

NEWS RELEASE

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Decision-makers 'lack will' to re-engage public interest in democracy

A national inquiry into declining election turnouts today [Thursday April 28th] claimed public authorities lacked the will to embrace changes needed to re-engage their disillusioned citizens.

The Power Inquiry – set up to increase public participation in political decision-making at all levels – today launches a report highlighting more than a dozen barriers to effective participation in the UK.

They include:

- Poorly executed participation programmes
- Lack of cultural change in public authorities
- Lack of incentives for public involvement
- Failure to respond to the outcomes of participation
- Public scepticism
- Lack of dedicated resources
- Organisational and professional resistance
- Lack of creativity.

The Beyond the Ballot report claims postal voting and e-voting cannot alone stop the growing gulf between the governed and the governors and urges the authorities to be creative and learn from other countries.

Power Inquiry chair Helena Kennedy QC said: "For all the political rhetoric about prioritising public participation, the report clearly shows that public authorities lack the will, resources and freedom to embrace democratic innovation.

"The best innovation in the world will fail if this culture is not changed. Above all, the public has got to believe that their participation will make a difference."

The report studies almost 60 democratic innovations from around the world and highlights 'exceptional' examples of effective democratic engagement from British Columbia, the US and poverty-stricken neighbourhoods in Brazil.

It calls for:

- Use of independent bodies to facilitate participation and overcome public scepticism about the motives of public authorities
- Provision of more resources dedicated to public participation
- New incentives to encourage citizen involvement
- More imagination in designing effective approaches to participation.

Ms Kennedy added: "UK electoral innovations such as postal ballots and e-voting alone are not enough. We have got to be more creative. We've got to look around and learn from what works in other countries – not just in terms of elections but with all forms of political process and engagement.

“Above all, we have got to respect ordinary people and give them a reason to get involved in democratic processes - or sit back and watch the growing gulf between the governors and the governed.”

The Power Inquiry will today continue its year-long exploration of participation in policy making processes with a hearing in Manchester.

There will be evidence from expert witnesses from the World Economic Forum and European Policy Centre as well as from four community activists who have successfully implemented their agendas through grassroots work in Manchester.

Background Information

- The Power Inquiry is a year-long commission funded by the Rowntree Trusts to increase participation in UK political decision-making processes and is due to present its final report in early 2006.
- The Inquiry commission is made up of ten representatives from across society and includes Helena Kennedy QC, former Radio One DJ Emma B and TUC deputy general secretary Frances O’Grady.
- The ‘Beyond the Ballot’ report was written by social scientist Dr Graham Smith of Southampton University.
- The report highlights three ‘exceptional’ examples of effective participation:
 - i. Participatory Budgeting scheme (PB) first launched in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989 to give poor neighbourhoods the chance to decide a list of investment priorities (eg sanitation, health care and paving)

- ii. Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia. Two randomly selected citizens from each BC electoral district reviewed the province's electoral system
- iii. Citizen Initiative and Popular Referendum. Used widely in Switzerland and some US states - these have proved effective because they require citizens to mobilise support for their own petitions and are not Government sponsored.

Notes to editors

Members of the Power Commission will be available for interview at the report launch at 11am, Thursday, April 28th, Manchester United Football Club. Interviews can also be set up in advance by contacting Pam Giddy on 0845 345 5307. Media are welcome to attend the hearing but should contact Pam at the Power Inquiry in advance.