

# People and government

## After 5 May, the divorce proceedings continue

Helena Kennedy

In all the words spilt following the general election little has been said about the really significant result from 5 May. That is the fact that turnout remained stubbornly low – up only 2 per cent on 2001's record-breaking dip. Most notably, it has yet to become common knowledge that almost 1 million more people chose not to vote than supported the victorious party.

This failure to address the most obvious sign of spiralling disengagement from democratic processes is not a surprise to the commissioners of the Power Inquiry. While the public have wailed with frustration and anger to us about a political establishment they neither trust nor respect, the polity itself has expressed a response based on a mix of denial, complacency and contempt for the public. This is not to say that there are no politicians who do not see the depth of the problem but even they are at a loss to know how to respond effectively.

So let us now be clear: the election has once again confirmed the existence of a very big problem: the ongoing divorce of the British people from their political institutions. This is not a side issue, it is not just another policy sphere we can work our way out of. We know that low turnout at elections challenges the legitimacy a government can claim, but there are even deeper issues at stake. Most particularly, the fact that democracy itself is withering. As politicians think one set of things about themselves and the decisions they take and as the public think something very different, the risk of increasing autocracy and/or uncontrolled political conflict grows. Indeed, it is difficult to see any alternative to these outcomes in an unresolved situation where ever larger numbers of people have no wish to engage with the state and its core structures. The situation is of particular concern when one considers the potential outcomes of a popular contempt for politics in a period of economic slowdown or crisis. Under such circumstances the rapid rise of populist and extremist forces could be a certainty.

Voter disaffection on a mass scale results from some profound historical shifts in social relations and the individual's expectations. The fact that similar problems exist across most post-industrial economies highlights this. It also belies any notion that the current disengagement is primarily due to the specifics of the current British political experience whether that be the supposedly widespread contentment promoted by economic growth or the predictability of a political landscape dominated by one party.

### **Four facets of disengagement**

Across the established, post-industrial democracies and in Britain disengagement

has four features in common. These are:

— **declining turnout at elections:** the last two general elections in Britain have experienced unprecedentedly low turnouts and voting in all other elections – local, European, devolved institutions – has declined recently or remains unsatisfactorily low. Beyond our shores, turnout dropped by an average of 7 per cent in the older democracies during the 1990s and twenty out of twenty-seven post-industrial societies experienced a drop in turnout in the same decade (Norris, 2002).

— **declining membership of and allegiance to established political parties:** the main political parties have all seen a serious decline in membership since the early 1960s – membership now stands at about one quarter of its level in 1964. Two separate studies found similarly significant aggregate falls in party membership across thirteen and sixteen established democracies respectively since the 1950s (Mair and Beizen, 2001). In addition, popular allegiance to parties has declined even more radically: in 1964, 44 per cent of British electors described themselves as identifying ‘very strongly’ with a political party; this had dropped to 14 per cent in 2001. A cross-national study found identification with a political party had dropped across the advanced democracies but this represented a particularly sharp fall for Britain (Rogers, 2004).

— **increased levels of distrust and contempt towards 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. This is usually the response to survey questions such as: ‘how much would you say you trust politicians?’; or ‘how much do you trust politicians to tell the truth?’. 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 this figure has only risen slightly since (Bromley et al., 2001). Similarly low or declining levels of trust 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’ (Dalton, 2004).

— **the rise of political activity conducted outside formal democratic mechanisms:** in contrast with party membership, party allegiance and voting, less formal methods of participation have grown. While all the main parties have lost thousands of members, Friends of the Earth has gone from 1000 members in 1971 to 119,000 in 2002; and Greenpeace has enjoyed a rise of members from 30,000 in 1981 to 221,000 in 2002.

Bodies which have combined leisure pursuits with advocacy work have performed even better: the National Trust has gone from 278,000 members in 1971 to 3 million in 2002; the RSPB has risen from 98,000 to 1.2 million in the same period (Haezwindt, 2003). Two consecutive surveys have tracked similar shifts across eight post-industrial nations. 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 (Jowell et al., 1995). As Pippa Norris 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' (Norris, 2002).

#### **The conditions behind disengagement**

Why should a set of political systems with so many different cultures and institutions be suffering a problem similar to Britain's? Could it be, the commissioners of the Power Inquiry are beginning to ask, that a common contradiction has grown up at the heart of all democracies based on representation? This contradiction, put simply, is that a successful representative democracy relies on the eagerness of citizens to delegate their sovereign power upwards to their elected representatives on the basis of a regular but rare vote. However, for a variety of reasons, this eagerness has gradually dimmed over the last three decades the crisis we are now beginning to experience.

Five reasons lie behind the dimming of this eagerness to delegate power upwards:

— The well-documented decline of popular deference since the 1950s onwards has all but destroyed any widespread sense that those we elect are somehow better-suited to taking key decisions by virtue of their birth, education, class background or natural ability.

