



“Citizens feel they have little influence over political decisions”

Chapter 3— The Reality

Despite our doubts about the explanations for disengagement outlined in the previous chapter, a series of other explanations appeared regularly and with force in the evidence received by the Commission, and which stood up to closer scrutiny.

Persuasive Explanations: Citizens do not have enough influence over political decisions

The one factor felt to cause disengagement that runs through all the strands of our investigation is the very widespread sense that citizens feel their views and interests are not taken sufficiently into account by the processes of political decision-making. It cannot be stressed enough the depth and extent of this perception amongst the British public. Many, if not all, of the other accepted explanations presented here could also be understood as variations on this theme of weak citizen influence.

This view comes through very strongly in the many public submissions received by the Inquiry. The quotes below are indicative of a much wider concern.

For the most part, people can't make a difference, because our politicians will do what they want to do regardless.

We are powerless against unaccountable individuals, why should anyone be interested in politics?

To vote, people need to feel that it achieves something more than just exercising a right. People want to feel that their vote makes a difference to their lives; for many this is not felt.

People need a feeling that their vote might actually have some effect.

It is just the fact people don't really think they make a difference.

This view also made strong appearances in the Inquiry's own research projects. The survey of non-voters in the 2005 General Election asked respondents to choose an option from a list of twelve factors which might encourage them to vote. The most popular option was "politicians listened to my views between elections" which was identified as 'very likely' or 'likely' to encourage voting by 53 per cent of non-voters. Surprisingly, given the widespread sense of politicians' lack of honesty, this was more popular than the option "politicians' promises could be trusted".⁶⁵

The first session of the Citizens' Panel based in Newcastle-Gateshead concentrated on reasons for lack of participation in formal democracy. A number of reasons were given but the lack of citizen influence on decision-making came through as unquestionably the most common and most passionately felt. Some of the quotes from the thirty-strong panel highlight this.⁶⁶

I think the politicians pay lip service to the public, they don't put our suggestions into practice.

They pretend that we're involved and that, but you're not really.

The first thing is, you've got to get somebody who'll listen and this is

90 per cent of the problem. You've got nobody to talk to.

When I vote I never believe I can make a difference.

I voted at the election, I voted at council elections. Your words are still not heard.

I feel as though they (politicians) don't want you involved.

It (politics) is a closed shop. You don't feel you're being told the truth.

These views were reflected in the project that held day-long focus group meetings with activists from parties, campaign groups and community groups to discover attitudes towards local political parties. The attitudes of campaign and community group activists were extremely negative and the party activists themselves could not think of many positive things to say about their own organisations. The overwhelming cause of this negativity was the sense that party leaderships do not listen and do not allow 'ordinary' members or citizens a real influence over the decisions they take.

The main parties are controlled from the top down and they don't actually listen to either their party members or the general public.
(Community group activist, Glasgow)

At the end of the day, local party reps are puppets on a string. They just listen to the big lads down south and they dance to their tune.
(Campaign group activist, Glasgow)

In a political party you are severely restricted by who and how much you can lobby. They can't challenge the sources that feed them.
(Campaign group activist, Birmingham)

They draw up their policies without any consultation ... they say jump and they expect us to say “how high?”.
(Community group activist, Glasgow)

We have important issues and they have their ivory towers and there’s a big gap in between. That’s why they can’t help us.
(Campaign group activist, Somerset)

How much power we have locally is negligible. I don’t think we have any say over national policy at all.
(Party activist, Glasgow)

I joined the party to be an influencer but I am not naive enough to think that by being part of the political process, even running as a candidate in a local election, that I have any real power.
(Party activist, Birmingham)

No, I don’t feel local parties have power. I know from experience.
(Party activist, Somerset)

These findings are upheld by research carried out independently of *Power*.

- 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 1994.⁶⁷ 56 per cent agreed in 2003 that they have ‘no say in what the government does’.⁶⁸
- 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’.⁶⁹

- Over three-quarters of those questioned in 2000 felt they had little or no power between elections.⁷⁰
- 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’.⁷¹
- 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.⁷²

In the face of such overwhelming evidence, we are in no doubt that the sense that citizens can have little influence over political decisions, even if they do get involved in formal democracy, is a fundamental cause of disengagement and alienation.

