk of money raised or provided to parties is spent by the Labour and Conservative parties in particular on administration, short-term campaigning at election time and their work inside Parliament. There is, therefore, a need to distribute money in a way that encourages engagement and will allow a fairer allocation of resources.

- Many of the specialists who spoke to the Inquiry felt the need for some form of state funding for parties but also doubted whether the public would support such a move. However, we feel this ignores the fact that tacit but significant state subsidy to the main parties already exists and that the quantitative evidence on public support for state funding is inconclusive. In addition, any public opposition exists in a period of extremely high alienation from parties and politicians. If this alienation was effectively tackled through the implementation of the other recommendations in this report, then such opposition would wane. It is also felt that if significant influence over state funding of parties could be offered to citizens themselves then this would allay the distaste that exists towards spending public money on apparently undeserving parties.

- The reliance of the main parties on a small number of large donations is not conducive to democratic engagement or transparency. It also offers significant opportunities for the wealthiest members of society to buy influence over government policy. However, we fear that any attempt to ban political donations would introduce new and unintended rigidities into the political system that will disallow smaller or newer parties from forging links with civil society organisations which might allow them to challenge the established power of the bigger, wealthier parties. We note the fact that the funding of the emerging Labour Party by the Trade Unions in its early days aided that party to challenge the

monopoly on power held by the wealthier Conservative and Liberal parties and gave a democratic voice to the industrial working class. We feel it is important that regulations do not prevent the development of similar processes in the future, given the currently sclerotic nature of the party system.

We believe, therefore, that any new proposal for reform of the system of party and candidate funding must achieve a number of things. It must:

- place strict limits on the capacity of wealthy people and wealthy organisations to buy political influence;
- continue to allow parties to forge links with civil society organisations through a financial link;
- prevent the reliance by parties on large donations from a small group of wealthy individuals or organisation;
- be fully open and transparent;
- encourage rather than discourage engagement between political parties and citizens particularly at the under-funded local level;
- continue to allow some level of state funding to provide parties with a reasonably stable income to enable them to build local structures and engagement processes alongside that which already exists to support election campaigning and activities in Parliament
- ensure that both state funds and donations are open to some degree of democratic control and oversight.

To achieve these diverse goals, we recommend a two-part reform of party funding. The first is a more closely regulated approach to party donations, the second is a truly open and democratic form of state funding.

**Recommendation 19: Donations from individuals to parties should be capped at £10,000, and organisational donations should be capped at £100 per member and subject to full democratic scrutiny within the organisation.**

Under this proposal, a cap would be placed on all donations from individuals of £10,000. However, to ensure that parties can continue to build links with civil society organisations – such as trade unions and campaign groups – such organisations would be able to donate sums of up to £100 per member. These figures are, of course, only indicative rather than firm proposals. Any membership organisation would be required to ensure that such donations are fully subject to processes of democratic scrutiny and control within their own structures.

We note that most large businesses have now stopped donating to political parties. However, if a business did wish to do so, it would face the same restrictions as any other organisation. It could donate up to £100 per shareholding member but, as with all other organisations, the decisions would be subject to full democratic scrutiny and control.

We accept that no system is perfect and wealthy individuals and organisations may well develop ways to evade these controls. However, we do feel that this approach will place limits on the undue influence which the current uncontrolled system offers to those in possession of considerable wealth. It would also ensure that a much higher degree of democratic accountability and control was introduced into the process. A further benefit is that it should encourage parties to engage more effectively not just with a larger number of individuals but also with more civil society organisations.

**Recommendation 20: State funding to support local activity by political parties and independent candidates to be introduced based on allocation of individual voter vouchers. This would**

**mean that at a general election a voter would be able to tick a box allocating a £3 donation per year from public funds to a party of his or her choice to be used by that party for local activity. It would be open to the voter to make the donation to a party other than the one they have just voted for.**

The second part of our proposal draws on the Council of Europe's Green Paper, *The Future of Democracy*. Under this scheme each registered voter is allocated a nominal voucher which could be worth approximately £3 of public funds per year. During a general election, each voter is provided with a form listing all the registered parties and independent candidates in their constituency. Voters can then tick which party they wish to receive their allocation of £3 of public funds each year until the next general election. Those voters who do not wish to see their money spent on political parties can tick a box indicating 'none of the above' or can simply fail to complete the form. Unallocated monies are then reabsorbed back into mainstream public spending.

Importantly, we suggest that this money is restricted to activities conducted by parties or candidates within their constituency. This would solve the current problem of national parties increasingly spending large sums on national campaigning and leaving local parties with no funds to engage with citizens or campaign locally. In effect, this will probably mean that money raised through donations will be spent nationally while money raised through state funding will be spent locally.

If the voucher was set at £3 per year, this would mean that if 30 million people voted in a general election, there would be a potential pot of £90 million available to fund local party political and candidate activity. In practice, however, many voters would probably fail to allocate their £3 voucher, so reducing the pot.

This method, though radical, has a number of attractions for the *Power* Commissioners.

- It creates a strong financial incentive for political parties and candidates to engage with voters, in the hope that they could persuade as many voters as possible to allocate their £3 voucher to them. £3 seems negligible but if a local party were able to secure 10,000 vouchers for example this would bring £30,000 per annum into a constituency party's coffers. This would make a huge difference to the activities which could be organised. Alternatively, it could cover the salary of a full-time organiser.

- It helps address one of the chief findings of *Power* that citizens want more direct influence over political decisions – this approach gives citizens a direct say over political funding.

- It overcomes popular objections to state funding of parties by allowing voters the option of allocating their tax money earmarked for party funding to be used for mainstream public spending instead.

- It will allow voters to direct state funds to those parties that are not raising money from business and large individual donations, should this be a matter of concern to the voter.

- It allows voters to vote for one party while directing funds to another party which they feel may offer interesting alternatives in the future but is not quite ready for power yet. The system therefore allows the voter to play a sophisticated role in shaping the responsiveness of the party system to emerging voter interests and values.

**Recommendation 21: Text voting or email voting should only be considered following other reform of our democratic arrangements.**

We feel that there is a good case for governmental authorities to continue investigating and piloting changes to voting procedures. Expert evidence presented to the Inquiry and the Inquiry's own research indicates that changes to voting procedures such as more postal voting, voting by computer or mobile phone, or changing the day on which elections are held, would have a small but worthwhile impact on turnout.

The Inquiry's survey of non-voters in the 2005 General Election found that 44 per cent of respondents stated that if voting was made more convenient, they would be "very likely" or "likely" to vote. In addition, a fair proportion of submissions to our public consultation on voting and elections cited improved voting procedures as a key way to raise turnout, although this was not nearly as commonly mentioned as 'political' issues such as the nature of the electoral system and the similarity of the main parties. The expert and practitioner evidence received on voting procedures generally concurred with the public point of view. It was broadly felt that such changes would bring the system into line with citizen expectations about convenience and choice and would ensure that the chance to vote was not hampered by the diverse working, leisure and family lives of citizens today.

However, in line with all the expert and practitioner evidence we heard, we strongly feel that such changes should be implemented only when voting security can be guaranteed. In addition, it is also vital that choice remains a feature of all elections and that no one method of voting is employed to the exclusion of any other, as in recent postal voting pilots, since this defeats the very object for which a wider range of voting techniques might be introduced.

Most importantly, we believe that significant change to voting procedures should be introduced only after the types of major structural reform outlined elsewhere in this report have been undertaken by government, and only after general engagement with formal democracy has begun to improve. We are fearful, given previous government practice, that such changes to voting procedures could be introduced as an alternative to genuine structural change.

There was also a strong feeling in the Commission that voting should be a public moment. Some of us still have the emotional gulp as we put our cross on the ballot paper remembering the long hard struggles for the vote which took place here and still take place around the world. It is not very long ago since some of our grandfathers did not have the vote because they were not property owners and our grandmothers were disenfranchised because they were women. Collective memory is increasingly short. As a result there was a feeling that turning the process into a Big Brother phone-in should be resisted. In fact there was some enthusiasm for turning voting day into a Democracy Day, perhaps on a Sunday to maximise opportunities to participate.

**Recommendation 22: The realignment of constituency boundaries should be accelerated.**

We recognise that a more responsive electoral system cannot be genuinely responsive to voters' changing values and interests if the constituencies within which elections are fought reflect out-dated demographic boundaries. Expert evidence presented to the Inquiry indicates that the process of determining new boundaries for election constituencies is extremely slow and laborious and that the recommendations for change often do not come into force for eight to ten years. In an era when geographic mobility is high and shifts in population profiles can be very rapid, such delays mean that there can be no guarantee that 'new' constituencies still meet the criteria which led to the recommendation for boundary change in the first place.

We recommend, therefore, that the Electoral Commission, the Department for Constitutional Affairs and Parliament rapidly consider how the process of determining boundaries can be speeded

**up**. These considerations should aim primarily to understand how recommendations for boundary changes can be implemented in time for the election immediately following those recommendations.

**Further Points**

<u>'None of the Above' option on ballot papers</u>

We have received considerable comment on the introduction of a 'none of the above' category on ballot papers (that would enable voters positively to reject all the candidates rather than negatively to abstain). The evidence received by the Commission suggests this is a very popular option with the wider public but less so with experts and practitioners. We feel that under the responsive electoral system recommended above there would be no need for a none-of-the-above category as the greater range and diversity of parties that should result, combined with the fact that no vote would be wasted, should satisfy nearly all voters.

