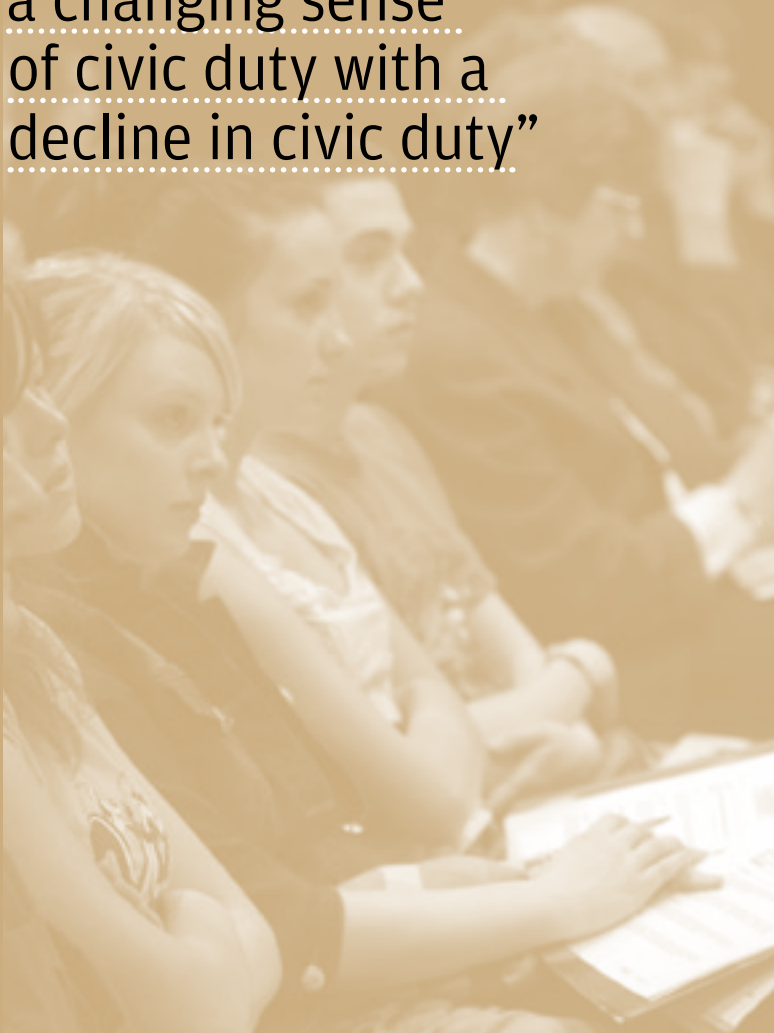


“We should not confuse
a changing sense
of civic duty with a
decline in civic duty”



Chapter 2— Red Herrings

The three key facts about disengagement outlined in the previous chapter are important because they immediately cast serious doubt on some of the explanations of disengagement which were being submitted to us.

Explanations in Doubt: An Apathetic, Uninterested Public with a Weak Sense of Civic Duty

A series of studies have argued that there is a weak sense of civic duty amongst British citizens. Some of the findings of these studies are quoted below but we feel that when these are placed alongside our own and other evidence, an alternative interpretation is more appropriate.

- ‘the norms supporting political activity have weakened over time’: in 1959, 70 per cent of those questioned thought a citizen should participate in the “local affairs of his town or district” to some degree; in 2000, only 44 per cent agreed with the statement “every citizen should be involved in politics if democracy is to work properly”;³⁹
- a comparison of civic duty between those who reached voting age under different governments found a gradual but serious

decline: when asked if they felt it would be a serious neglect of duty not to vote, 79 per cent of those who first got the chance to vote during Macmillan's premiership answered yes; this declined to 70 per cent of the Wilson/Callaghan generation; 53 per cent of Thatcher's generation and only 41 per cent of Blair's;⁴⁰

- this is supported by a survey which found that, while 74 per cent of the whole population agreed it was a duty to vote, this stood at only 58 per cent amongst 18-24 year olds and at 61 per cent amongst 25-34 year olds.⁴¹

The notion that the British people's failure to engage with formal democracy resulted from apathy, lack of interest or weak sense of civic duty did not, however, sit easily with the evidence (much of it outlined in the previous chapter) which showed a vibrant and innovative realm of participation beyond formal democracy.