Persuasive Explanations: The main parties are too similar and lack principle

The previous point explained the hostility towards parties on the grounds that they fail to offer ordinary members and citizens influence. The other attitude to parties that occurs regularly as a cause of disengagement in the evidence is that **the main parties are not distinctive enough**, particularly in their core economic policies, and that **their policies are guided by the search for votes from the centre-ground rather than by deeply held values**. Some representative quotes from the public submissions illustrate this view.

Politics in Britain is like those cheap chocolate boxes: “Six different flavours, one single taste”. Where is the choice? What’s the point?

It was enormously hard to see any real differences between the main parties’ agendas at the last election. It was pathetic, quite honestly.

People argue against each other just because they're from two different parties, even though they may in principle agree on the same issue. To me that's wasting time.

I find it difficult to want to ally myself with political parties when they all seem terribly similar.

People don't bother to vote because they believe that all parties are the same.

This view has also been the most commonly held perspective in the expert evidence on the reasons behind declining engagement and the decline in election turnout in particular.

We've had a watering down of ideology so that there's not so much differentiation between the parties. Just as people might look at goods on the supermarket shelf, they look around and they decide what it is they want to buy. But if they don't see anything that they like, they don't buy anything. In the same way they look at the parties and they actually don't see that the choice is going to make a great deal of difference to them.

(Ken Ritchie, Director, Electoral Reform Society)⁷³

There's a level of consensus between the two, and in fact three, major parties about a great deal of things that people like me think are important. So if you're concerned, for example, about the increased involvement of the private sector in public services or the idea that public services are best improved by setting them in competition with one another, that's something that there's broad agreement about across the three parties. Now on the right of politics that applies equally well, for example if you're of the opinion that Britain should withdraw from the EU – that's not an opinion that I agree with, but it's an opinion which polling suggests applies to

*about a third of the population and certainly no one would doubt that this country is innately Euro sceptic – none of the three major parties articulate that view. So a lot of people only hear differences of nuance if they hear anything at all and I think that as well gives people the impression that there's nothing at stake.
(John Harris, Author and Journalist)⁷⁴*

I think people believe that the choice is less great than it was. I think probably in the 1980s you had three clear choices and you had fierce competition between different parties, turnouts were higher and in 1992 I think probably people believed again then that there was a really clear choice between John Major's Conservatives, Neil Kinnock's Labour party and Paddy Ashdown's Lib Dems. I would say with the changes Labour had in the 1990s when they decided to move onto a much more conservative agenda, the gap between the Labour and Conservative parties suddenly greatly reduced, compared to the battle you had in the 1980's so there was less choice and less competition.

(Lord Rennard, Chief Executive, Liberal Democrats)⁷⁵

Over the last 30 years people decreasingly find it easy to see that whoever gets elected makes a huge amount of difference, because of the degree of consensus. Again, if I go back, the first election I voted in was in 1970 and, at that stage, even if people didn't know much about politics or weren't particularly interested in politics, there was a very strong sense of a real gulf between what Labour stood for and what the Conservatives stood for. And so, even people who weren't particularly interested – and it's partly tribal but it was also very much ideological – people felt very clearly what side of the fence they were on and were much more likely to turn out to vote for that. Now the debate is much more in managerialist terms. Who's going to manage the Health Service better? Who's going to manage the education system better?

(Sam Younger, Chairman, The Electoral Commission)⁷⁶

These views were replicated in our Citizens' Panel, particularly in the discussion about the 2005 General Election. Almost half of the Panel did not vote and the primary reason given was that elections do not change anything because the main parties are so similar. This was given quantitative support in the survey of non-voters which found that 48 per cent of respondents claimed that more differences between the main parties would make them 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote.⁷⁷

Our evidence on this issue also suggests that the similarity between the main parties lies behind much of the popular distaste felt towards the nature of political debate in Britain. The notion that adversarial debate itself is a cause of disengagement did not feature at all strongly in any of our sources of evidence. Indeed the way political discourse is conducted was raised very rarely, if at all, in our public submissions, our interviews with expert witnesses or our research with non-voters or local political and community activists. Instead, there seems to be a widespread sense that politicians who engage in confrontational debate but do not disagree fundamentally on policy are either engaged in petty point-scoring or are embroiled in a party tribalism with which the great majority of the country do not identify. Indeed, the strong preference arising from our evidence for distinct parties which stood for core principles would suggest that adversarialism (not for its own sake, but with a real purpose behind it) may be positively welcomed and may encourage engagement.