However, if the first-past-the-post system were to remain in place then a none-of-the-above category should be seriously considered. The major problem of first-past-the-post today, as identified by the Inquiry, is that it requires large numbers of voters to choose a party from a very restricted menu of options and even then leaves many of those votes with no impact on the final result. It is vital that such a system provides an option for voters to express their dissatisfaction with the restricted menu on offer in the hope that this might counter some voter alienation and encourage the main parties to broaden their appeal through greater diversity.

Nevertheless, we feel the introduction of a none-of-the-above category is very much a 'second best' option to the establishment of a properly responsive electoral system.

<u>Compulsory Voting</u>

We reject recent calls by some politicians and commentators to introduce compulsory voting. Any legislation designed to compel people to take part in a process which they feel is meaningless avoids the real issue of structural failings in the political system; it will cause greater resentment, and it may well prove unworkable.

Compulsory voting is based on the assumption that voters require compulsion because they are apathetic or lack sufficient levels of civic duty. This is a perspective which the report has rejected in detail in Part One.

The more recent argument that compulsory voting would force parties to pay more attention to the interests and demands of those who are less likely to vote – such as some ethnic communities, those on low incomes, or young people – is far from proven. We feel the best way to require parties and others in positions of power to listen to these groups is to take the strategic approach presented in this report of encouraging more diversity in political parties and in elected representatives, and by changing the culture and structures of political decision-making.

<u>Incentives for voting</u>

The notion of providing incentives to voters, such as retail vouchers or lottery tickets, is totally rejected by the Commission. All the evidence considered by us shows that this would trivialise elections and would be very unlikely to boost turnout.

The survey of those who did not vote in the 2005 General Election found that only 24 per cent said a material incentive would make them "more likely" or "likely" to vote. A tiny fraction of submissions to the Inquiry mentioned incentives as a way of increasing turnout. The experts and practitioners we spoke to about the idea were almost unanimous in their rejection.

As with compulsory voting, it is a response based on a misunderstanding of the causes of disengagement. It assumes that today's citizens can be motivated only by appeals to their self-interest. Once again, the evidence presented in Part One denies this assumption.
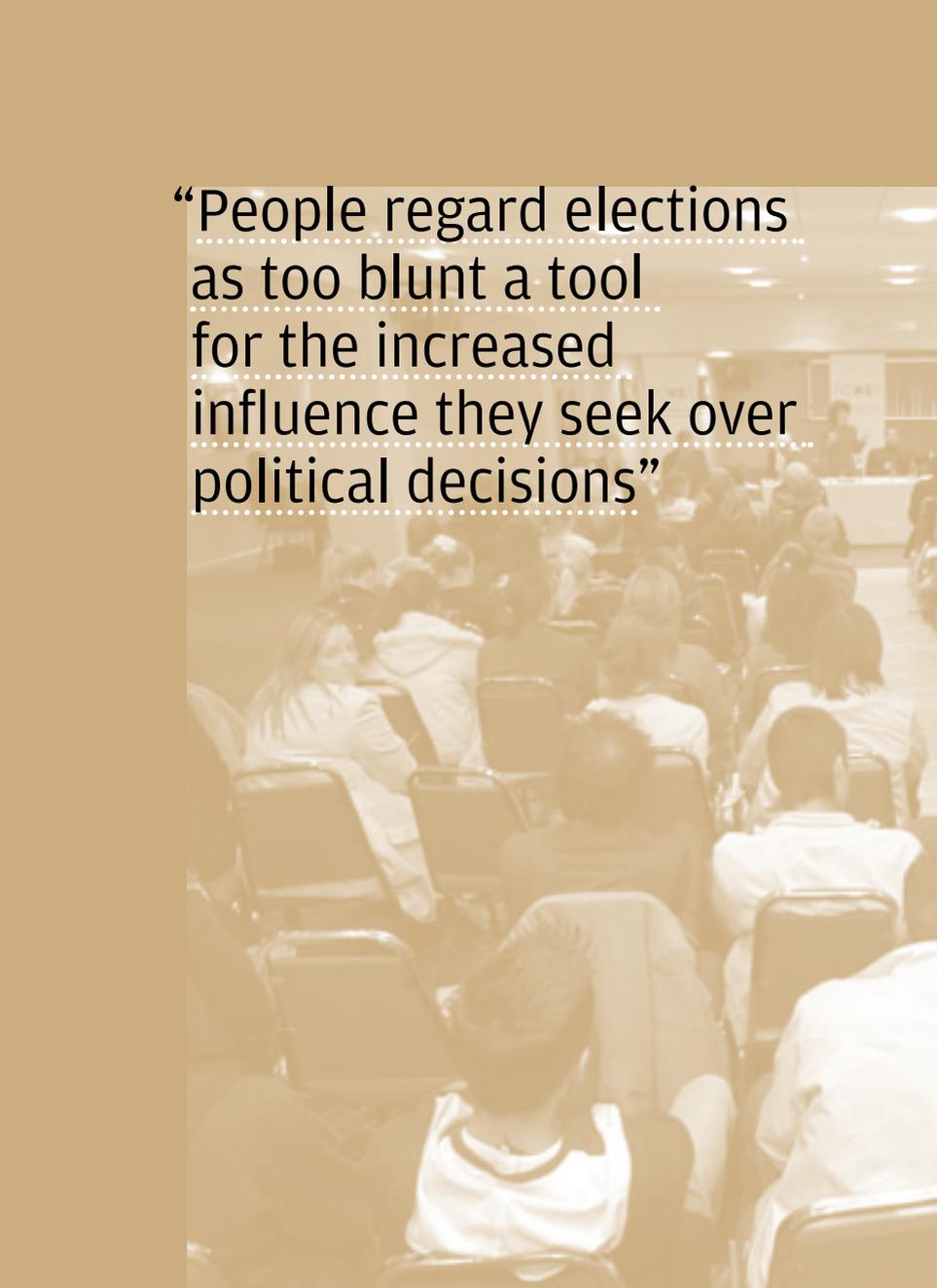
> "People regard elections as too blunt a tool for the increased influence they seek over political decisions"

# Chapter 7 – Downloading Power

So far, this report has detailed two of the three big shifts in British political practice required to address the severe problem of disengagement from formal democracy. The first of these shifts is the rebalancing of the political system to give our elected representatives more power. The second is changing the way our electoral and party systems work to better reflect the diversity and complexity of British life today. Some of the recommendations have been new, some have been adaptations of long-standing demands.

This chapter outlines the newest and possibly most crucial step in any effort to re-engage citizens with democratic political decision-making. This is the introduction of institutional and cultural changes which place a new emphasis on the requirement that policy and decision-making includes rigorous and meaningful input from 'ordinary' citizens. Before detailing the recommendations, it is necessary, given the significance of this shift, to explain why we feel it is a central part of our overall approach.

Calling for a more direct role for citizens in political decision-making is a straightforward response to two of the six explanations of disengagement arising from the evidence outlined in Chapter 5. These are:

- many citizens feel they do not have enough influence over political decisions;

- many citizens do not like the fact that support and voting for a particular party is taken as assent for a very wide range of diverse policies.

The strong sense from all our sources of evidence that many people want more influence over political decisions, but regard elections as far too blunt a tool for the exercise of that influence, led us to investigate the possibility of giving citizens a more direct say over specific areas of policy and decision-making.

The evidence generated by this part of the Inquiry confirmed that the majority of citizens are attracted by such direct mechanisms and that many are willing to engage with them. Nevertheless, a convinced minority certainly exists who regard it as the elected representative's rather than the citizen's role to deliberate and decide upon the important issues of the day.

The first part of this aspect of the Inquiry's work was to undertake an investigation of different innovations in democracy from across the world. This resulted in the Inquiry's *Beyond the Ballot* study. Reference to the detailed findings of this report will be made later in this chapter, but what the study clearly highlighted to us was that across the world democracy is far from a static form. Interesting, even inspiring, experimentation is the order of the day, especially the expansion of approaches which the report's author, Dr. Graham Smith, described as 'deliberative', 'co-governance' and 'direct' innovations. The first is an approach which gives citizens a chance to discuss specific issues in detail, without conflict with other citizens or decision-makers. The second actually gives citizens some significant decision-making power over key issues alongside that employed by elected representatives and public officials. The third gives the final say on key political decisions to citizens. This important study made it clear to us that there was no shortage of successful techniques being used across the world to re-engage people with democratic politics by offering them some degree of influence over specific policy issues.

When these techniques and the ideas informing them were put to members of the British public, the response was enthusiastic.

In the survey of over one-thousand non-voters, respondents were asked about more direct mechanisms. This found that more than 70 per cent of respondents said they were either "very likely" or "likely" to take part in three out of six techniques. These were a referendum, a citizens' initiative referendum (a process which allows citizens to demand a referendum on a specific topic) and a participatory budget (a process which offers citizens significant influence over how money is spent by a municipal authority). Of course, expressing a willingness to take part in such mechanisms and actually doing so are two different things and these figures almost certainly overstate likely involvement. However, given that these are high responses from a group who did not vote in 2005, these findings suggest that a more direct approach to involvement may offer a powerful means of re-engaging a significant proportion of those alienated from the existing processes of formal democracy.