— The decline in class identity and the fragmentation of the two dominant classes of the industrial era has removed one important factor, which encouraged an individual to believe that a significant proportion of their elected representatives had the interests of their class at heart, and thus could be trusted to take decisions with which she or he agreed.

— The same can broadly be said of the big ideologies of the twentieth century. Their decline in credibility and popular allegiance has removed another factor, which led individuals to believe that the decisions taken by at least some of their representatives were taken on the basis of shared values.

— The dispersal of power away from the political system to a variety of other bodies – often leading to very complex and unpredictable patterns of decision-making well outside the direct control of the state – has made it less clear what representatives are being elected to do, how their decisions have relevance for the daily lives of citizens, and how they are able to hold decisions taken by other powerful organisations, such as corporations, quangos and supranational bodies, to account.

— The growth in self-esteem of today's individuals – encouraged by better education, affluence, greater choice over lifestyles and consumption, and a culture of self-respect and achievement – has led to a much greater expectation that one should take decisions on one's own behalf rather than delegate them elsewhere.

Clearly, any political system which continues to conduct its business on the basis of delegation of power when a set of profound, long-term social trends militate against such delegation is bound to experience disengagement and popular contempt. It is also highly likely that political activity will increasingly take on other forms and strategies – such as single-issue campaigning – as individuals seek new ways to bring about change and engage support outside a political system that has less power and less popular appeal than it once enjoyed. All of this can be summed up relatively simply although the implications for the way we do our politics is vast: people in Britain and most other postindustrial societies feel they have less ownership and influence over the political decisions that affect their lives just at the time when they actually desire this more than ever before.

This can explain some of the most striking findings of recent surveys of attitudes to democracy in Britain:

— 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 (Jowell et al., 1995); 56 per cent agreed in 2003 that they have 'no say in what the government does' (Pattie et al., 2003).

— 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' (Curtice, 1999).

— Over three-quarters of those questioned in 2000 felt they had little or no power between elections (ICM and JRRT, 2000).

— 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' (Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, 2004).

— One-third of respondents surveyed in 2004 believed that transnational corporations had more influence on their daily life than the government (Clarke et al., 2004).

— 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; this compared with 35 per cent who felt corporations should have such influence but 79 per cent who felt corporations actually do wield such influence. The respective figures for the media being 31 per cent and 79 per cent (Weir et al., 2004).

### **The current debate and solutions**

In the context of the above analysis much of the debate about political disengagement and the proposed solutions appear somewhat off-focus. In particular, a great deal of the policy discussion acknowledges some of the changes in public expectations that have been mentioned above, but then assumes, as Tom Bentley, Director of Demos, recently put it: 'as if "the public" could be herded back into a pen and convinced to follow the routines and obligations of a set of external institutions' (Bentley, 2005).

Hence, the government's main responses to the problem of disengagement has been to introduce citizenship education onto the national curriculum and insist on the wider use of postal voting. The former is based on the assumption that if only the public knew more about politics they would get involved; the latter assumes that if only the routines of democratic life were more convenient, today's ultra-busy citizen could take part. Unsurprisingly neither strategy had any significant impact on turnout in the general election because they don't address the key issue identified above of ownership and influence.

Both citizenship education and postal voting make a common mistake in much of the debate about engagement – a very comforting mistake for politicians – that the problem resides with the people rather than the system. Many vices are laid at the door of the British public to explain the problem: too ignorant, too lazy, too consumerist, too individualistic, too disrespectful of authority, too little sense of civic duty. Our Commission's vice-chair, Ferdinand Mount, summed-up these views, after hearing many of them at our Cardiff witness session, by quoting the subtle irony of Brecht: 'The people have failed us. It is time to elect a new people.' This is not to say that some of the solutions that arise out of this debate would not help. Greater political education and information is probably a good in itself; making voting and candidacy easier and more convenient seems more in tune with twenty-first-century expectations (as long as security can be assured); and increasing the capacity of some of the least engaged communities to take part in decision-making is undoubtedly worthwhile.

But, and it's a big but, all of this will count for nothing if the newly educated, resourced citizenry still see no meaningful reason to get involved in formal democratic processes. Indeed, greater knowledge and engagement with a system

that denies real influence might only lead to further frustration. This is upheld by our conversations with activists from the country's poorest communities who *are* genuinely engaged with decision-makers trying to improve the lot of their families and friends. The truth is they are just as cynical as any ordinary non-voter. This still leaves a great deal of work for the Power Inquiry to do. The Commission has been clear from the start that it did not want to just produce elegant analysis. It wanted hard recommendations that combined the short term with the visionary. The main phase of our evidence-taking is soon to end and we will enter a deliberately long period of consideration of all that has been submitted and collected for us before we produce our final report in February or March 2006. Of course, the extent to which change offers people a sense of ownership and real influence over political decision-making will be our guide for assessing any potential recommendations but those actual recommendations are far from known yet. However, the broad parameters of where we shall be looking are getting clearer:

— **The constitutional reform agenda:** the Commission is, of course, thinking hard about that agenda of constitutional change which crystallised around Charter 88 and informed the post-1997 reforms. However, we are aware that this agenda was designed to meet a very different set of priorities from those which have been thrown up by disengagement. At the heart of that reforming vision was the need to renew the accountability and pluralism which many felt were not given due weight in the British political settlement. Improving accountability and pluralism may be worthy in themselves, but whether alone they will increase political engagement is unclear. To take just one example: many are demanding the completion of House of Lords reform by instituting an entirely or largely elected chamber. The Power Commission does not doubt that this is a democratic good but given how distant the great mass of people now feel from political parties, we very much doubt that the creation of a second chamber full of party members beholden to the whips will do anything to renew participation and engagement. Some smarter thinking is needed.

— **The future of parties:** political parties remain central to the way we conduct every aspect of our political decision-making and yet they are severely withered at the roots. Political parties play many functions, some of which – such as offering aggregated choices to the electorate and organising political authority – could probably not be done as well by any other form of organisation. However, they no longer play an effective role in allowing dialogue between governed and governors, mobilising sections of society behind key concerns, or bringing large numbers into the democratic decision-making process. Indeed, many people seem to feel they are now a positive block on other organisations or processes which might fulfil such roles. The key question for the Commission, therefore, is can parties play these roles once again or should they now stand aside to allow more effective means to be employed?

— **The potential of participatory democracy:** the Power Inquiry's report, *Beyond the Ballot* (Smith, 2005) has shown us that there is a great wealth of experimentation out there designed to give people a more direct and precise say over the decisions that affect their lives. Given that our starting hypothesis is that representative democracies can no longer offer individuals the decision-making power they feel is their due, the Commission has been looking at these experiments with care. They raise as many questions as they answer – most notably about how exactly they fit alongside the representative function of the political system – but their potential may well deserve to be widely tapped.

— **The role of the executive:** Britain has a highly centralised system of government. Great power is vested in the prime minister and government

departments, increasingly at the expense of cabinet, Parliament and local authorities. The Commission is aware that such concentration does nothing to encourage engagement. Many times during our investigations, for example, we have come across the war in Iraq as an example of how people feel that they have no voice in the really big decisions taken in No.10. Returning powers to cabinet, Parliament and local authorities may be a start in renewing political engagement but on its own it will not be enough. All of these bodies remain tightly controlled by those political parties which have earned such deep disrespect and they are still based almost entirely on the representative principle. The Commission will have to consider how a restructuring of the relationship between the executive and other political bodies can be placed in wider context of change for the renewal of political engagement.

— **The media's role:** much of the debate about political disengagement – particularly the contributions from politicians – blames the media for the spread of cynicism and distrust. However, as the above analysis has shown, there are good reasons for understanding disengagement as the result of long-term social trends. Indeed, there is little academic research which has shown a correlation between consumption of TV or press news and higher levels of political disengagement or distrust. The Commission is taking a very different attitude to the media. We are exploring whether digital media on television and the internet might offer a new site for popular participation in decision-making given that these media are rapidly replacing the press, the leaflet through the letterbox and the drafty community hall as the main source of political knowledge and popular collective experiences.

— **Elections:** of course, the Commission will consider how to increase turnout at all elections – although we are very clear that this is only one aspect of a much deeper and wider problem. The issue for us is to understand how voting can be made meaningful for the millions who no longer see any point in voting. This almost certainly means a step change in the other aspects of political involvement mentioned above but clearly electoral reform will be central to our considerations.

— **Democracy beyond the political:** it was mentioned above that powers have drifted away from the state and that this is one reason for the rise of disengagement. Corporations, quangos, the media, supranational bodies, devolved institutions and the voluntary sector now have an influence over our lives that was unforeseen thirty years ago. And yet few people, if any, understand exactly how they all fit together into the decision-making process and none of these bodies seem to be clearly held to account or even clearly responsive to the needs and demands of the public. The Commission will, therefore, have to consider how public ownership of the decisions taken by these bodies – some of which are very far-reaching – can be most realistically promoted.

This is a breathtaking agenda to consider and for that reason we have deliberately given ourselves a long period to think, discuss and decide. I am confident that the recommendations for change that arise from the Power Inquiry will be quite unlike anything else previously produced on this issue. But that is as it should be for the profound problem of political disengagement is quite unlike anything the democracies have had to confront before.

**Helena Kennedy** is a QC, Labour peer and Chair of the Power Inquiry, an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy (you can submit your own evidence to the Power Inquiry at [www.powerinquiry.com](http://www.powerinquiry.com)).

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