

Part One: The Disconnect



Chapter 1— The Myth of Apathy

When we set up this Inquiry we were all acutely conscious of the potential paradox of seeking to engage the public in a debate about why people are politically disengaged. After all, if the average citizen could not even be bothered to vote, why would they bother to talk to a public inquiry with a political theme? We needn't have worried. There is no paradox here: Commission witness sessions drew large, vocal audiences; over 1,500 submissions were sent in by members of the public; the Inquiry's experiment in local democratic engagement in Harrow attracted over 300 participants; our initiative designed to encourage political deliberation on the Inquiry's concerns – Democracy Dinners – generated some level of media ribbing but also 400 meetings across the country; and research projects with members of the public have encountered no difficulty in securing or maintaining witnesses and participants. Thousands more have got in touch with the Inquiry with questions or comments or have registered for its updates. *Power's* early fears proved groundless.

As the Inquiry has progressed, it has become clear why this has been the case. *Power's* research and evidence reveals a nation that is far from apathetic. In a wide range of areas, both political and non-political, large sections of the British population are active and generous in time and support.

Some years ago, there was a fear that Britain was suffering a

crisis of social capital akin to that identified in the USA. However, recent research has revealed that, in fact, involvement in charitable and community activity is vibrant and growing. For example, the Home Office Citizenship Survey has questioned a very large sample of 10,000 people every two years since 2001, and in 2005 found that 50 per cent of British adults – or over 20 million people – volunteer formally or informally at least once a month, an increase of 3 per cent from the same survey in 2001.³ Among those at risk of social exclusion⁴ – who are usually regarded as far less likely to participate – the percentage of volunteers is still a surprisingly high 43 per cent.⁵ *Power's own research found that amongst the supposedly most apathetic – those who do not vote in general elections – 37 per cent were members of, or active in, a charity, community group, public body or campaigning organisation.*⁶

The data also shows that in the realm of political campaigning outside formal electoral or parliamentary politics, involvement is still very healthy. The Citizen's Audit of Britain found that over a twelve-month period 62 per cent donated money to a political or campaigning organisation, 30 per cent helped raise money for a political or campaigning organisation, 42 per cent signed a petition, 25 per cent contacted a public official, and 13 per cent contacted a politician in an effort to change laws or policies. Only one person in twenty took part in a public demonstration or attended a political meeting, but in terms of the numbers willing to participate this remains highly significant.⁷ The Home Office Citizenship Survey broadly backs these figures, finding that 38 per cent of people had undertaken one of these activities (with the exception of donating or raising money) during 2004/05. This figure was the same for the previous two Citizenship surveys.⁸

Power's own research project on political activists found that those involved in campaign groups and community groups enjoy high morale and commitment. Although many activists lament the time and effort sometimes involved in their work and may, on occasion,

feel they are unfairly perceived as do-gooders or extremists, there is no sense, on the whole, that their politics is undertaken in the face of public indifference or hostility. This is vibrant political participation that, as one of the participants in the project put it, “makes a real difference and produces real results that impact on people's lives”.

The level of campaigning activity also represents an increase over the last three decades. The World Values Survey found that the percentage of the British population that had taken part in a demonstration rose from 6 per cent in 1974 to 13 per cent in 2000 and those who had signed a petition rose from 23 per cent to 81 per cent.⁹ The organisations making use of such techniques have seen a comparable rise in membership: Friends of the Earth has experienced a growth from 1,000 members in 1971 to 119,000 in 2002; Greenpeace has risen from 30,000 in 1981 to 221,000 in 2002. Bodies which combine campaigning and advocacy work with leisure-time pursuits have done even better: the National Trust has seen its membership grow from 278,000 in 1971 to 3,000,000 in 2002 and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has enjoyed a growth from 98,000 to 1,200,000 in the same period.¹⁰

The last four years have also seen three of the most widely-supported campaign events that have ever taken place in Britain – the Countryside Alliance demonstration in 2002, which drew 400,000 participants;¹¹ the demonstration against the Iraq war in 2003, which gathered around 1, 500, 000 people;¹² and the Live 8 event in 2005, which was attended by 150,000 people¹³ and involved far greater numbers in associated activities and demonstrations around the country, and, indeed, the world. These events were built around the willing involvement of hundreds of thousands of British people in vigorous political activity of national and international significance.

This activity is innovative and imaginative. Increasingly wide use is being made of consumer power, lifestyle choices and digital technology to bring about change.