A similarly positive response was provided by *Power's* Citizens' Panel based in Newcastle-Gateshead. This group of thirty randomly selected individuals met three times during the life of the Inquiry. A clear consensus was formed within this group that offering a more direct say to citizens over decision-making was the most important way of re-engaging people with democratic politics. In the final session, the panel discussed the three major shifts which we have identified as crucial to engagement. The notes of the research team that ran the Newcastle-Gateshead project give a strong sense of the Panel's feeling about giving citizens a more direct say:

*... participants gave this idea their greatest level of approval. They find it hard to pick out a favourite from the list of recommendations designed to give citizens more say over political decisions, as they like all the concepts. The whole idea leads to their most emotive and animated reaction.*

However, it should be stated that there was no sense on the Panel that power should be handed over without qualification to 'ordinary' citizens. The popularity of more direct involvement was tempered by the oft-cited view that elected representatives have an access to expert information, resources and a broader view that should not be discounted. The panel broadly agreed that except on the biggest issues, the final decisions over most areas of policy should be left to elected representatives, once the public had had their say.

This positive view of more direct and focussed involvement was reflected in the many public submissions received by the Inquiry. One of the seven questions put out for public consultation specifically asked about this approach:

*Some people argue that voting in elections is not enough. They believe today's citizens need an opportunity to discuss and have direct say over individual policies through other means such as referenda, internet forums and public meetings designed to have significant power to influence political decisions. Would more opportunities to do this attract participants and would they encourage greater trust in the policies pursued by politicians?*

The overwhelming response to this question was positive. The great majority of the submissions accepted that these methods would encourage participation in politics and may help to increase trust. However, these responses were very widely qualified with concern that such processes should be designed to be more than simply consultations which politicians could ignore; they should avoid populism

and should avoid the engagement of the 'usual suspects'. A minority of the public submissions did reject more participatory mechanisms, usually for reasons akin to the qualifications which other submissions placed on their positive response. However, there was also a common view amongst this minority that representatives were elected to do a job and should not 'pass the buck' to the wider public.

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Indicative submissions to the public consultation regarding greater use of participatory and direct mechanisms

*Having lived in Switzerland where the system is referendum-based and where an ordinary citizen can create an act of parliament I know that attraction of people comes from accountability and from knowing that one can actually make a difference. Why have referenda on things about which we all know very little. We want referenda on the things which we have shown we care about, and we want to be listened to.*

*I would like to have the opportunity to vote on issues that I feel strongly about. ... why not let the people themselves vote on policies? Can we not be trusted? A party's policies frequently seem to change during the course of a parliamentary term so why should I vote for a person belonging to a party and not be sure that he will not carry out his election pledges? What about all the issues that were not mentioned during the elections? How will I know at the time of voting that my representative will act in my best interests?*

*Yes, there should be more referenda. Of course the political apparatchiks will denigrate this as leading to populist policies, but in these days of good communications the whole raison d'etre of the MP as representative is undermined .*

*Yes. Events evolve and change by the week/day. Elections every x years assume a snapshot in time of public opinion, which may have been appropriate 100 years ago – not today.*

*We sent representatives to a London Parliament by horse and carriage and trusted them to act in our best interests. Nowadays with instantaneous communication why do we need to continue this archaic practice? Why can't I vote for issues that I have views about? What political candidate or political party can I vote for with the certain knowledge that my own values, concerns, ideas will be represented? Political parties do not always deliver on their promises or election manifestos and anyway the differences between the main political parties seem to be in name only.*

*If one argues that some issues may not attract sufficient numbers of them to vote then we need only to look at voting statistics in the Houses of Parliament. No parliamentarian is sufficiently interested or knowledgeable on every issue so rather than allowing them to be persuaded by their party whips on how to vote, why not allow the population to vote?*

*I do not trust politicians to vote for what they promise in their election manifesto. I also realise that no politician or political party shares all the same views as myself. I want to vote on issues that affect me and that I am interested in. I would prefer to vote for issues not for people or parties. I can represent myself and my family and my community. Why should I ask a stranger to do it for me?*

*It would certainly help me to feel that my little vote is making a difference, as a general or council election can seem to encompass such huge issues that you feel you are a drop in the ocean. Also, I think less and less people have faith in just one party as they may agree with certain issues from one and others from another.*

*It seems silly to me that all our democracy is voting in someone who then takes it from there and makes all the decisions. It would be more democratic to have more referenda and opportunities to vote on issues and not just parties. I think people feel more strongly about specific issues rather than parties nowadays anyway.*

The evidence received from the experts and practitioners was more divided than that received from the public. However, the majority view was clearly that experimentation with a more participatory approach was necessary and desirable. The expert witnesses who objected to this raised very similar concerns to those raised in the public submissions. However, those who favoured wider experimentation and use of a participatory approach were also commonly concerned about the damaging influence the media and wealthy may have over such processes to promote populist or self-interested causes. We noted with interest, however, that while not all MPs opposed a more participatory approach, all those experts and practitioners who did oppose such an approach outright were, in fact, MPs.

Given that this was likely to be the newest aspect of our recommendations, it was decided to learn some more detailed and practical lessons by undertaking an experiment in participatory democracy ourselves. This was the Open Budget designed and managed by the Inquiry in association with the London Borough of Harrow. The Open Budget was based on a set of principles and practices drawn from the Inquiry's earlier *Beyond the Ballot* research and was designed to give Harrow residents a more direct and detailed say over their local council's 2006/07 budget, largely through the organisation of a large deliberative assembly. However, the success of the project indicated to us that such techniques can prove popular with the wider public. The Open Budget assembly itself attracted some 300 participants to take part in six hours of deliberation on a Sunday afternoon, and generated a great deal of interest and debate in the local press and local community organisations. A brief look at the main findings from the assem-

bly participant evaluation form indicates how effective deliberative political events can be:

- 90 per cent regarded the event as "good" or "very good";
- 74 per cent felt the process should "definitely" be repeated next year;
- 43 per cent stated they now had an improved view of the Council, 55 per cent reported no change in their view;
- 80 per cent stated they would now be more interested in Council decisions;
- 64 per cent felt a similar process should "definitely" be used for other areas of Council work, 33 per cent felt the process should "possibly" be used for other areas.

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**The Harrow Open Budget Process**

At the heart of the process was the Open Budget Assembly. This brought together 300 Harrow residents on 23ʳᵈ October 2005 to discuss and vote on key priorities for the 2006/07 budget. Prior to the Assembly there was a period of consultation with council officers, councillors and community groups to identify the types of choices about different sections of the budget that should be put to the Assembly and to write the 'Assembly Discussion Guide' which would guide participants through those choices.

At the same time, a pro-active recruitment campaign was launched to encourage people to attend the Assembly. Any Harrow resident over the age of 16 was free to register for the Assembly. However, the recruitment campaign was designed to ensure that Assembly participants were as close to the ethnic, age, gender and social composition of Harrow as possible and that not only the 'usual suspects' took part. Councillors and officers were free to observe the Assembly but could not register to take part in the deliberation and voting.

As well as choosing budgetary priorities, the Assembly also elected an Open Budget Panel from amongst the participants. The Panel's main role was to produce a report for Assembly participants assessing how well the Council's final budget met the priorities agreed by the Assembly. It also kept participants informed on an ongoing basis prior to the budget setting in February, of how the budget was being developed and what efforts were being made to address the Assembly's priorities.

How did the Assembly work?

The Assembly was designed to allow a large number of people to discuss and decide on complex issues in a considered and deliberative manner. The 300 residents who attended were randomly divided onto tables of ten. Each table discussed the budgetary options in five sessions over six hours. Each table had its own trained facilitator who ensured equality in the discussion and fed back the table's views via a laptop computer to an analytical team. This team collated common views from all the tables and any particularly interesting ideas.

Plenaries were held between table discussions which allowed a lead facilitator to feed back the views collated by the analytical team to the whole room. The plenaries also gave participants the chance to vote as individuals on each option they had just been discussing by using voting keypads. The results of the vote were fed back to the whole room immediately on large screens.

Diversity in the Process

Efforts were made to ensure the Assembly represented the complex demography of Harrow. The Assembly was a very accurate reflection of Harrow's ethnic diversity. Geographic spread from across the borough was also good. All age groups were over-represented (including 16-19 year olds) at the expense of the 20-44 age group which was under-represented. There was also a small gender imbalance with forty more men than women attending. However, these imbalances

were rectified in the Panel on which the 20-44 age group over-represented and which had only four more men than women. It is also notable that there were eight 16-19 year olds on the Panel of thirty-four.

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Following the consideration of all this largely positive evidence, we are convinced that participatory approaches to democratic decision-making are now coming of age. There is clearly a public appetite for their wider use and, as stated above, they offer a clear policy response to two of the main causes of disengagement identified by the Commission.

In addition, a more participatory approach seems well suited to our post-industrial age. The traditional arguments which have been used against participatory democratic approaches have increasingly less relevance in the twenty-first century. The claim that the great majority of citizens do not have the intellectual capacity or expertise to make important decisions is less convincing in an era where educational attainment has risen significantly and where detailed information is increasingly easily accessed by very large numbers of people through the mass media and digital technology. We are totally convinced, given the evidence we have seen from across the world, and our own experience with the Harrow Open Budget, that when 'ordinary' citizens are presented with clear information and are given the freedom and structure to deliberate on that information, they will come to decisions just as reasoned and balanced as those made by elected representatives or public officials.