An alternative approach is to explain the British sense of civic duty not as weak but as essentially non-political. A major survey asked British respondents to indicate what responsibilities they felt they had as a citizen. Amongst the general population, not political activists, the most popular three choices were: obeying the law, respecting others, and being a good neighbour. Activities which required political activity were the least popular choices.⁴²

We felt, however, that none of this data ruled out the very strong findings from the Inquiry's own research that people's disengagement from formal democracy was motivated by frustration and alienation. It is quite conceivable that respondents to the above surveys were expressing not apathy, indifference or a weak sense of civic duty but a broader lack of allegiance to formal democracy resulting from a strong sense that existing institutions and processes offer little meaning.

Indeed, some studies argue that citizens do not have a weakening sense of civic duty but have a *changing* sense of civic duty, the out-

come of which is a declining willingness to get involved in the formal political system. For example, Pippa Norris, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, has conducted a detailed cross-national survey of data on political participation. She argues that declines in electoral activity are only part of a wider story which does not suggest a weakening sense of civic duty. Instead, the populations of contemporary societies now engage in a repertoire of political activity which is wider than the traditional and formal modes of political participation. In essence, people are just as comfortable using 'pressure activity' as electoral activity to influence politicians and decision-makers. Young people may actually feel *more* comfortable using pressure rather than electoral activity.⁴³ Other similar studies concur with Norris's findings.⁴⁴

This analysis receives further backing from studies of people's interest in politics, especially amongst young people. One would expect that if there was a weaker or non-political sense of civic duty, especially amongst young people, that interest in politics would be low or declining. However, most studies have found that such interest is reasonably high and that there is little or no difference between the interest of the general population and young people.⁴⁵ One study of the 2001 General Election recorded particularly notable findings. It found that, in 2001, 59 per cent of the population professed themselves interested in politics. This is the same as the percentage that voted. Amongst young people, however, while 53 per cent declared themselves interested in politics, only 39 per cent voted.⁴⁶

The support this gives to Norris's approach may be strengthened further by a separate study of non-voters in 2001. It reported that most non-voters attributed their failure to vote to a conscious decision to abstain rather than to apathy or lack of interest.⁴⁷ It is also backed by another study which found that interest in 'national issues' and 'local issues' was very high at 82 per cent and 78 per cent respectively, but was much lower for 'news about elections' and 'politics' at 60 per cent and 58 per cent.⁴⁸

These findings remain true for the 2005 General Election. *Power*

conducted its own survey of 1,025 people who were on the electoral register but did not cast their vote at that election.⁴⁹ This showed that:

- Only 19 per cent cited apathy as a reason for not voting when asked the ‘open’ question: ‘what was the main reason for you not voting on 5th May’, 36 per cent of non-voters cited political reasons such as a lack of difference between the parties and claims that politicians ‘could not be trusted’.
- When asked to choose a factor from a list that might encourage them to vote, most non-voters (54 per cent) chose politicians keeping their promises and listening to people’s views between elections. Interestingly, the figure rose to 72 per cent for 18-24 year olds.
- More than 90 per cent of non-voters identified three or more political issues that “really mattered” to them despite the fact that 66 per cent declared themselves as uninterested in politics.

As a result we felt confident that while there inevitably always is some lack of interest or apathy towards politics to be found in society, this explanation could be largely discounted as a primary cause of recent declines in engagement. The key lesson that can be taken from this evidence is that it is important not to confuse changing senses of what constitutes civic duty and political involvement with a decline in civic duty and involvement.

Explanations in Doubt: A Culture of Contentment

Occasionally, we would hear the claim that voter turnout has declined because citizens are broadly satisfied economically and politically. The view was expressed most usually by politicians, very occasionally by experts and very rarely in the public submissions. We

were not convinced by this explanation for the following reasons.