The World Values Survey found that the percentage of people

who had taken part in a consumer boycott had risen from 6 per cent in 1974 to 17 per cent in 2000. The Citizens Audit suggested an even more significant rise in this area with 31 per cent stating they had “boycotted certain products” during the last twelve months in 2000.¹⁴ Further evidence comes from the Cooperative Bank’s research. This found that the total value of boycotts in 2003 rose to £3.2bn, a growth of £600 million on the previous year.¹⁵ This represented a significant increase in the boycotts of brands associated with poor environmental performance or questionable labour practices. The value to these brands, in terms of lost sales, more than doubled to £1.8bn in 2003.

Consumers are also using their political power positively. According to the Co-operative Bank,¹⁶ purchase of ethical products is now worth £24.7 billion a year – an increase of 16 per cent on the previous year. Sales of Fair Trade goods, such as tea, coffee and bananas, increased by £29 million to £92 million – a growth of 46 per cent. Ethical investments and deposits with ethical banks and credit unions rose by 18 per cent to £9 billion in 2003. These facts are even more striking when one considers that, over the same period, UK household expenditure increased by only 4 per cent.

The newest and most innovative area of participation is in the realm of the internet. Hundreds of blogs (simple websites usually written by one person in the form of a diary with space for comments and discussion by visitors) are being established every day and many have a political theme or element. A brief look at the many discussion forums on the internet, including those which are aimed specifically at young people, such as myspace.com, reveal that political and current affairs topics are often among the most popular, sometimes attracting tens of thousands of ‘posts’ by visitors to the sites.

Although detailed data on blogs and discussion forums on the internet are hard to come by and is rarely entirely reliable, some general figures can be arrived at. Livejournal estimates that there are 78,000 active bloggers in Britain¹⁷ while the UK poliblogs website links to 257 blogs with an entirely political theme¹⁸ of which the most

popular secures approximately 15,000 visitors a day.¹⁹

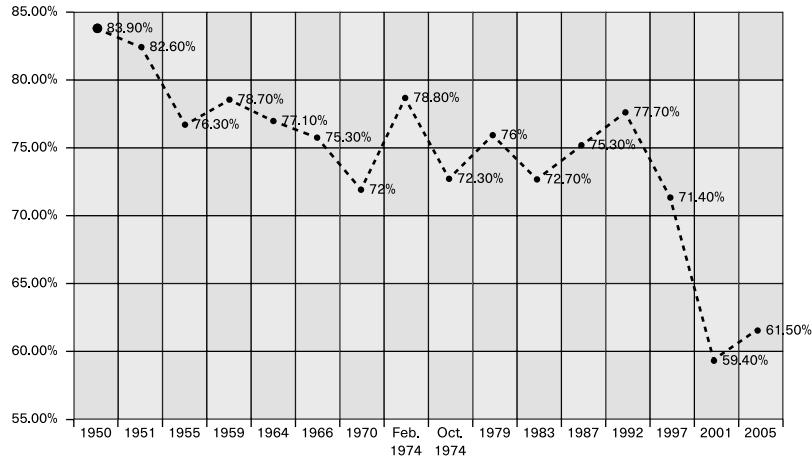
While these levels of vibrancy and innovation are obviously welcome and help to explain why *Power* has not suffered the public indifference we feared, there is a need to remain hard-headed about the reality of the phenomena. It is clear that levels of participation vary considerably across different social groups. Your likely participation in the activities mentioned above varies according to your level of education, your income and, in some cases, according to your ethnic background. These varying levels of participation across society have been a key concern to the Inquiry and we shall return to them frequently in the course of this report.

All of this also begs an important question: if so many British citizens are engaged in political and non-political participation, how has the concept of general public apathy emerged? The answer lies largely in the realm of the highly visible formal democratic institutions of elections and political parties. It is here that participation is waning, not in the perhaps less visible voluntary sectors.

General election turnout have reduced significantly since 1992 and dropped to its lowest post-war level in 2001 by 12 per cent (Figure 1). Turnout in the 2005 election rose from that historic low by only 2.1 per cent.²⁰ In addition, local election turnouts have been very low for decades. For example, elections to English Metropolitan Councils rose above 50 per cent in 1979 only when they were held on the same day as the general election. During the 1990s they hovered around 25 per cent. European parliamentary elections have not seen a serious decline because they have never enjoyed anything other than low turnout since their inception in 1979. The highest turnout was never more than 40 per cent.²¹

Figure 1: General Election turnout 1945-2005

Source: House of Commons²²



Party membership has experienced an even more striking and long-term decline since the early 1960s. Membership of the three main parties in 2001 was less than 25 per cent of its 1964 level (Figure 2).