Not only does the similarity of the main parties feature strongly in the Inquiry's evidence but it is not contradicted by the three key factors of disengagement: the intensity of alienation, the vibrancy of participation outside formal politics, and the cross-national nature of the problem.

Only this last factor may need some explaining. Many other European countries do indeed have two or three main parties or a coalition of parties which have tended to gravitate to the centre ground. The reasons for this are not simply electoral – as in Britain – but can also be explained by the decline of the grand ideological positions that

dominated the twentieth century and the possibility that the pressures of a globalised economy have removed the 'policy space' within which governing parties can operate.

However, it is significant that most European countries have proportional systems which should provide a wider choice of parties from a more diverse political spectrum who all stand a good chance of winning places in Parliament or even in a governing coalition. This therefore raises the question of whether this factor can be treated as a genuinely significant cause. We feel it still can. Firstly, because it is such a commonly cited factor in all the expert and public evidence received by the Inquiry. And, secondly, because there is recent research to suggest that proportional systems have, on the whole, limited if not halted election turnout declines in comparison to Britain. More detail on this is given in the next section which deals more directly with the characteristics of the first-past-the-post system.

Persuasive Explanations: The electoral system leads to wasted and unequal votes

One of the questions the Inquiry put out for public consultation was: *What changes would encourage a larger number of people to feel it is worth voting?* Far and away the largest number of responses identified an electoral system that treated all votes equally. The box below presents a small selection of the public submissions in this area that give a feel of the overall evidence.

Indicative quotes from submissions to public consultation claiming that 'wasted votes' lead to disengagement.

The first-past-the-post-system means that most of the electorate (those that didn't vote for the winner in a particular constituency) feel as if their vote has been wasted.

The merit of first-past-the-post is stable government. However, except for those living in marginal constituencies, it renders one's vote virtually worthless.

Many votes are wasted under the first-past-the-post system.

The first-past-the-post system is one of the things that put people off. As a Liberal Democrat voter in Westminster there really is no point me bothering to go to the polling station, it will make no difference.

It takes a zealot to bother voting when the vote won't count.

Anyone voting in a non-marginal seat knows their vote is wasted.

First-past-the-post is also responsible for 'safe seats' whereby in many areas everyone knows that the candidate of party X will automatically be elected; this is a disincentive to anyone – supporters of party X or of the opposition – to voting. Why vote if the result is a foregone conclusion?

The expert evidence presented to the Inquiry was more divided on the issue of proportional systems and their benefits or otherwise, but there was a clear majority view that first-past-the-post does not aid turnout. The reasons given for this were varied but the effect of creating so many votes which have no influence on the national outcome and the priority the system gives to the votes of a small percentage of floating voters were clearly identified as major blocks to increasing turnout.

This factor also received backing from the survey of non-voters which found that 49 per cent of respondents said they were 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote if "my preferred party had a real chance

to win power".⁷⁸

The issue of 'wasted votes' is not challenged by the key factors of the intense and political nature of alienation from formal democracy nor by the higher levels of participation in other areas. However, as mentioned above, there is the fact of disengagement and declining turnout in countries that use proportional electoral systems. We were persuaded, however, that this need not require the rejection of the wasted votes explanation. This was for two reasons.

- The expert evidence presented to the Inquiry is clear that the problems of first-past-the-post may help explain disengagement but that they are far from an entire explanation. Obviously we believe that the other factors presented here play a significant role and will clearly have an impact even in those countries that use proportional representation.
- Research by Professor Pippa Norris, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, suggests that those countries that do use proportional systems have had historically higher turnouts than Britain and have in most cases maintained higher turnouts despite a general decline. Her study in 2005 of 164 countries found that those with proportional representation had average turnouts of 70 per cent; 10 per cent higher than those achieved by Britain in the most recent general elections.⁷⁹

Persuasive Explanations: Parties and elections require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies

There was a cause of disengagement which was mentioned frequently in the public submissions, the research with local activists and the Citizens' Panel, but was not nearly so common in the expert evidence or in the literature surveyed by the Inquiry research team. This was the view that many citizens find parties and elections unappealing because they require individuals to commit to a very broad

range of policies with which they might not entirely agree. The box provides some representative quotes from the Inquiry's evidence sources on this theme.