For example, the leading scholar of citizen-initiated referendum and recall in America concluded:

*Voters have been cautious and have almost always rejected extreme proposals. Most studies suggest that voters, despite the complexity of measures and the deceptions of some campaigns, exercise shrewd*

*judgement, and most students of direct democracy believe most American voters take their responsibility seriously.*[141]

There is also the linked claim that citizen initiatives will produce outcomes unfavourable to minorities. While there are some well-documented examples of successful initiatives which have promoted discrimination, it appears that voters are more tolerant than critics contend. It is important, when making these claims, to compare the decisions made using this mechanism with those passed by legislatures that do not use such initiatives, and research displays no clear evidence that the former leads to less tolerant legislation or policy.[142]

The other common argument against a participatory approach is that in an era of very much larger societies than that which existed in Ancient Athens, it is simply impossible to involve statistically significant numbers in decision-making processes. As a result, it is often argued, only a representative system can offer the necessary focus for decision-making in large, complex societies. However, as is detailed below, we are convinced that new technology and new techniques in public engagement will increasingly allow large numbers of citizens to become engaged in political decisions in a focussed way. They can also secure the confidence of the wider community in the legitimacy of the process.

A frequent objection to participatory approaches is that they are antithetical to representative democracy. We are not convinced that such a polarised view is now relevant. Representation and participation can exist alongside each other and even influence each other without unsustainable tensions arising.

Furthermore, at a point when the great mobilising ideologies, organisations and networks which connected people to political decision-making have lost their appeal and resonance, whether temporarily or forever, it is vital to find other ways of engaging the governors with the governed. The last chapter was clear that we do believe that political parties and the ideologies which sustain them may well re-

formulate around new identities, values and interests in the future. Indeed, a chief aim of creating a more responsive party and electoral system is to allow such reformulation to happen, without resistance, if necessary. However, such a process could take many years to occur if it happens at all. The current severe levels of disengagement simply cannot be allowed to continue for that length of time, so more participatory mechanisms should be introduced to address disengagement while parties and political value systems are allowed to develop anew. Of course, a much more rigorous and widely adopted approach to participation by the political system would also inform and may hasten the complex process by which political organisations and values are shaped by, and in turn shape, the wider social constituencies to which they are connected.

It should also be acknowledged that participatory approaches respond directly to the new sets of expectations of today's citizen created by post-industrialisation. As outlined in Part One of this report, the first of these is the expectation of citizens that they should have much greater control over many aspects of their lives. Today's citizen is not constrained by the traditional bonds and values of old, and the aspiration to shape one's own life with regard to major life choices, as well as the trivial material consumption of everyday existence, is now very widespread. Thus, not only are choices expected but options within those choices are expected too. The opportunity to participate in the detailed decisions of political life that concern or affect us most deeply clearly reflects this spirit and may go some way to explain the popularity of the approach amongst the many members of the public from whom we have heard.

Part One also detailed the less positive outcomes of post-industrialisation: the creation of a section of society struggling against the problems of structural unemployment, poorly paid work, low educational attainment, high crime levels and many other forms of disadvantage historically associated with low income and poor living conditions. As was pointed out in Part One, these sections of society are doubly alienated from political processes. Not only are they widely disgusted at the permanence of their situation and the apparent inability of politicians to make any significant difference to their lives, but the organisations and networks of organisations which articulate the political concerns of other sections of society and offer them some level of engagement with political decision-making, at least informally, do not exist for these lower income groups. Hence, if these citizens are the ones most in need of wielding influence over political decisions, since they have the most pressing concerns, they remain the ones with the very least influence. As such, the use of participatory methods which offer genuine influence to the most marginal groups in our society over the design, implementation and evaluation of the policies that affect them would have a major impact on some of the most severe political disengagement in the country.

We are clear that for all the enthusiasm we observed in relation to greater public involvement in decision-making, we do not believe that participation should be regarded as an alternative to representation. The vision that informs the recommendations below is a 'mixed economy' of participatory methods and a more open and responsive system of elected representation. This is for four main reasons.

- The complex processes which bring together the values and interests of people and decide upon the major allocation of public funds are still best carried out by processes of election between opposing candidates offering different, broad programmes for government. Participatory methods can inform such processes at every step but they cannot resolve large-scale political disputes as conclusively, or comprehensively, as an election.

- Linked to this point, elections are not purely about the election of a representative but also about the election of a government. Clearly, participatory methods cannot fulfil this role.

- The existence of an assembly of full-time elected representatives offers a degree of detailed and ongoing scrutiny and deliberation of an executive's actions which participatory methods, however well-designed, cannot hope to offer.

- Finally, our representative system is one of the oldest and best-established in the world. It is a crucial part not just of the way Britain works but also of its national identity and culture. Such a fact cannot and should not be simply dismissed in favour of some other way of working. However, neither should it be used as an argument for having no change at all.

We believe, therefore, that a more participatory approach to democratic decision-making should be developed alongside the representative traditions which have been so important to effective government in Britain. The recommendations below show that if we are imaginative, participation and representation can not only exist alongside each other, but, by addressing disengagement, can actually strengthen representative democracy and ensure it is carrying out the functions for which it was designed.

**Recommendation 23: All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes.**

In order to imbue government and service delivery in Britain with a culture of participation, it is recommended that an Act of Parliament establish a duty of public involvement for all public bodies. It is expected that the Act would require public bodies to have such a duty written into their remits, targets and performance criteria.

We are aware that consultation with 'stakeholders', interest groups and members of the public is an increasingly common feature of the way public bodies make decisions. We also note that 'commu-nity engagement' is a central feature of the latest performance assessment for local authorities.

However, the evidence received by us in all our sources of evidence is that popular cynicism towards public consultation is very strong. The process is widely regarded as meaningless, in that it is often unclear how a consultation process can influence final decisions taken by officials or representatives. Many people feel that consultation is undertaken by public bodies simply to "tick boxes" or to give a veneer of legitimacy to a decision that has already been made.

We believe that if a duty of public involvement is to make a genuine difference to disengagement, then it must mean more than simply consultation. It must genuinely mean 'involvement' in that the public can clearly recognise that their participation has led to their views being taken into account when a final decision is made.

This requires a willingness on the part of public bodies to learn from the many innovations in public involvement being conducted across the world, and which have been detailed in *Power's Beyond the Ballot* study. It also requires a greater consistency in the will to implement meaningful public engagement by the senior management of public bodies. This is why the duty of public involvement cannot simply be left as an aspiration asserted by Parliament or the Government but must be written into the specific documents and processes governing individual public bodies.

Most importantly, it requires that public involvement is based not on vague goals or even on attachment to certain models of engagement, but on clear principles which should inform all efforts at involvement. We have drawn up the following five principles based on the evidence we received of best practice across the world. However, we are well aware that other principles may also play a part in ensuring effective public involvement. The five principles are as follows.

Influence: Any involvement process must offer some measure of real influence to citizens over final decisions. *Power's* own research,

the evidence it has received and its experiment in public involvement in the London Borough of Harrow is absolutely clear that it is influence that encourages participation in any process and makes it meaningful. This reflects the wider concern about lack of influence being a major cause of disengagement which was outlined in Part One.

Our work also makes it clear, however, that influence need not mean participants having a final or absolute say over a key decision or policy. The majority of citizens simply want to know that their views and interests have been taken fully into account and have been treated with the respect due to them. Our evidence and our experience in Harrow has convinced us that it is simply untrue that citizens are no longer able to understand the imperative for negotiation and compromise or to appreciate wider collective needs that are fundamental to democratic decision-making. It is notable, for example, that, despite the ongoing public disquiet over council tax rises, when the Assembly in the Harrow Open Budget was asked what values should inform local authority decisions, cost was ranked fourth out of six values below efficacy, environmental impact and long-term impact.

We believe, however, that certain processes of engagement will encourage these democratic characteristics to come to the fore, and others will not. The remaining principles ensure that such characteristics are encouraged.

Feedback: The research seen by the Power Commission is clear that a major cause of alienation from public engagement is the failure of the relevant authority to explain to participants how their views were taken into account when a decision was taken. It is this failure which often leads participants to conclude, maybe rightly, that their views have in fact not been taken into account and that the engagement process was just a bureaucratic or cosmetic political exercise. Thus it is vital that any public involvement process includes effective feedback processes for participants. If this feedback can come from a trusted source, then the involvement exercise will have even greater

credibility. The Open Budget in Harrow, for example, established a Panel elected by the Assembly from amongst their own number to report back to the Assembly participants on whether and how their decision had influenced the final budget set by the Council.

Deliberation: We are aware that interaction between elected representatives or public officials and members of the public is now often conducted in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and even hostile conflict. This reflects the high levels of cynicism towards political authority detailed throughout this report. It is also clear that some of this conflict arises from the fact that elected representatives and public officials understand themselves to be making decisions on behalf of the public good, while individual citizens are often pursuing their own self-interest when pressing a particular point.

The power of creating a structured space within which elected representatives, public officials and members of the public can speak to each other resides in the fact that it erodes mutual antipathy by encouraging face-to-face interaction on equal and courteous terms. It also allows members of the public to understand and appreciate the public good imperatives which officials and representatives have to take into account, and weigh these against their own interests.

The Harrow Open Budget made wide use of such deliberative techniques to encourage facilitated, well-informed discussion which dealt with both the detail of individual policies and the wider context within which they were being proposed. It is in large part the careful use of such techniques that leads to the very high satisfaction ratings for such events.