- If contentment were a key cause, one would not expect to see similar trends of disengagement occurring in other European countries – most of which have not enjoyed Britain’s sustained period of economic growth and stability, and some of which have experienced sustained periods of mass unemployment.
- Contentment is suggested as a cause very rarely in the mass of evidence presented to the Inquiry. Against the regularity with which frustration and alienation were cited, contentment fades into insignificance.
- If contentment were a prime cause, one would expect to see declining levels of involvement in all forms of political participation but, as the data presented in Chapter 1 shows, this is only the case with formal democracy.
- Declining turnouts in general elections have coincided with recent economic stability and growth but turnout in other elections (local and European) and political party membership has been consistently low or declining over a series of economic cycles.
- If the logic of the claims about contentment is followed through, one would expect to see lower levels of political engagement amongst the better-off and higher levels amongst the worse-off but, as is well-documented, the opposite is the case. For example, MORI found that turnout in the 2001 election was 68 per cent amongst social classes A and B but only 53 per cent amongst classes D and E.⁵⁰

- The claim is backed by no empirical research evidence. Academic support for contentment as a cause of disengagement could not be found by the Inquiry. Indeed, if it is mentioned at all, it is only in order to be rejected.⁵¹

We could find no convincing evidence to uphold this explanation and it played little part in our consideration of further evidence and deliberations.

Explanations in Doubt: The Low Calibre of Politicians

We have heard a considerable amount of evidence attacking the calibre of British politicians. A fair number of the public submissions claimed disengagement to be caused by the fact that politicians have little or no interest in their constituents' views, are only concerned about their own careers, cannot be trusted to tell the truth, and are corrupt.

Expert evidence heard and seen by the Commission has also argued that disengagement has resulted from a decade of sleaze scandals and a long series of misleading statements by ministers (on topics ranging from BSE in the early 1990s to more recently the intelligence for the Iraq War). A similar analysis suggests that in an era where there is decreasing room for genuine policy difference between parties – particularly on economic matters – and when ideological vision is largely absent, the only way politicians can differentiate themselves from their opponents is by attacking competence or probity. Over time, this inevitably leaves the public with a sense that lack of probity and incompetence are characteristics of all politicians.⁵²

We could not find nor did we hear convincing evidence that either the calibre or the probity of politicians has worsened in recent years – a necessary condition if the low quality of politicians were to be a genuine cause of declining engagement. This is upheld by the cross-national nature of the problem. If low calibre were to be a cause, then one would have to accept that a similar decline in calibre was

occurring across the established democracies. No doubt some would argue that politicians everywhere are cut from a cloth inferior to that in previous generations. We are unconvinced. No such evidence has been presented to or found by us.

There is also some evidence that a popular distrust of politicians reduces when respondents are asked about the calibre of politicians whom they have actually met or with whom they have had dealings. A survey which asked specifically about competence found somewhat better results for a respondent's local MP than MPs in general. When asked whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the way MPs were "doing their job", 32 per cent were satisfied and 36 per cent were dissatisfied. These figures improved however, when people were asked how they felt "your MP is doing his/her job" – 41 per cent were satisfied, only 13 per cent dissatisfied. These findings suggest that the belief that politicians are of a particularly low calibre is not based on direct experience but a more general sense of alienation from politics and politicians.

The linked but slightly different notion that a decade and more of sleaze and spin has caused disengagement is also challenged by the cross-national data. While sleaze and spin have been problems in many European countries, we have not heard that they have reached the same intensity of concern as in Britain since the early 1990s. This again casts doubt on the significance of this suggested cause, although sleaze and spin have probably fed into the general disenchantment.

It is also not clear that low trust in politicians is closely linked to a decline in direct engagement, despite common assertions to the contrary in the media and within politics itself. Of the few detailed academic studies of any such link, all but one⁵³ broadly conclude that the causal relationship between trust in politics and political participation is "weak and patchy" and "not at all robust" as one study put it.⁵⁴

Our sense on this issue is that **low levels of trust in politicians are part of a wider alienation from formal democratic politics resulting from more profound structural issues** rather than its cause. As such, the widespread perception that politicians are economical with the truth or of a particularly low calibre is a problem to be addressed rather than to be taken entirely at face value. We have to ask why the perception has taken hold that today’s politicians are unworthy. What has brought that disdain into being?

Explanations in Doubt: The Lack of Competitive Elections

It has been regularly stated to the Inquiry that disengagement has been caused by the fact that the Labour Party has become so dominant in recent years. This is the “why bother to vote, we know who is going to win” scenario. The theory is that this has driven down interest in politics and made elections appear to be foregone conclusions removing the point of voting for many.