Some rightly point out that political party membership figures are notoriously inaccurate, but the trend is clear and cannot be explained by faults in the data alone. In addition, the extent of the decline is clearly supported by qualitative and anecdotal evidence presented to *Power* and others. Focus groups held by *Power* with party activists from across the political spectrum in Birmingham, Somerset and Glasgow found unanimity on the fact that membership had declined, and was continuing to decline, and that efforts undertaken by local parties to reverse this had little or no impact. A selection of quotes from participants is representative of the wider view from the focus group sessions:

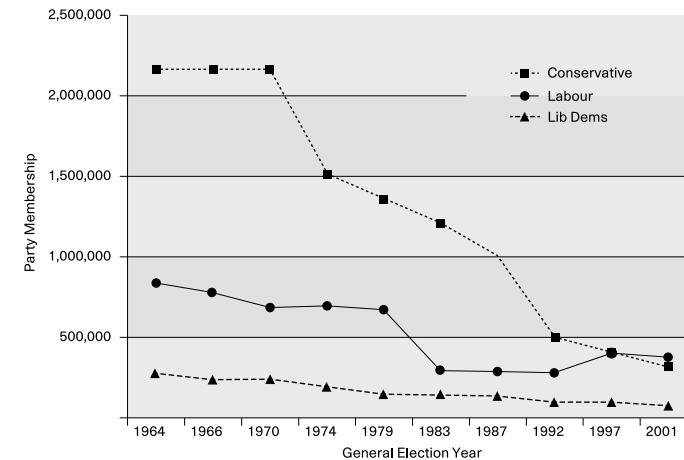
We've tried holding social gatherings for people to come along but they're not interested, are they? (Party activist, Somerset)

We do set up stalls in looking to get new people on board but it's hard work to get anyone to talk to you. (Party activist, Birmingham)

It might sound bad but increasing our membership is not top of our agenda at the moment. (Party activist, Glasgow)

Figure 2: Membership of the three main parties 1964-2001

Source: Democratic Audit²³



Furthermore, the percentage of the population which does take an active role in party affairs is even smaller than the less than 2 per cent who are party members.²⁴

In 1992, only 11 per cent of Conservative Party members reported attending more than five party meetings in the previous year. 77.8 per cent said they spent no time on party activities in the average month.²⁵ Labour Party members have always been more active than their Con-

servative counterparts. However, by 1999, just 18 per cent of members said they had been to more than five party meetings in the previous year. 65 per cent said they spent no time on party activities in the average month.²⁶

Figures tracking Labour members' involvement in the 1997 General Election campaign are also illuminating. Despite the fact that the party was on the brink of its first victory in more than two decades, 76 per cent of party members did not help at all with door-to-door canvassing. Only 20 per cent of members helped more than once.²⁷

Research also shows that this low activism of party members is part of a long-term decline. The percentage of Labour members who said they had not attended a party meeting in the previous year rose from 36 per cent (1990), to 54 per cent (1997), to 61 per cent (1999). At the same time the proportion of members attending more than five meetings a year fell from 30 per cent (1990), to 19 per cent (1997), to 18 per cent (1999). Those reporting that they spent no time on party activities in the average month rose from 51 per cent (1990), to 63 per cent (1997), to 65 per cent (1999).²⁸ It seems fair to assume that figures for the Conservative Party – whose members, as already mentioned, are historically less active than Labour's – would show a similar pattern.

It is now also well-established that, amongst the wider public, identification with and allegiance to political parties has declined severely. In 1964, 43.8 per cent of respondents said that they had a 'very strong' party identification. By 1997, this figure had fallen to 14.7 per cent. At the same time the percentage of people declaring themselves to have a 'not very strong' party attachment rose from 10.7 per cent to 31.5 per cent.²⁹

Much of the public debate about apathy has arisen from the decline in participation in these areas. However, when these figures and findings are set against the higher and more energetic levels of involvement elsewhere, asking why British citizens are apathetic seems to miss the point. It is clear that a striking dichotomy has emerged

between the involvement of British people in non-political and informal political activity and their involvement in political parties and elections.

A more appropriate question, therefore, would be: **why is a population that is active in many political and non-political areas increasingly unwilling to participate in the institutions and processes of formal democracy?**

With these data and these questions in mind, it quickly became clear to the *Power* Commissioners that the first issue they had to confront was not how to increase and deepen political participation across the board but to understand why the British people were withdrawing from formal democratic processes and institutions when their enthusiasm for other forms of political participation remained strong. If we could explain this, we reasoned, then we might be in a stronger position to understand whether and how to re-engage people with formal democracy.

However, the flourishing of participation outside of formal democracy was only the first of three key characteristics of political disengagement that struck us as noteworthy. The second is the fact that alienation from that formal democracy is very intense and widespread. The third is that this is a problem afflicting nearly all of the established democracies.