Information: Effective involvement relies heavily on the fact that participants have equal access to all relevant sources of information. A great deal of consultation or engagement is currently conducted without great thought as to how the relevant information about a policy area can be communicated. Is it clear? Are the risks set out as well

as the benefits? Indeed some popular forms of consultation, such as the telephone survey, make no effort to communicate detailed information before participants are asked to come to a conclusion. One of the reasons why citizens juries are so successful is because the group hears evidence on all sides of an issue and can make evaluations which are evidence based.

Provision of all relevant information in an accessible format is therefore vital if deliberation is to occur in a context in which all participants are on as equal a footing as possible.

Independence:  The evidence taken by the Inquiry suggests that exercises in public involvement often work best when they are designed, managed and facilitated by an independent body. This adds legitimacy to the process by reducing the possibilities for political manipulation or the perception of it. However, in practice, such independence may only be possible for large-scale involvement exercises due to cost restrictions. If a culture of public involvement was genuinely to infuse all public bodies, then it is highly likely that many small exercises in involvement would be occurring all the time and would be conducted 'in-house'.

Introducing a duty of public involvement for all public bodies based on these principles would begin to imbue all public decision and policy-making with a culture of effective involvement which would, in turn, begin to challenge the widespread sense of lack of influence which is a major cause of disengagement.

However, it is clear to us, that many elected representatives see public involvement as a challenge to their role and position.

The evidence presented to the Commission and its own experience through the Harrow Open Budget suggests that some of these objections are motivated simply by a distaste for wider public participation in politics or by an unwillingness to share power with others. We feel that such motivations simply cannot be accepted at a time when disengagement from formal democracy is so severe and the wider participation suggested in this chapter offers a clear way to address this disengagement.

However, for many elected representatives there is the more considered fear that the type of direct participation being suggested here undermines the fact that they are elected to pursue a particular programme of change based on their party's manifesto. For example, some Harrow Councillors in the ruling Labour group were understandably concerned that the Open Budget process might have identified priorities fundamentally different from those which they were elected to uphold, although this did not prove to be the case in practice.

These are tensions which the *Power* Commission believes need to be addressed in practice rather than be treated as insuperable obstacles to greater public involvement in democratic decision-making. This is primarily because greater public involvement cannot be ignored as a necessary response to the types of dissatisfaction and changes in citizens' expectations that we have encountered in our evidence. In particular, it is clear from the evidence that while elected representatives may feel a strong allegiance to their manifesto programmes as a whole, a far greater number of citizens resent the assumption that their vote should automatically be taken as assent to everything that is contained in a manifesto.

We have also taken account of the fact that even given the supposed endorsement an election provides for a party's broad programme, there is still a great deal left unsaid in a manifesto which could be the subject of much greater public involvement. This could include the detail of how certain policies or aspirations are implemented, the development of future policies which have not yet found a place in a manifesto and government response to unforeseen developments and events. Greater public involvement in such areas would not necessarily undermine an elected authority's manifesto commitments.

In addition, we feel that when public involvement is well-designed and meaningful it will enhance rather than undermine the standing of elected representatives. As has been pointed out earlier in this report, and as is discussed in more detail below, the main cause of the low esteem in which politicians are held is the widespread perception that they fail to engage with citizens between elections and are more accountable to their party leaderships than their constituents. Thus, an emphasis on public involvement which offers a role for elected representatives will begin to counter this perception and gradually persuade people that their representatives are genuinely interested in, and are responding to, their views and interests.

**Recommendation 24: Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.**

The right of citizens to initiate referendums on legislation by collecting a pre-ordained number of signatures on a petition is widely used across the world, although it is most famously employed in a number of US states and in Switzerland.

The great benefit of such citizens' initiatives from the point of view of the *Power* Commission is its capacity to address the two key causes of disengagement relevant to this chapter. Firstly, it provides citizens with a very tangible power over the most crucial issues confronting a democracy. Most importantly, it allows those citizens to decide for themselves what those issues are, even if the Executive and legislature have ignored the issues. Secondly, it allows citizens to bring single issues into the formal democratic sphere in a far more precise way than voting or membership of a political party allows. It is this focus on specific policy areas which is increasingly popular with citizens, but operates largely outside of formal democracy, and which has contributed to the declining appeal of parties and elections. Citizens' initiatives have the potential to capture the political energy generated by single issues and make them a source of re-engagement with formal democratic processes.

We believe, however, that the power of citizens' initiative should be extended beyond legislative processes to include public inquiries and to include hearings into the performance of public bodies. It is felt that this is important because governments have proved themselves unwilling on occasion to establish major inquiries or hearings on subjects which, at the very least, could be regarded as matters of major public concern.

In addition, it is felt that the power to initiate hearings on the performance of public bodies is an important boost for accountability in a period when the capacity of elected representatives to scrutinise and control such bodies has been eroded (see Chapter 6). This power would, in particular, offer citizens, who feel that a local public body was failing to deliver an acceptable level of service, a significant power to effect change without having to wait for the attention and decisions of government departments, local authorities or regulatory authorities. We note that the current Government has itself recently floated the idea of allowing citizens to initiate inquiries or hearings into local public bodies.

We also note that the power of initiative is not the fact that it is used regularly – it is not – but its very existence exerts pressure on governments and other authorities to take account of public feeling, and address popular concerns, for fear that if they do not a citizens' initiative is always a possibility. In this way it helps create the more open and responsive government which is so crucial to the resolution of disengagement.

In short, citizens' initiative would add to the overall perception and reality of direct citizen influence which would address this key cause of disengagement.

We recommend, therefore, that legislation is introduced to Parliament which would allow British citizens to initiate legislative processes on issues of their choosing, to initiate public inquiries on issues of their choosing, and to initiate hearings into the performance

of public bodies and their senior management.

We are aware that serious concerns are raised about initiative procedures, particularly that they can be hijacked by professional lobbying organisations and by sections of the media, and that they can lead to ill-informed, populist measures. To address these concerns, we recommend a process which allows time and freedom for the public and elected representatives to enter into a debate about whether an initiative proposal is appropriate and then whether it should be approved.

The following is a possible model which might meet such stipulations, but we are aware that there may be a number of different ways to ensure that time and opportunity for detailed public deliberation is a feature of an initiative process. Hence, this model is provided not as a firm recommendation but as an indication of the type of process we have in mind.

For a national initiative the process would be as follows.

i. A legislative proposal receiving the support of 1 per cent of registered electors on a petition within the space of one year (approximately 400,000 signatures across the UK) must be formally debated and voted on by Parliament or the relevant devolved assembly. Negotiations between MPs and the principals leading the initiative can be part of this process. If Parliament rejects the proposal or amends it in a way that is unsatisfactory to the initiative's principals or other members of the public, the process moves to (ii).

ii. A proposal already debated by Parliament or devolved assembly which receives the support of a *further* 1 per cent of registered electors within the next six months is then presented as a referendum question to the people of Britain. We are wary of the use of internet and email petitions for the launch of an initiative since this may reduce the time and

freedom for public deliberation which a traditional paper petition would allow. Therefore, it may be that only paper petitions would be an acceptable way of launching an initiative at either stage (i) or (ii).

iii. If over 60 per cent of registered electors turn out, and if the proposal is passed by a simple majority, it passes into law.

iv. At any point, this process may be halted if the High Court rules that the referendum proposal is contrary to the Human Rights Act.

v. If a proposal fails at the referendum stage, it cannot be brought before the British people within the next five years.

vi. Initiative proposals relating to public finances or taxation would be barred on the grounds that they could be used to derail the legislative programmes of governments or local administrations.

Initiatives for legislation would be managed, and any disputes about process resolved, by the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission would also have responsibility for reviewing the petition thresholds which would trigger the two main stages of the initiative process. The threshold level should ensure that launching a successful initiative is not a common event but neither is it likely to be a rarity. If it became clear that petition threshold levels were allowing too many or too few initiatives, the Electoral Commission would conduct a consultation and research process to decide on a new level.

The process would be broadly the same at local government level as at national level but petition thresholds would be set at a sliding scale depending on the number of registered electors within an authority's area. These levels would also be set and reviewed by the

Electoral Commission. Of course, initiative proposals would be submitted to the local council for discussion and decision by councillors rather than by Parliament.

Initiatives designed to launch public inquiries or hearings into public bodies would have a different process.

i.   Demands for public inquiries or hearings relating to national public bodies which receive the support of 2 per cent of registered electors nationally over a period of one year would automatically be referred to an independent Commissioner for Inquiries and Hearings. Demands for hearings into local public bodies would require the support of a percentage of electors in the area covered by the relevant public body. This percentage would be set on a sliding scale akin to that used for legislative initiative as detailed above.

ii.  The Commissioner would be charged with drawing up the remit for the inquiry or hearing – in negotiation with the principals behind the initiative – and inviting independent individuals to sit on the inquiry or hearing including members of the public. All inquiries and hearings would be led by a commission rather than a single individual to ensure that evidence and conclusions are given the fullest consideration.

iii. The inquiry or hearing would have the power to compel attendance by witnesses. In the case of a hearing, testimony would be given under oath.

iv.  In the case of an inquiry, findings and recommendations must be formally debated and voted on by Parliament or relevant devolved institution. In the case of a hearing, recommendations would require a written response from the elected authority to which a public body or its management is

accountable. If action is not taken in response to a hearing's recommendations, the Commissioner for Inquiries and Hearings will judge whether the reasons given are sufficient. If they are not judged sufficient and the relevant elected body refuses to take further action, then the Commissioner will assume responsibility for enacting the hearing's recommendations as he or she sees fit.