The literature contained strong quantitative evidence to support this claim. Studies have found that:

- the extent of ‘political efficacy’ reported by survey respondents was very closely related to the difference in share of the vote between the two main parties at the various general elections between 1945 and 2001 in Britain⁵⁵ – it did not matter whether this was real or just a perception but voters did weigh up the extent to which their vote would matter in deciding whether to head for the polling booth or not;
- turnout in different countries rises or falls with the size of the share of the vote for the winning party;⁵⁶
- variations in British local election turnouts are closely related to the marginality of the election;⁵⁷

- more competitive general elections and more marginal parliamentary constituencies tend to report higher turnout than safe seats – see table below:

Average turnouts in nine marginal and nine safe seats in the 2001 General Election

Source: Power Inquiry Research

Average turnout in nine marginal seats in 2001 General Election	65.8%
Average turnout in nine safe seats 2001 General Election	61.0%

As well as being supported by this data, the approach does seem enticingly logical, but there is strong counter-evidence and a potential alternative explanation for the above findings.

- Once again, the cross-national nature of the problem challenges this perspective. Other countries that have not experienced the electoral domination of one political party in the way the UK has have still experienced disengagement and declining turnouts.
- This analysis can only explain the recent decline in general election turnout. It cannot explain low turnouts in other elections, declining political party membership or low levels of trust in politicians – all of which predate the drop in general election turnout.
- The General Election of 2005 was considerably closer than those fought in 1997 and 2001, and the ruling party’s campaign strategy strongly emphasised the closeness of the contest, yet

turnout was in fact 10 percentage points lower than in 1997 and only 2 points higher than 2001.

- Most notably, the obviousness of the result is rarely suggested by people as a reason for not voting. The idea was not a significant feature of the public submissions to the Inquiry on elections and the Inquiry's Citizens' Panel based in Newcastle-Gateshead did not raise it as a reason in their discussions about the 2005 general election. Most strikingly, in the Inquiry's survey of 1,025 non-voters in that election, only 1 per cent raised it as a reason unprompted. This is upheld by a study of non-voters in the 2001 General Election which reported that none of their subjects 'spontaneously' gave the likely closeness of the result of the 2001 General Election as a reason for not voting.⁵⁸

Given this evidence it seems highly likely that the support for this claim is either overstated in its impact or has been misinterpreted. For example, we have heard an alternative interpretation of the data suggesting that closer elections lead to more people being encouraged to vote, not so much because there has been any change in the perception of the contest by the voters, but because the politicians make greater efforts to contact voters in more competitive elections and more marginal seats. We have not seen any hard evidence to support this thesis, but it seems as plausible as the original interpretation.

A much more significant factor affecting turnout indicated by the Inquiry's evidence – as is explained below – is the way our electoral system leads many voters to believe that their votes will be wasted. It seems likely that when seats become more competitive, the perception of waste is lessened because a vote for an opposition party might actually have an impact on the outcome of the contest. This can only be a minor factor, however, as even in the closest elections, the great

majority of constituencies remain safe.

Our evidence suggests that the causality for declining turnouts is the widening perception that votes are wasted in most constituency contests, not the fact that elections have been less competitive in recent years. This is a significant difference of emphasis. It suggests that we cannot accept the view that we only need to wait for a resurgent opposition to see turnout and participation rise. On the contrary, a way needs to be found to create less wasted votes even when one particular party is in the ascendant.

Explanations in Doubt: The Media Causes Disengagement

We regularly heard the claim that distrust in, and disengagement from, formal democratic politics is largely or primarily caused by a negative approach to politics and politicians on the part of the media. This view has been most strenuously advanced by the politicians to whom the Inquiry has spoken. As the late Robin Cook stated in evidence to the Commission:

*If you always serve up to the public the sense of the political process as one of failure, then it's hardly surprising that you lose confidence in your democratic process.*⁵⁹

We would not want to dissent from the view that media coverage of politics can be negative and hostile, and is quite possibly more negative now than it ever was. What is more difficult to gauge is how and why this descent into such mutual antagonism has come into being. Those in political power will always have an ambivalence about their relationship to the media because, while they need it for the dissemination of information and promotional purposes, they also resist its role as critic and lifter of stones. The media has a responsibility to inform; one of its purposes is to shine light in dark corners. It is also part of the public realm where debate on issues of the day should take place. Recent governments, all too aware of the power of the

press, have tried to bend it to their own purposes and in doing so have shown little respect for what journalists ought to be doing in an open democracy. The media is treated as yet another part of the mechanics of government to be bent to governmental will. Not surprisingly this leads to mutual disrespect. The product of this *folie a deux* can be poisonous distortion on both sides.