Indicative quotes from Inquiry evidence expressing the view that parties require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies

Submissions in response to public consultation:

Parties are irrelevant. I cannot get my views to map on to those of any single party so I can't see how I can ever vote for a party. Why shouldn't we be asked what we think about the important issue of the day and be allowed to vote on them directly? We are an educated and informed population and we no longer need to be 'represented' by politicians, we can do it ourselves (or we could if we were allowed to).

People and society have changed now, and their issues have changed but those parties have not. The need to sign up to the whole kit and caboodle of a political manifesto can put people off who have a more sophisticated analysis of political issues.

Parties used to attract sections of the population who shared a raft of concerns mostly deriving from their shared social and environmental situation. These days people's concerns on many issues do not fall into the traditional party stereotypes so such clear-cut differentiation is becoming inappropriate... There are probably a dozen issues important to people where their view on one does not predict their attitude on any other. It is therefore unrealistic for a party to offer a manifesto with defined positions on more than a few of these major issues and seek unreserved loyalty to it especially if the party members have had no say in developing the eventual positions

taken. And yet this is still what is happening with ever decreasing success in terms of party membership.

Parties are restrictive. People can have very particular views and whilst they may agree with a party on some, they may be against them on the rest, and so feel unable to support them. We are perhaps more of a nation of individuals than ever before, and maybe this should be reflected in how we go about politics.

I am interested in issues, beliefs and values, problems/solutions and open discussion around any issue area. Political parties are not flexible enough to represent my evolving opinion of a variety of issues.

Parties are too broad brush for most people – I agree with some ideas but not others. Political parties give the impression that you must 'sign up' to a whole series of political objectives. Many people don't feel able to do this. They may simply be interested in one particular issue. Their view on this may coincide with that of a particular political party but they don't feel that they can sign up for anything else.

The biggest problem is that most people agree with a bit of one, a bit of the other, and a bit of a third, or a fourth, party. No one party encapsulates someone's beliefs entirely.

I personally find that there is no party which encompasses all of my political beliefs, therefore I focus on campaigning for certain groups as I feel that this is the only way I can make a difference.

Allegiance to any one party would only be attractive to me if I felt that I did not have to support every policy or position that the party

has. If someone is a member of a political party, I associate that with them supporting at least the majority of their policies. No one party does that for me. I think more open and collaborative models would encourage me to get involved – techniques like deliberative forums, online debates etc.

It seems that many political parties are intolerant of the diversity of views among its members... so if you join you have to sign up to a whole bunch of policies whereas you may only strongly agree with a few of them or even just the general thrust.

Experts and Practitioners Comments

Partisan alignment was rooted in a class structure or a set of class and social beliefs in the country. You tended to take your politics from your family and your social background. As that class stratification has become more diverse and more broken down, it's led to a de-alignment of party links and the strength of feeling towards political parties. This has led to people drawing their politics much more from issues, from concerns that they have, and less from simply a set of inherited or adopted views that they have taken from their community and their social group.

Matt Carter, General Secretary, The Labour Party

Particularly for young people there's a perception that if you support a party you have to sign up to the whole policy platform. That may not be the case but that is the perception there. Lots of people think "well I may support them in some areas but I don't actually agree with this policy, so I won't join".

Peter Facey, Director, New Politics Network

The fact that you can only see yourself fitting 30 per cent of a party's political position is very unfortunate but it may be that is the fact of

political life. ... It looks as if the younger you are the less likely you'll feel that you're prepared to box yourself in like that. At one level, that's extremely healthy. The other level is if they keep that right through their own personal development, that refusal to be boxed in, we have nobody who's prepared to commit themselves to anything in terms of political allegiance.

Lord Tyler, Liberal Democrat Peer

This is an interesting perspective because it may go some way towards explaining the popularity of informal pressure politics over formal party politics. Pressure politics is largely formed around groups that campaign on single issues or groups of closely-related single issues. This would inevitably be more attractive if citizens are less willing to commit themselves to broad programmes of change. Of course, this perspective fits well with the other key factors of disengagement identified above.

Why this should now be the case and how to respond to this seemingly intractable objection to formal democracy is dealt with throughout the rest of this chapter and report.

Persuasive Explanations: Lack of information and knowledge about politics

The lack of information and knowledge about elections, candidates, parties and the political system more generally proved a recurring theme of all the strands of the Inquiry's investigation and research.