We believe that the introduction of citizens' initiative in the way described above would amount to a major symbolic and practical step towards rebalancing the relationship between the state and citizen in a way that meets the expectations and preferences of the modern citizen and reinvigorates the British political system through the application of the democratic ideal of self-determination. In this way, it would make a major contribution to ending disengagement from formal democracy.

**Recommendation 25: The rules on the plurality of media ownership should be reformed. This is always a controversial issue but there should be special consideration given to this issue in light of the developments in digital broadcast and the internet.**

The *Power* Commission received little evidence to suggest that there is widespread public concern about the oft-heard claims that the media is unnecessarily negative towards politics and politicians (see Chapter 3). However, another aspect of the media did arise as a common cause of concern and which was a contributing factor to disengagement. This is that the media is widely regarded as a significant unelected influence on government policy and decisions. Many people feel that this reduces the significance of citizen influence over government and hence weakens the incentive for engagement.

Indicative submissions in response to public consultation regarding the political power of the media

*The media have been behaving like a political party in recent years. They should step away and concentrate on factual information and pure entertainment. Currently they are turning people off by being clearly politically biased either towards the right, or as is more common with the BBC, towards the left.*

*The media is more of an opposition than the Opposition. They should avoid dragging up stories about politicians, private lives that are not in the public interest and focus instead on the importance of voting and democracy.*

*A powerful media which lacks diversity, combined with an apathetic electorate is worrisome. I would support restrictions on the number of media outlets that can be owned by one person, and hope that greater diversity, in views and forms (i.e. the internet) improves the situation.*

*Ownership of media companies is not well regulated in the public interest. It should not be possible for an individual or company to own more than one national newspaper title nor for an individual or company to own a newspaper as well as television or radio stations/ news-gathering networks. Commercial considerations influence too greatly how newspapers and other media gather, edit and represent news stories about politics.*

*The media's agenda is largely directed by the vested interests of political parties and capital and in selling its coverage of hot stories (I'm not saying this is wrong since the media is largely a profit making concern). The media routinely and systematically ignores the serious problems of our times, such as climate change, global poverty,*

*massive political unrest social instability and dispossession all over the world and spends much of its time analysing party political rhetoric, the behaviour of the Windsor family and the wranglings of religious establishments.*

*The media largely serves its own (financial) interests and barely serves the interests of the public.*

*I think it is a disgrace that so much of the media is concentrated in so few private hands. I think it is a disgrace that it is allowed to 'self-regulate'. The media should be forced to maintain professional standards of impartiality and factual correctness. Perhaps this could be done through a directly elected regulating body or through legislation to prevent ownership of controlling stakes by individuals or corporations. There should be no room for Murdochs or Berlusconis.*

*The control of most of the national press by a very small number of wealthy individuals with their own agenda (e.g. Rupert Murdoch, Richard Desmond) is a major influence here and ways should be found to limit the ownership of too great a share of the media by any individual or organisation.*

*The media is owned by those with vested interests – big business interests and reporting is biased accordingly. The media can start to improve by explaining how our democracy is meant to work, how people can participate and reporting not just news but using features to give more depth and balance. See for example The Herald.*

*The media's main aim is to sell papers and good news stories do not achieve this. Hence every day people are bombarded with over the top horror stories. Many of the tabloids and even some of the broadsheets refuse to have sensible debates on issues. They give one sided political view points that tend to be the opinion of the owner. This can be*

*resolved by forcing the media to give unbiased accounts of events and facts rather than opinion.*

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We are also aware that the efficacy of many of the recommendations made elsewhere in this report could be limited by a media lacking in political diversity and the will to use its political power responsibly. This is particularly the case with regard to the proposals on citizens' initiative immediately above. Although care has been taken in the suggested model to ensure that detailed and lengthy public deliberation is a part of the process, such deliberation can only be aided by a diverse media in which distinct but considered perspectives on a particular proposal are put before the public by the main organs of the press, broadcast and internet media.

The issue of plurality in media ownership was obviously a key feature of the debate surrounding the passage of the Communications Act 2003 through Parliament. After a rebellion in the House of Lords led by the Chair of the Joint Committee on the Communications Bill, the Government agreed to make the public interest a criteria by which Ofcom and ultimately the Secretary of State with responsibility for the media should judge any change in the ownership of media outlets. This would be in addition to the usual matters of commercial competition by which mergers are judged.

However, the Joint Committee had other concerns. These were that the relaxation of the restrictions on foreign and cross-media ownership proposed in the Bill should only occur once Ofcom has established itself as an authoritative regulator in the area of commercial public service broadcasting *and* if it recommended such a relaxation itself. In addition, the Joint Committee felt the same restrictions for newspaper proprietor ownership of Channel Three should also apply to Channel Five. Both of these concerns were rejected by the Government.

However, we feel that much greater public debate on the issue of media ownership needs to be conducted than occurred in the case of the Communications Act of which the contours were ultimately decided by intense whipping and politicking in the Lords. In the short to medium term, this means that when a major change in the ownership of the media is afoot, the decision taken by Ofcom and the Secretary of State about its impact on the public interest must not be taken without an independent, structured and thoroughgoing process of public deliberation and involvement. It should also be clear how any decision taken by the Secretary of State has taken account of the conclusions of that public deliberation process.

However, in the longer term it means there is a need for a much wider public debate about the future of media ownership in Britain, given the radical changes currently taking place in media provision with the growing importance of digital broadcasting and the internet. The launch and maintenance of such a debate is particularly necessary because the practical implications of these changes will only become clear over time. Thus it is vital that the provisions of the Communications Act are kept under very close scrutiny by Parliament and other interested bodies in the context of such ongoing debate and that an openness about the possibility of revising the Act is accepted by government and the main political parties.

**Recommendation 26: A requirement that public service broadcasters develop strategies to involve viewers in deliberation on matters of public importance – this would be aided by the use of digital technology.**

A further aspect of the media in relation to disengagement relates to the advent of digital technology. The evidence presented to us makes it clear that broadcast media is now key to the seizing of a major opportunity to engage very large numbers of citizens in public deliberation on issues of political importance.

Light entertainment television shows such as *Big Brother* and *The X Factor* have shown that there is a public appetite to engage with the

broadcast media in a relatively simple interactive fashion – in most cases by casting a vote for or against a particular individual engaged in a competition. In addition, the rise of political debate on the internet – charted in Part One – has revealed the potential for the development of a new culture of deliberation on current issues.

The prospect that television and the internet will be combined into one media form over the coming years offers the exciting possibility that interaction with television programmes could become highly sophisticated. It could be based more on a debate between broadcaster and viewer, and viewer and viewer, rather than on the simple casting of a vote. It could be both national and on a local basis, with the planned licencing of local television stations. The potential in this to take the techniques and spirit of public involvement in politics to a very large audience is clearly great. Of course, the switchover to digital transmission for all television broadcasting in the UK between 2008 and 2012 will only make the potential reach and impact of such involvement that much greater.

As with the recent development of successful interactive programmes on television, the technology and techniques which will make political deliberation effective through such media will take much experimentation and time to develop. However, the evidence presented to *Power* indicates that little if any work is yet being conducted by broadcasters to plan for the future by developing this potential. Indeed, the history of analogue broadcasting means that the prevailing view of the television audience is still to regard it as a passive body unwilling or unable to become involved in sophisticated or detailed interaction.

The Commission feels that if the potential of the digital revolution is to be seized to tackle political disengagement then any public service remit for either the BBC or commercial television should include the requirement to do just that. They should be expected to develop a strategy for engaging the public in deliberation on issues of public and political importance.

**Recommendation 27: MPs should be required and resourced to produce annual reports, hold AGMs and make more use of innovative engagement techniques.**

So far this chapter has concentrated largely on the need for institutions to encourage and allow much greater public involvement in their decision-making processes. However, we believe it is vital that individual MPs also adopt this ethic.

As has been made clear elsewhere in this report, public attitudes to MPs are not positive. We have specifically rejected the notion that this is due to any weakening in the calibre of MPs themselves but that it is more the result of major changes in the expectations citizens now have of their elected representatives. In particular, the Inquiry's research and evidence shows that citizens feel particularly alienated from their parliamentary representatives in two related areas:

- it is widely felt that MPs do not engage with or listen to their constituents enough between elections;
- it is widely felt that MPs are more accountable to their party leaderships and whips than they are to their constituents on the key issues of the day.

These concerns clearly relate to the wider causes of disengagement identified by the Commission, most notably, the sense of a lack of influence over political decisions reported by many people, and the dissatisfaction widely felt towards the main political parties.

We are, of course, aware that many MPs work extremely hard to maintain links with their constituencies and spend a great deal of time working to benefit their constituents. Indeed, some MPs have taken time and effort to adopt innovative ways of keeping in touch with their constituents. Some are making wider use of consultation by internet, email and even mobile phone text to discover the views of their constituents. Others are building networks amongst the least engaged, holding 'policy workshops' with constituents or establish-

ing more accessible and informal offices and events at which they can meet their electorate.

