

House of Lords Debate on Parliament and Public Engagement

Helena Kennedy's statement

*House of Lords Hansard
9 February 2005*

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws: My Lords, I, too, pay tribute to the noble Lord, Lord Norton, for providing the opportunity to debate this subject. The noble Lord, Lord Norton, is a constitutional lawyer of high repute and he has often raised important issues about our political processes, sometimes raising a warning flag when active steps have to be taken to maintain an effective political system. We owe him a debt of gratitude for doing that. As the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, has just said, sometimes we have to get there in the nick of time. In raising this debate we are perhaps just at that margin.

Last year I became the chair of yet another independent commission looking into the state of political participation in Britain. Called the Power Inquiry it was established by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. That commission comprises Ferdinand Mount, who will be known to Members of this House as a former political adviser to the Conservative government, the president of the Women's Institute, the deputy General-Secretary of the TUC and representatives of sections of the community. The commission is composed not just of the great and the grand but also of people from community organisations, political activists and young members of the public. The noble Lord, Lord Parekh, will be happy to hear that members of the ethnic minorities are well represented.

We have been considering and taking evidence for three months and already it is clear to us that there is a deep well of frustration and disenchantment with traditional politics, which has been referred to by a number of previous speakers. Whereas in the past the public may have been divided around the principles and policies of Left and Right, people are now abandoning their tribal moorings. A sense of distrust of politicians and of the system in general seems to be shared by many. A very saddening result of our inquiry so far is the discovery of the feeling that involvement in politics is a waste of time. That sentiment is expressed by young people but also by people from ethnic minorities and generally by sections of the public who traditionally were actively engaged in politics.

We should never underestimate the strength or depth of this disconnection between governor and governed. General election turnout may have dropped only recently but party membership has been in severe decline for 50 years. Local election turnouts have been low for decades and surveys have consistently found strong distrust of politicians since as early as the beginning of the 1980s. The decrease in membership of political parties should concern

us because, of course, it is from the political parties that our politicians are drawn. Therefore, the pool is becoming increasingly smaller.

The partisan arguments, which claim that this is the result of sleaze—that is the allegation made against Conservative governments—or spin—that is the allegation made against the Labour Government—are often wide of the mark. The overriding cause is the widespread sense that the average citizen has no real influence over the key political decisions that affect their lives. That is repeated over and over again. Endless consultations carried out by public bodies seem to have no clear impact. The recurring theme is that they are often seen by the public as a fig leaf rather than real account being taken of their views.

There is also a sense that MPs are far more bound to the wishes of their party leaderships than to the views of their constituents. It is claimed that the one real formal power the citizen has—the vote—has been rendered meaningless by one party dominance and the similarity of the main parties' policies. Even if that is perception only, there certainly is a feeling among the general public that there is little to choose between them.

The political parties are going through their own convulsions of having to reconfigure their identities in a very new context in which class is no longer such a powerful determinant of people's position in the world, and certainly not a determinant of voting patterns. Political parties have been poaching in each others voting pools for some decades now, and that is not confined to one political party. Members of the public say that there is uncertainty regarding what the parties stand for.

Disenchantment with political processes is just the contemporary outcome of a much older historical trend. Our system of democracy, formed as it was in the 19th century, never took serious account of the fact that citizens at some later time might want more influence than a vote every few years. In those days and for much of the 20th century British citizens were expected to delegate decision-making to their political representatives on the grounds of their superior intellect or by virtue of the fact that they shared a common ideology, and therefore you could be sure that your political representative would reflect the things you believed in. However, that may no longer be so. In an era when citizens are ever more confident of their own ability to make informed decisions, and when the old ideologies no longer resonate, that traditional rationale cannot work. The 21st century citizen does not see why he or she should defer to the politicians they no longer regard as their betters, or to parties with which they no longer identify. We have to recognise that those underlying problems exist, and they are problems with which political parties will have to engage.

Apart from anything else this analysis of the ways in which political parties are having to reinvent themselves applies in other mature democracies too. It explains why similar problems are occurring across nearly all of the older established democracies. The old way of explaining this by saying that we are all comfortable and therefore people do not vote because they do not feel the

need to—the Galbraith notion that we are living perfectly well and therefore do not have the impulse to vote—is not the answer.

The notion that such a deep-seated problem can be addressed by policies such as all-postal voting or electronic voting from your armchair are inadequate. Citizenship education is one of the things with which we must engage. However, only a determined strategy to address the citizen's sense of powerlessness will really resolve the disenchantment. Ironically we talk a great deal about public trust in politicians but there has to be mutuality in processes of trust. What is needed is a programme designed to show that politicians actually have enough trust in their citizens as well as the other way round. We should be involved in greater engagement with them.

The good news is that such a strategy need not be conjured up anew. The Power Inquiry is exploring dozens of innovations and experiments across the world which are precisely designed to re-engage citizens with politics. They range from participatory budgeting in Brazil to youth councils in Finland to citizens' assemblies in Canada. I am hoping that we may be able to see in those better and more exciting ways of engaging the electorate.

I was in the Computer Office the other day when someone said that they wanted a website but that they really would prefer eyesight. While I have sympathy with Members of our House who feel that way, I agree with others that we have to modernise our own processes for them to work better.

As others have said, our democracy is vital but we have to revitalise it on a regular basis. I hope that the Power Inquiry will help our political masters to see that mastering is no longer the name of the game.