The majority view is that **basic understanding of the system is low** and that this leaves people unclear about how to get involved in politics and intimidated about participating in a world they do not fully understand. At a more basic level, the view was propounded that if voters know little or nothing about their candidates and what they

stand for, then they will not feel adequately resourced to enter a polling station to make a rational choice. This latter point was upheld by the survey of non-voters which found that 49 per cent of respondents said they were 'very likely' or 'likely' to vote if they had more information about the candidates in their constituency.⁸⁰

Indicative quotes from Inquiry evidence expressing the view that lack of knowledge and information reduces participation

Submissions in response to public consultation:

Local politicians are not known – neither are the facts. Local politicians (of all parties) must go into sixth forms, not as untouchable figures of respect, but as members of a community, who will listen and make a difference.

More pragmatically, if schools, voluntary organisations and the mass media were to seriously engage with the 'civic responsibility' and 'citizenship' agendas currently being (poorly) promoted [then engagement would increase].

More media and especially television coverage is essential in order to make people more aware how central politics is to everyday life and the big questions.

Party membership and allegiance can be made more attractive by individual parties offering a clearer outline of what they are actually standing for. Too many people are unsure of what they are voting for and may support a party more fully if they understand it better.

Party membership can only be made more attractive if people

understand politics to start with. ... I think that parties could be more effective than they are if time is taken to redefine people's stereotypical view of parties as a group of 50 year old men doing boring things that have no tangible impact on an individual's life.

I personally find it frightening that most young people (18-24) I encounter have very little understanding of politics and the key issues of the day. They also have a very narrow view of world politics. There needs to be more emphasis on issues and getting debates at school and university to raise awareness and the media have a role to play in raising awareness of issues through documentaries not just the usually facile news reports. Only if people care about the issues will they get involved with any of the parties. Only when you understand the issues can you make a judgement about which party to get involved with.

It would be a good start if people knew how to become members. Many people in politics assume the everyday person is aware of how to join and how to vote ... this is not so.

Most people would have little idea about what they would actually do by joining a political party. Do you go to meetings? How often? What kind of time commitment is involved - and is it easy to get out of if you're no longer interested? Do you have to be completely aligned with the party platform - i.e. indoctrinated with an ideology? Is it a group for healthy debate and dialogue about issues?

Trade unions and other collective organisations such as charities have a role to play in re-educating society about the key issues of the day and how each citizen can affect change to benefit others.

Experts and Practitioners Comments

I think there is an incredible lack of understanding. I do quite a lot of street stalls with my local party and you find a lot of people who still say, “ah, I don’t know if I can vote in this area”. Some people don’t understand the constituency system. I think there’s a whole set of things there that people don’t understand and they certainly don’t understand that you can still go and vote even without your polling card and that you don’t have to give your polling card to telling agents at the polling station. A whole set of things that people just don’t know... you will often find as well a lot of people will say to you they’ve got no idea who is standing.

Jean Lambert, Spokesperson, The Green Party

Official information is just appalling. Try finding out where your polling station is for local elections, if you don’t happen to have the polling card, it is impossible. It is not even on the web. It is so easy to do that kind of thing particularly with the internet, but using other media as well. The official information for the London elections is atrocious and it is pretty bad for general elections. There is just this assumption that you will know where to go and that you will have filled out your polling card at the right moment and you will think about it and most people don’t lead those sorts of lives.

Professor Helen Margetts, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

There is quite a lot of evidence that people find the voting process confusing, and I think there does need to be a significant effort to make people feel comfortable with it. I think it is an inhibitor, that’s what the research tells us. Again, I think it’s by no means one of the headline reasons for turnout being lower than one would wish, but it’s a further inhibiting factor. The importance to me of looking at things like information about voting methods, how to go about

voting, making sure people find it convenient and easy to understand, is that some of these other things about parties being seen as the same, people not trusting politicians, all of that, these are very big things to change, so let’s at least make sure we don’t fail to change the smaller inhibitors.

Sam Younger, Chair, The Electoral Commission

There are two points here and they conflict. The first one is that only 10 per cent of the seats are marginal and only 10 per cent of the electorate in those seats are floating voters and are going to affect the result of the General Election. So the political parties are only going for that 1 per cent of the population and the other 99 per cent is ignored. And so there has been a dearth of information except to that 1 per cent who has been inundated with information.

