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GIVE CITIZENS POWER TO MAKE LAWS, URGES INQUIRY

'Power to the People' calls for radical power shift from centre

The biggest ever independent inquiry into British democracy today calls for citizens to be given powers to make and change laws, more powers for Parliament and local government and a radical new funding system which would allow voters to each allocate £3 of public money to the party of their choice.

The recommendations are among 30 Power Inquiry proposals designed to save British democracy from meltdown and tackle the creeping threat of authoritarianism by harnessing the kind of mass interest inspired by single issue movements like Live 8 and the fox hunting protests.

They are published today in the Inquiry's final report, **Power to the People** – the result of 1,500 public submissions and a comprehensive series of surveys and hearings held across the UK during the inquiry's 12 month investigation.

Power to the People says that millions are turning away from voting and parties to campaigning and alternative action because they have little influence over decisions affecting their lives.

Power to the People also calls for caps on party donations, reduction of the voting age and scrapping of election deposits as part of measures designed to plug the British public back in to democracy.

The 30 recommendations make-up three major shifts in the way politics is conducted in Britain:

- Devolution of power from central Government to Parliament and from the centre to local government
- Reform of the electoral and party systems so voters have more choice at election time
- Involvement of citizens in key decisions taken by politicians

Headline recommendations include:

- Two written agreements or Concordats should be agreed to redistribute power from ministers to Parliament and from central to local government.

- House of Lords reform should be completed rapidly based on the election of 70% of its members.
- On general election polling day, each voter should be able to allocate £3 of public money to support the local party of their choice
- The electoral system should be reformed to provide much greater choice and diversity at elections by giving small parties and independent candidates a greater chance of election.
- Donations from individuals to political parties should be capped at £10,000, and organisational donations capped at £100 per member.
- All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision-making processes.
- Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies.
- The rules on the plurality of media ownership should be tightened.
- MPs should be required to produce annual reports and hold AGMs with their constituents.

Chair of the **POWER** Inquiry, Helena Kennedy QC, said:

“Politics and government are increasingly in the hands of privileged elites as if democracy has run out of steam. Too often citizens are being evicted from decision-making – rarely asked to get involved and rarely listened to. As a result, they see no point in voting, joining a party or engaging with formal politics.

“The old gentleman’s agreement or conventions which underpinned our system are no longer observed. Parliament has had many of its teeth removed and government is conducted from Downing Street. A new written Concordat will reclaim Parliament’s power by setting out the role of the Executive and elected MPs. It will make Parliament a place worth engaging with for those seeking change.”

“Our political system operates as though deference to authority and allegiance to the two main parties still exists. But people have changed radically in the last fifty years. We have got to learn from the success of single issue politics in capturing the passion of the public. We’ve got to tackle structural problems within the current democratic system so there is space for new political vision.

“Our report is about people having real influence over the bread and butter issues that affect their lives. We can only achieve that level of influence with popular debate and a genuine

political will for change. That is why we today challenge politicians to rise above their party ranks and start treating democratic reform as a non-partisan necessity - not a political toy."

E n d s

Note to editors: The POWER Inquiry was set up in 2004 to explore how political participation and involvement can be increased and deepened in Britain. POWER is funded by the Joseph Rowntree Trusts to mark their centenary year. POWER is completely independent of any political party or organisation. POWER has taken evidence from all major political parties, facilitated community debates across the country, conducted polling, consulted senior academics and experimented with new forms of decision-making to explore ways of engaging people with politics. It has also attracted over 1,500 written submissions from the general public.

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Full list of Power Inquiry Recommendations:

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 mouth of British citizens at the heart of government.

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 fulfill 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 to 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.

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 to 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.

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.

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