

Poll positions: voters are likely to stay away from the UK election in droves. But is that really a sign of apathy?

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ALTHOUGH no date has been set, the starting pistol for the general election has been fired. There was a time when elections were about who would form the next government but despite all the hoo-ha about tax, spending and immigration, we could all lay bets that Labour will be back in Number 10.

It's projected that voter turn-out this time may be even less than in 2001. Taking evidence on Thursday and Friday in Glasgow as chair of the Power Inquiry was a lesson in alienation. The inquiry, funded by the Rowntree Trusts, was set up to examine the state of British democracy. In Scotland, as elsewhere, the election promises to be a test of the public's disenchantment with politics. In the evidence sessions, there were clear messages that people are not just distrustful of politicians but generally alienated from the political processes: "politicians don't listen", "politicians don't hear us", "consultation is a fig leaf", "there is nothing to choose between the main parties".

The idea that young people aren't interested in politics was quickly abandoned as pupils in Holyrood School, as young as 13 and 14, talked about the environment, the war in Iraq and poverty, but expressed suspicion of political motives and disbelief in promises made before elections.

Why does the campaigning turn more people off than it turns on? Why, when politicians meet real voters – those who haven't been hand-picked for the cameras – is the air often thick with anger?

It is argued that people don't vote because there is general contentment, or because they don't know enough about politics or because voting is inconvenient for the non-stop lifestyle of the 21st century. Solution: offer more of the same but bung citizenship on the national curriculum and introduce all-postal voting.

There is also a view among politicians of all colours, expressed more usually in private, that today's electorate are self-obsessed super-consumers, who can't see that it is their civic duty to vote. Solution: compulsory voting.

Yet numerous research projects support the evidence we are hearing: that there is a massive pool of popular frustration and anger towards politicians over the way they conduct their business. People are not self-absorbed or uninterested in life beyond their front doors. There is no shortage of interest and passion over many issues. Charitable and community activity is as vibrant as ever.

It seems to have been forgotten that the majority of non-voters in 2001 explained their failure to turn out as a deliberate decision. So much for the ignorant, lazy British citizen. It is certainly true that there has been a loosening of tribal moorings when it comes to voting. Political parties were configured around class in ways that no longer hold true. Margaret Thatcher broke the stereotype of the Tories being the toffs and Labour the party of the workers when she introduced the "right to buy" policy.

Poaching the votes of your opponents by shifting policies has brought the parties to the same place in many key policy areas, and a by-product of sucking the ideological oxygen out of politics is that for many, there is little point in going to the ballot box.

Low voter turnout is not a problem for Britain alone – but other countries are taking action. Evidence presented to the Power Inquiry has revealed a wealth of bold experimentation with democracy across the world, all of it designed to re-engage the governed with the governors and vice versa.

Some of it is about rethinking elections: voting by internet, reducing the voting age, placing a none-of-the-above category on the ballot paper. The most interesting, however, is about what goes on between elections – innovating in a way that gives citizens a precise influence over the political decisions they really care about.

Vigilance committees in Bolivia bring together elected members of the community to ensure that local policy and investment meet agreed municipal plans. Politicians are then forced to deliver on their election promises.

Finland, meanwhile, has established 80 youth councils elected by young people and with direct access to local government decision-makers. In the town of Espoo, which started it all, a quarter of the ideas generated by the youth council's consultations have been enacted.

Famously, Brazilian municipalities increasingly use neighbourhood meetings and popular assemblies to set local budgets following the huge success of such a scheme in Porto Alegre.

But Canada is leading the way in innovations that offer citizens real power. British Columbia recently established an assembly of 160 randomly selected citizens to investigate the state's first-past-the-post electoral system. It recommended a move to proportional representation – a proposal that will go to a popular referendum in May. Ontario recently announced it will do the same.

The interesting thing about all these experiments is that they are as much about renewing the politicians' trust in the people to take good decisions as they are about renewing the people's trust in the politicians to listen and act on their wishes.

Of course, given that the current occupant of Number 10 has expressed his preference for a non-elected House of Lords, it seems likely that such ideas would receive a frosty reception in London.

But Edinburgh should be a different story. Scotland's parliament was set up in the spirit of a wider popular participation in politics. Unlike Westminster, we should avoid wringing our hands about low turnout and disengagement while doing little of any real impact. There is no excuse for inertia when there is so much to learn from across the world.

Our Scandinavian neighbours also worry about the state of their democracies. But rather than causing political paralysis, this has created an urgent willingness to keep rethinking and experimenting. Scotland, with its newer and bolder political culture than that south of the Border, should be just the place to follow this example.

Details of the Power Inquiry can be found at www.powerinquiry.org

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