However, what is lacking is the existence of formal, resourced and high-profile methods by which all MPs can listen and respond to the concerns of their constituents between elections. Such processes would not only show that MPs were taking account of their constituents' views, but might also help to counter the undue influence of the whips which is a major source of alienation for the public.

We were impressed that the Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham, Harriet Harman, publishes an Annual Report so that her constituents see what she has achieved in the previous year.

Drawing upon this idea the Commission recommends that all MPs should be expected to produce an Annual Report which is distributed to all constituents and is then discussed at an Annual General Meeting of constituents. This practice should be properly funded by an allowance to MPs to be used solely for this purpose. Such funding is vital because the MP's AGM must be structured according to the best practice in public engagement to ensure that the meetings do not become events at which the 'usual suspects' engage in unconstructive conflict with their representative and with each other. As such, the AGM should meet the principles of best practice outlined under Recommendation 23 in this chapter.

It should be pointed out, of course, that important though such efforts at greater engagement by MPs may be, they will remain very limited in their success if the power of Parliament itself remains so restricted relative to the Executive. Even the most active and innovative of parliamentary representatives, when it comes to public engagement, will be stumped when a constituent asks him or her *why* they should actually bother to speak to their MP given the severe limitations on the MP's capacity to influence change. This only emphasises a point made throughout this report that the three big shifts in political practice informing these recommendations will reverse disengagement only when they are implemented with equal vigour.

We did receive evidence suggesting that constituents should be given the power to recall their MPs between elections through the collection of constituents' signatures followed by a local referendum. Many feel that such a power would offer significant influence to citizens; that it would act as a pressure on MPs to remain engaged with the constituents between elections, and that it would act as a counterweight to the influence of the party whips. The idea also proved particularly popular with the Inquiry's Citizens' Panel.

However, after considerable discussion, we felt that a responsive electoral system (see Chapter 8) in which voters could choose more independently-minded candidates from one party, or could vote, meaningfully, for candidates without a party allegiance, would be a more sophisticated way for constituents to express their views about the independence and public engagement of their representative, and would render recall powers largely redundant.

**Recommendation 28: Ministerial meetings with campaign groups and their representatives should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.**

When engagement is spoken about by politicians and public officials, it often means engagement with 'stakeholders' which tends to include other public officials and professionals or figures from campaign, interest and community groups. While the *Power* Commission believes that stakeholder engagement is a vital part of the effective operation of a modern political system, it should not be viewed as a substitute for direct engagement with citizens themselves.

It is not clear to us that all of these stakeholders are accountable or particularly well-connected to the sections of society they claim to represent, although many clearly are. Nor is it clear that their policy positions are always based on good engagement with their own members, supporters or communities. Do the male elders, for example, of minority communities adequately represent the views of women?

Of greatest concern to the Commission is the fact that stakeholder consultation can sometimes be as opaque as the interaction between business and political decision-makers (discussed in Chapter 6). Although the influence of stakeholder groups over government is not as great a source of concern as the influence of business, it is important that transparency is introduced into the relationship to prevent it becoming yet another factor which suggests to citizens that their influence counts for nought against further well-resourced and powerful players.

Thus, as with recommendations on the role of business, we feel that meetings between ministers, senior civil servants and stakeholder, campaign and interest groups should be placed on a more formal footing. We recommend that all such meetings be formally logged and regularly listed in an easily accessible format and without the requirement of a formal request under the Freedom of Information Act. MPs or members of the public should then have a speedy response when requesting documents relating to any particular meeting or meetings under the Act.

The strict limitations on funding of parties by organisations suggested above should also make the relationship between government and stakeholder groups more open and accountable and reduce the risk of impropriety. In addition, a more powerful Parliament should enhance the relationship between MPs and these groups and bring such groups out from the relatively more hidden world of ministerial briefings and agreements.

**Recommendation 29: The creation of a new independent National Statistical and Information Service to provide the public with key information free of political spin.**

As was pointed out under Recommendation 19, an effective public involvement exercise relies heavily on the provision of relevant and accessible information. The same is true of the wider, less bounded processes of public involvement suggested elsewhere in this chapter.

Ensuring plurality in media ownership is a central part of this, but we also feel that government and academic research bodies could also play an important role in informing debates. To quote Jack Straw in a speech to the Royal Statistical Society on 25th April 1995 when he was in Opposition:

> *In any democracy, the public should have a healthy scepticism about the claims, and practices, of politicians. But there can come a point where the cynicism goes so deep that it corrodes the foundations of our political system, leading to a wholesale lack of confidence in the system, and to a detachment between the governed, and what is perceived to be the governing class – in which I include MPs of all parties. I believe that we are dangerously close to that position today.*

Jack Straw indicated that his concern was with the way statistics were susceptible to manipulation by government and then went on to say:

> *Democracy is about conceding power to those with whom you disagree, not to those with whom you agree; and about ensuring that every citizen has a similar access to the information on which decisions are made and governments are judges.*

The Commission agrees.

We recommend the publication of regular information and briefings for the public, detailing the sum of government and academic research and statistics on issues of ongoing concern or of current relevance. An annual analysis assessing what the statistics and research tells us about progress or otherwise in areas of key concern to government and society would also be a particularly useful addition to public debate. This work should be conducted by an independent body similar to the National Audit Office to ensure fairness and rigour in the presentation of the findings. The body should be fully re-

sourced not just to carry out the statistical analysis and the adequate secondary research but also to ensure that its reports are professionally produced, highly accessible and widely disseminated, and that they obtain media coverage.

**Recommendation 30: 'Democracy hubs' should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.**

The cumulative impact of the recommendations in this chapter will be to create a wide range of opportunities and means for people to raise issues of concern with public officials and elected representatives. It is vital that resources are available to facilitate, advise and publicise these means and opportunities so that full use can be made of them by the public to ensure that they promote re-engagement with formal democratic processes as effectively as possible. It is recommended, therefore, that offices and resource centres are established in each local authority area, staffed by the necessary specialists and with sufficient resources to carry out these tasks. Most importantly, these 'democracy hubs' will offer a point at which citizens can obtain information and support on how to raise issues of concern through the political system. It would be important, in practice, to differentiate the role of 'democracy hubs' from Citizens' Advice Bureaux. The former would be concerned with aiding collective political activity while the latter concentrates on helping individuals resolve their legal and financial problems.

These recommendations, if vigorously implemented, will create a new sense of influence for the ordinary citizen over the policies and decisions that most affect their lives or about which they are most concerned. The ability of political power in Britain so easily to stonewall public demands would be greatly reduced. In addition, the freedom of any authority to take decisions which deeply affect the lives of citizens without serious consideration of their views and interests would also be greatly curtailed. If the recommendations are implemented, a major barrier to participation in democracy – the sense that ordinary citizens' views count for little or nothing – will begin to crumble. There is also, of course, the possibility, often overlooked in the debate about a more participatory democracy, that those in authority may actually make better decisions and more effective policy as a result of entering in to serious deliberation with those who will be affected by those policies or decisions.
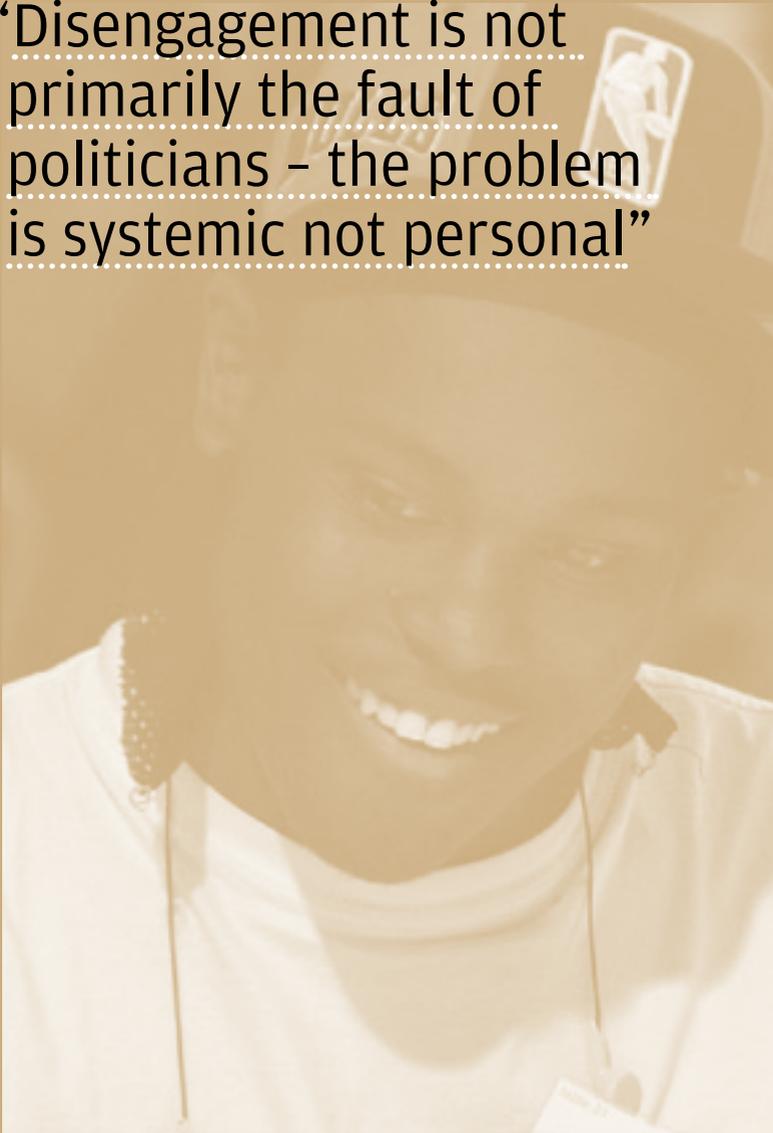
# "Disengagement is not primarily the fault of politicians – the problem is systemic not personal"

# Conclusion

Midway through its inquiry the *Power* Commission travelled to Manchester to hear witness testimony from a group of people who worked hard to bring about change for their deprived and marginalised communities. We heard from Gaafe Ali, a leading activist in the Sudanese Cultural association, Mandy Powell, who has been at the forefront of regeneration in East Manchester, Nasima Rahman, who works to involve Asian women in community affairs, and Anne Stewart, who works for the greater engagement of women and disabled people with decision-makers.