However, other factors are at work. There is a malevolent streak in the human spirit which wants to see culprits publicly excoriated and victims deified and which wants the Manichean simplicities of good and bad. This encourages the press to be both reductionist about quite complex issues and sensationalist about failure or flaws. Bearing the head of a politician or celebrity on a pole is the ultimate victory in the ratings wars and this feeds into the atmosphere of disdain for those in public life.

Another problem is that ownership of the media in Britain is concentrated in too few hands and the grip of particular hands is especially powerful. The support of The Sun newspaper is deemed so critical to political success that the owner was able to insist upon a referendum on the European Constitution and the government was prepared to do a volte face on its previous policy. This speaks volumes to the people about where power lies and reinforces the view that our votes are not what counts.

There is extremely strong evidence from a variety of sources that higher levels of exposure to news media correlate to higher levels of citizen participation.⁶⁰ Clearly people who are interested in politics are likely to read newspapers and watch the news on television. Whether just reading newspapers to fill the journey to work stimulates political interest is anyone's guess. The research shows that people whose only media diet is light entertainment are less likely to be involved in community and political activities.⁶¹ However, none of the evidence suggests that exposure to news media dampens participation as might be suggested by those fearful of the 'corrosive cynicism' of the media.

The seven questions *Power* put out for public consultation included the following: *Some people claim that the media breeds cynicism about politics and politicians which discourages political interest and involvement. Is this true? If so, how can the media play a positive role in encouraging political involvement?* The response to this was interesting. While many submissions were highly critical of the media – particularly of the way it reported politics and its unaccountable influence over government – “The Daily Mail effect” – the view that its negative approach promoted disengagement was very much a minority opinion. Many submissions felt that it was right for the media to hold politicians firmly to account as they were not sufficiently challenged elsewhere in the political system, and they felt that this reflected a wider scepticism about politics and politicians amongst the public at large.

The cross-national data also plays a role here. Few countries have a press or broadcast media quite as challenging and cynical as that in Britain and yet, as pointed out extensively above, disengagement is also a problem in these countries.

Our view is that, as with the popular hostility towards politicians, more profound structural problems have promoted disengagement and alienation, and that negative media coverage is a symptom rather than a significant cause. It seems to us that while there clearly is a problem with the media the answer is where to start and, in light of the evidence, we believe that if we get the political system right this will change the atmosphere and culture and the press will follow.

Explanations in Doubt: Lack of Time

Occasionally, the *Power* Inquiry heard claims that an increasing lack of time in the lives of today's citizens has led to the decline in political engagement. In particular, it is sometimes pointed out that because both people in so many couples work, the old pattern of one half of a couple engaging in political activity while the other takes care of dependents and household matters no longer holds true. As a result there is less time for the activism of old.

Research does exist to show that lack of time impacts on other forms of community activity beyond the political. Studies have found that:

- by far the most common cause cited as a reason for not volunteering for charity work or community groups is lack of time – 58 per cent cited this in 1997, an increase of 19 per cent since a similar survey in 1991;⁶²
- a survey of ‘social capital’ in the United States identified lack of time as one of the five main reasons for a decline in community or group activity.⁶³

The key fact, however, is that, despite heavy demands on some people’s time, many *are* engaged with non-political and informal political activity and seem to prefer this type of time-consuming activity over formal politics. This suggests that the issue may not be lack of time but the priorities that affect how citizens use their scarce time. It is also notable that the youngest citizens – who are less likely to have the work, childcare and household pressures of older people – are, in fact, the age group which are least likely to participate in formal democratic processes and institutions.

It also has to be said that while activism in a political party may be time-consuming, voting is hardly demanding in this respect – especially given the recent ease of obtaining postal votes – and yet this is an area of formal political participation that has seen a serious decline. Indeed, only 1 per cent of respondents in *Power’s* survey of non-voters gave lack of time or being too busy as a reason for not voting.⁶⁴

As a result of this, we did not feel lack of time was a significant factor impacting on engagement with formal democracy.

Overall we had identified a series of explanations which we felt could be entirely rejected or which could be judged to play only a minor role in promoting disengagement from formal democracy. However, we also received a number of explanations which did fit more convincingly with the wider evidence we had uncovered. These are dealt with in the next chapter.