On the other hand the sitting MPs have been able to spend a lot of their money on their computers and their research assistants to help them contact the electorate telling them all about themselves. People probably know more about sitting MPs than they did in the past, but they certainly don’t know about the parties and their platforms anything like they used to.

...If you went back as little as 20 years you could guarantee that you would have literature from every single candidate in the election in your constituency. And in many cases, more than one piece of paper, I mean you could have several during the course of a campaign. Now I think in a lot of seats that are regarded as safe as opposed to marginal, the people aren’t going to get anything!

John Strafford, Chair, Campaign for Conservative Democracy

This is backed up by independent research which shows very low levels of political understanding amongst the general public.

- 64 per cent felt they knew ‘just a little’ or ‘hardly anything’ about how Parliament works – this increased to 81 per cent amongst 15-24 year olds;⁸¹
- 57 per cent felt they knew ‘not very much’ or ‘nothing at all’ about politics⁸² – this increased to 71.1 per cent amongst 18-24 year olds;⁸³
- in a seven-question political knowledge quiz of 2,000 adults only 45 per cent got four or more answers correct and only 3 per cent got all answers correct – only 27 per cent knew that a general election does not have to be held every four years and only 49 per cent knew that the House of Commons has more power than the Lords.⁸⁴

While a number of sources report that these low levels of knowledge dampen political participation,⁸⁵ few actually explain why this should be the case. One analyst has suggested that people who feel they know little about politics are less likely to vote because they fear making the ‘wrong’ choice. This source also suggested that in the past many were guided in their voting – in a relatively unthinking way – by the strong party identification of their family or community. As partisanship has declined, citizens feel less able to make a choice without knowing more about the options on offer.⁸⁶

The most detailed work on knowledge and participation was conducted by Henry Milner. Milner feels that many citizens do not vote because of a prevalent view that “all politicians are the same”. He argues that this view is held by two different types of citizen. The first is politically informed and holds that view as a reasoned conclusion. They may be politically active in other ‘more meaningful’ ways. The second simply comes to that view because they do not possess the information to distinguish among the candidates or parties. Accord-

ing to Milner, evidence shows that the second type of citizen is on the rise and this in turn helps to explain declining turnout and participation.⁸⁷ This would also go some way to explaining the common view proposed to the Commission and examined above that the main parties are too similar.

Given that lack of information and knowledge is a relatively prominent feature of the Inquiry’s evidence, the fact that it is backed by academic research and that it is not contradicted by the three key factors of disengagement, we feel that it should certainly join the likely causes of disengagement presented here.

Persuasive Explanations: Voting procedures are inconvenient and unattractive

A final factor which occurred to a lesser extent in the evidence seen by the Inquiry was the inconvenience and unattractiveness of voting procedures. A number of public submissions mentioned this and the expert evidence highlighted it as a relatively minor cause but one worthy of some consideration. The survey of non-voters found that 44 per cent said they were ‘very likely’ or ‘likely’ to vote if they were able to vote by mobile phone or on the internet.⁸⁸

The independent research surveyed by the Inquiry is also reasonably clear that the inconvenience of voting is unlikely to be a significant cause of decline in electoral activity and that change to the way voting is conducted play a small part in increasing participation.⁸⁹ One study which compared average turnout in parliamentary elections in 29 countries between 1960 and 1995 concluded that the nature of voting facilities explained far less variance in turnout than the nature of the electoral system and the role of key democratic institutions.⁹⁰

Indeed, even the UK Electoral Commission, the body charged by the Government with helping ‘modernise’ electoral law states:

We recognise that it is unlikely that changing the method of voting can achieve major increases in voter turnout unless voters also feel that the election is relevant to them and that their vote matters.⁹¹

We accept that voting procedures are not a major cause of disengagement and clearly only relate to the issue of election turnout. However, as the issue was raised in the evidence a number of times, and is backed to a certain extent by independent research, it is an issue we have kept in mind during our deliberations.

The explanations outlined in this chapter were to play a central role in the work of the Commission particularly in its efforts to produce a series of recommendations which genuinely responded to the real causes of disengagement. However, we were also aware of another explanation of disengagement which seemed to frame all others and explain why the problem had arisen at this particular point in history. We felt it was vital to take account of this explanation, if our recommendations were to be as rigorous and informed as possible.