The Extent of the Problem

In speaking to many people around the country, considering hundreds of public submissions and looking at the results of commissioned research, we have been struck by just how wide and deep is the popular alienation from formal democratic processes.

The Inquiry put seven questions out for public consultation. One of these asked about elections, another asked about political parties:

- What changes would encourage a larger number of people to

feel it is worth voting?

- How can political party membership and allegiance be made more attractive? And are there more effective ways of involving people in politics than through parties?

The Inquiry received over 1,500 public submissions and the overwhelming impression is that the very great majority had nothing positive to say about parties or elections. It was particularly noteworthy that very few submissions identified any particular party as a problem but instead referred to all the main parties as deeply unappealing.

This highly negative perception was reiterated in the research projects carried out by the Inquiry. A random sample survey of 1,025 people who did not vote in the 2005 General Election, a randomly selected Citizen's Panel based in Newcastle and a series of focus group research sessions run with local party, campaign group and community activists across the country all displayed highly negative attitudes to political parties and elections. In addition, the Inquiry found general agreement – if often more nuanced – with this negative view amongst the 178 experts and practitioners whom the Inquiry interviewed and questioned. The only general exception to this came from the politicians themselves who were, perhaps unsurprisingly, far more positive about the present condition of parties and elections.

As with declining turnout and involvement in parties, this widespread negative view picked up by *Power* is confirmed by other research, particularly that which investigates attitudes to 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.

There is evidence that these low levels of trust are getting even

lower. 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 has only risen slightly since.³⁰

As a result, we had first been struck by the dichotomy between the vibrancy of participation outside formal democracy and that within. We had also been struck by just how strong the feelings of alienation from formal democratic politics and politicians were. However, a third factor also proved important in our attempts to understand the causes of the problem. This was the cross-national nature of disengagement.

A Cross-National Problem

Power commissioners soon faced strong evidence that similar problems of declining participation in elections and parties and a wider sense of distrust and alienation now affect many, possibly most, of the established democracies throughout the world.

- Turnout dropped by an average of 7 per cent in the older democracies during the 1990s and twenty out of twenty-seven established democracies experienced a drop in turnout in the same decade.³¹
- Two separate studies found significant aggregate falls in party membership across thirteen and sixteen established democracies respectively since the 1950s.³² A cross-national study found that identification with a political party had also dropped across the advanced democracies.³³
- Low or declining levels of trust in politicians 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.”³⁴

- Two consecutive surveys have also tracked the growing popularity of political participation outside of formal democratic processes across eight established democracies. 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.³⁵ Pippa Norris is an influential Harvard-based political scientist, who is also British. She studied political participation closely and 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.”³⁶

This statistical evidence was backed up by *Power’s* own qualitative research. A seminar hosted jointly by *Power* and the British Council with civil servants from seven European countries found that the decline in engagement with formal democracy was now a characteristic of all the nations that were represented. Each government was at least in the early stages of developing policies which they hoped would respond to this problem.

Evidence presented by expert witnesses also supported the observation that disengagement from formal democracy is a cross-national phenomenon. Three scholars of international standing – Professors Vivien Lowndes, Philippe Schmitter and Stuart Weir – all confirmed that the problem of disengagement from formal democ-

racy – particularly in terms of election turnout – was now a factor within every European country with a very small number of exceptions such as Denmark and Norway.

Finally, we were particularly impressed by the analysis presented in the Council of Europe’s paper ‘The Future of Democracy in Europe’³⁷ which was drafted by a group of academics from across the continent. This states clearly the depth and breadth of the problem:

Today, one of the most striking features of European democracies is an apparently widespread feeling of political discontent, disaffection, scepticism, dissatisfaction and cynicism among citizens. These reactions are not, or not only, focused on a given political party, government or public policy. They are the result of critical and even hostile perceptions of politicians, political parties, elections, parliaments and governments in general – that is across the political spectrum.

*Political discontent expresses itself in opinions, attitudes and deeds. Some citizens give utterance to their political disappointments or anger through day-to-day talks with friends or relatives. Social scientists try to analyse such opinions through polls, or in-depth interviews. The more intense these opinions or attitudes, the more likely they are to lead to actual deeds. In the political sphere these deeds are often ‘non-deeds’. Many disappointed or angry citizens refrain from voting or from joining a political party.*³⁸

We were presented, therefore, with three key factors of which any explanation of disengagement had to take account:

- the vibrancy of participation outside formal democratic politics;
- the depth of the alienation from formal democratic politics

and politicians;

- the cross-national experience of disengagement and alienation from formal democratic politics.