Forward, Executive Summary

&

Recommendations

of the

Power Report

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

Politics
without
Parties

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
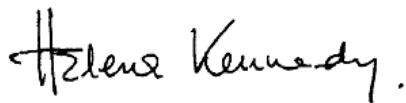
people round the West minster water coolers are clearly not having the same conversations as they are everywhere else. Their temperature gauge is seriously out of kilter. When politicians or party managers were asked for ideas for re-engagement, the suggested solutions were almost all about tweaking 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

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 ex plain 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 di verse 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 commit tees 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 map ping 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 pol icy 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.