The following month we travelled to Cardiff where we heard from leading national and local figures in the established political parties. The witnesses included Matt Carter, General Secretary of the Labour Party, Alan Duncan, Conservative Transport Spokesman at that time, Simon Thomas, Plaid Cymru MP for Ceridigion until 2005, and Simon Wakefield, a Liberal Democrat Councillor in Cardiff.

The contrast between these two events was striking. The Manchester witnesses impressed us with their manifestly high levels of commitment to, and understanding of, the needs of their community. These were intelligent, energetic people motivated by humanity and concern for the well-being of others. Equally striking was the fact that they felt that the established parties and processes of democracy, national and local, could offer them little or nothing of great benefit to

their communities. Indeed, there was some strong feeling that formal politics was often a positive barrier to change.

The experience of Manchester only confirmed what we had discovered in so much of the rest of our evidence. A great many British people are active participants in their various and diverse communities, and in many different ways, but formal democracy has become a turn-off of unique proportions.

In Cardiff, we could not help being struck by how willing the witnesses were to acknowledge the problem formal democracy faces. These committed politicians, like most of their contemporaries, know that severe disengagement exists. They also had a thoughtful and sophisticated understanding of why the problem has come about. They knew that peoples' values, expectations, lifestyles and interests had changed dramatically in the last four decades and that the main parties and the political system as a whole were struggling to respond to that.

What was disheartening for us, however, was when the issue of political change was raised. Not only was no clear agenda for reform expressed by either one or the whole panel of politicians, but there was also a resistance, even a tetchiness, when some of the ideas we have been considering were put to the witnesses. Interestingly, it was at this point, that some of the 'red herrings' about the causes of the problem – identified in Part One – emerged in place of the more thoughtful analysis of the earlier discussion. Suddenly, change became a matter for the people rather than the politicians. The Vice Chair of our Commission, Ferdinand Mount, quoted Bertolt Brecht to characterise what he had heard: "Would it not be easier in that case to dissolve the people and elect another?"

It is important to be very clear about what we are saying here because all our experience tells us that many politicians are very defensive about this problem. We are not saying that politicians are to blame for disengagement. We have specifically rejected the notion that our elected representatives and leaders are of a lower calibre than their predecessors. We have rejected the popular view that all politicians lie, break promises and pursue nothing but their own careers.

The problem is systemic not personal. Disengagement has arisen because a disjunction now exists between the way formal democratic politics is structured and conducted in Britain and the values, interests, expectations and lifestyles of the British people. The failure of politicians is not the way they behave in their professional lives but the fact that they have not yet developed a strategic and thoroughgoing response to address this disjunction.

The contrast between the witness sessions in Manchester and Cardiff was not between honest, hardworking grassroots activists and evasive, self-interested politicians. The contrast was between active citizens who could not see meaning in formal politics and formal politicians who could not see how they might offer that meaning to those active citizens.

For the politicians' own sake, let alone anyone else's, this is not a situation that can continue. No doubt, the agenda of reform detailed in this report would prove painful for many elected representatives. It amounts not just to a great shift in the culture and ethos of professional politics in Britain but, almost certainly, to a major restructuring of the way in which political parties are aligned and do their campaigning. Of course, other reforms, such as the re-empowering of Parliament and local government relative to the Executive, will be welcome to many MPs and Councillors. The report has been clear, however, that the three big shifts in political practice proposed here cannot be cherry-picked. We are willing to accept that there may be various ways of achieving those shifts beyond the detailed recommendations proposed here, but the shifts themselves must be implemented alongside one another if democratic renewal is to follow.

The politicians might fear the pain of reform, but it would be less than the pain of dismissing change or the prolonged agony of vainly hoping that something will turn up like a new party leader to re-engage British citizens with their democracy. The outcome of inac-

tion will only be ever greater decline in the public esteem in which politicians are held. Ultimately, it is possible that the brief local upsurges in support for anti-democratic and populist parties and candidates will develop into local, regional and even national mutinies as popular disenchantment with the main parties, elections and political decision-making is mobilised and focused.

The potential for this to happen would be magnified vastly should Britain suffer a period of economic slowdown in the future. It would be foolish to underestimate the campaign value to an extremist party or candidate of combining popular economic alienation with the widespread political alienation which the Inquiry has highlighted. The report has already made reference to the research which demonstrated the electoral benefits that this approach had brought to the British National Party in parts of the country.

However, it is clear that change of the magnitude proposed in this report cannot be left simply to elected representatives. Certainly, an alliance for change needs to be built amongst the most clearsighted MPs, local councillors, MEPs and members of the devolved institutions. The power of a growing number of elected representatives getting behind an agenda for democratic renewal would not only bring pressure on our over-mighty Executive but would also show the wider public that the message of disillusion is being taken seriously by some in the political establishment. This, in itself, might, in a small way, start to rebuild trust. Nevertheless, only a sustained campaign for change from outside the democratic assemblies and parliaments of the UK will ensure that meaningful reform occurs. The citizens themselves must be seen to demand this change if it is to have a real impact on decision-makers and prevent the cherry-picking which this report has repeatedly warned against.

Of course, it has long been a claim of politicians and columnists that the wider public are not interested in constitutional reform. The Charter 88 campaign of the 1990s was characterised as a movement of the 'chattering classes' while only 'bread and butter' issues such as health, education and jobs mattered to the great majority of citizens.

Two factors render this argument obsolete. Firstly, there is the fact that in 2006, disillusionment with politics and politicians is more intense and widespread than it was even a decade ago. The appetite for change and the interest shown in proposals for real change are palpable – they have been felt by the *Power* Commission throughout its inquiry. This appetite and interest come not just from the metropolitan elites but also from the wider country. If anything, it is those elites who have shown themselves to us to be often quite wary of real democratic reform that offers influence to citizens whose views they often don't trust or dismiss.

Secondly, the recommendations in this report do not amount to constitutional reform as conceived by campaigners in the late 1980s. Fundamentally, we have formulated an agenda which is not about re-thinking the relationship between the institutions of the state to promote greater accountability, efficiency or justice – although these are undoubtedly part of the agenda. What is proposed here is a reformulation of the relationship between citizen and state, so that democratic reform will ultimately come to mean giving citizens some measure of the influence they want over just those 'bread and butter' issues which matter to everybody.

We should be clear this vision is not the activists' utopia rejected by Anthony Crosland of a "busy, bustling society in which everyone is politically active, and spends his evenings in group discussions". It is a world where democracy is meaningful in that it offers as many people as possible a real opportunity to have their views taken account of and to effect change either at the points when they feel it is necessary or when their community (local, national, ethnic or any other) is asked to take a crucial decision about its future.

Ultimately, this is why the issue of political disengagement cannot be avoided. Democracy continues to exist because it allows citizens a collective voice and a point of peaceful negotiation over the issues that affect them. When this collective voice is not being ex-

pressed efficiently, democracy is threatened. And we cannot improve on Churchill's famous dictum that "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried". We also know that attempts to offer people the services or society they want in other ways – through benevolent autocracy, through bureaucratic edict or through market-driven mechanisms – will ultimately fail without democratic input. Political participation, democracy, effective government and successful societies all live or die together.

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The following people worked on the Power team, either for the duration of the Inquiry or for part of it:

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Ron Bailey – ACT (Active Citizens Transform)

Brendan Barber – TUC (Trades Union Congress)

Anthony Barnett – OpenDemocracy

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Robin Wilson
Wiltshire Federation of Women's Institutes
Wirral Youth Service
Michael Wise
Victoria Wiseman
Helen Witcher
Heather Witham
Tony Witham
Woking Quaker Meeting
Wolverhampton City Council
Andy Wood
Frank Wood
Les Wood
Phil Wood
Devolve!
Tony Woodcock
Charles Woodd
Stuart Woodin
Anthony Wooding
Jenny Woolnough
Renee Wortley
One World Trust
Wrexham County Borough Over-50s Forum

Bernard Wright
Dave Wright
Wycombe Liberal Democrats
Ahmed Yar
Tony Yates
Bee Yeap
Claire Yearby
Staff at Yorkshire Humber Assembly
Blossom Young
Gareth Young
Young Fabians
Your Party
Tricia Zipfel
Jurg Zollinger

# What Happens Next?

The Power Inquiry is formally ending in March 2006. However, it is clear that there is a huge appetite across the country for democratic power to be returned to the people.

If you would like to be part of the drive for that change, register your interest at our website or write to us at our address.

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