



“When participation meets the expectations of today’s citizens, they will get involved”

## **Chapter 4— The Rise of New Citizens**

The puzzling factor about most of the explanations accepted by the Commission is that they relate to features of the political system in Britain that are hardly new. We explored phenomena which had only developed in the last ten years – in the case of declining general election turnout – and in the last thirty to forty years – in the case of declining party membership and allegiance and low levels of turnout in local elections. Yet most, if not all, of the themes emerging in the evidence do not sit easily with such a recent emergence of the problem.

There have been periods in the past where the main political parties shared similar economic approaches and were eager to poach each other’s policies in an effort to dominate the political centre-ground. The most obvious example of this would be the 1950s when the Conservatives adopted and even extended many of the welfarist and mixed economy policies of the Labour Party at a time when the Labour Party itself was ruled by its most centrist elements. And yet this is regarded by many as the heyday of participation in formal democracy, with very high election turnouts, large and highly active memberships of the main parties, and very strong allegiance to and identification with those main parties.

Equally, the hierarchical nature of the British state and the main parties and their failure to offer real influence to ordinary members

of the public are hardly recent characteristics. The Conservative Party has always as a matter of principle been a hierarchical party which invests very great organisational and policy-making power in the office of Leader. Indeed, if anything, the Conservative Party has offered more influence to its members in recent years by extending the franchise for the election of leader to members.

The Labour Party may have historically endured long-running internal battles over policy direction but there have rarely been occasions when the ordinary party member enjoyed any great influence. The most significant challenges to the Party leadership were invariably met with intense resistance and could succeed only with the backing of a handful of union leaders who controlled the majority of votes at the Annual Conference rather than through a groundswell of constituency party votes. As with the Conservative Party, it could also be argued that members of the Labour Party have actually gained more influence in recent years, following the introduction of mandatory reselection and One Member One Vote for Parliamentary candidates.

In addition, the post-war period up to the 1960s was the high point of a technocratic and paternalist welfarism that embodied an unspoken idea that educated professionals automatically knew better than ordinary men and women. The notion of providing citizens with significant influence over political decisions was not a feature of this period and yet, this was the high point of participation in formal democracy.

The problems of the electoral system, identified by so many, are also, of course, not new. The first-past-the-post system has always left large numbers of voters without any impact on the final outcome and there is certainly nothing new in assuming that a voter's mark on the ballot paper indicates support for the full range of policies in a party's manifesto.

For us, therefore, only one explanation presented to the Inquiry could account for the relatively recent, cross-national, intense disengagement and alienation from formal democracy alongside the

vibrancy of, and innovation in, other forms of participation. This was the explanation that identified changes in the values, interests and expectations of citizens themselves over the last thirty years. **In short, the problem of disengagement arose not so much from changes in the political system but in changes in the citizens.**

The evidence and research showed that this transformation in citizens' values and expectations has been brought about by the great shift in social and economic relations since 1945 in the industrialised world. These changes have been documented in detail elsewhere and it is now extremely well established that advanced economies have undergone significant change in the post-war period. While the precise nature and the extent of that change is still hotly debated, it is also widely accepted that it has radically altered the nature of society, culture and politics.

Whereas in the past the advanced economies largely relied on the manufacturing industries, and to a lesser extent agriculture, this has changed since 1945, and particularly since the 1960s. Today, such countries create wealth largely through the provision of services such as banking, retail and information technology.

This analysis is clearly upheld by the figures:

- in the 1940s manufacturing accounted for almost 40 per cent of the UK economy; today it accounts for around 20 per cent;<sup>92</sup>
- at the end of the 1970s around seven million were employed in the manufacturing sector (around 33 per cent of the workforce); today, the figure is around 3.4 million (about 14 per cent of the workforce) and falling;<sup>93</sup>
- by contrast, all service industry sectors have seen their share of the economy and their number of employees rise in the same periods;<sup>94</sup>

- employment in the service sector exceeds 70 per cent in the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, France and the US. The figure is 65 per cent in Germany, Italy and Japan. This represents a major decline of manufacturing employment in all of these countries. For example, 34 per cent of German employment resided in manufacturing in 1980 but fell to 24 per cent by 2000; and fell from 22 per cent to 15 per cent over the same period in the USA.<sup>95</sup>

This establishment of these ‘post-industrial’ societies across Western Europe, America, Australasia and, increasingly, Japan and South East Asia has vast implications for human life. Some of the most significant are as follows:

- the expansion of professional classes and the shrinkage of the manual working classes – the factory worker has given way to the office worker;
- higher proportions of society are affluent with greater disposable income, rising living standards and more leisure time;
- education, expertise and intellectual skills have become more significant for successful employment than physical capacity and manual skills;
- greater social, occupational and geographic mobility;
- advanced economies have become much more tied in to global networks as the post-industrial nations rely on the import of manufactured goods and raw materials and on the complex production networks established by transnational corporations where different aspects of a single production

- process are carried out in many different countries;
- the material concerns for many individuals, families and their communities in the industrial era – securing decent and sufficient food, housing, and healthcare – have become less significant, while ‘post-material’ concerns – securing personal freedoms and rights, satisfactory leisure-time pursuits, access to luxury goods and environmental security – have grown in significance.

However, post-industrialisation has also seen the emergence of a new group in society that has not only suffered from the decline of manufacturing industries but has also not enjoyed the benefits of the rise of the retail sector. A class of people suffering ‘multiple deprivation’; “a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown”.<sup>96</sup> This desperate collection of disadvantage leads to an inability or prevention from taking part in the wider social, economic, and cultural facets of our society but also, most relevantly here, an exclusion from the political life of the nation.

It has been argued that ‘social exclusion’ is worse in Britain than in most of the rest of Western Europe and that this situation has deteriorated even further in recent years. Studies have found that:

- the percentage of individuals living in households in income poverty in the UK rose from 15 per cent in 1981 to 24 per cent in 1993/4 and 22 per cent in 2002/03;<sup>97</sup>
- child poverty has fallen roughly in line with government targets, but is still high by international standards – in 2002/03, 23 per cent of children in Britain lived in households earning below 60 per cent of the median income;<sup>98</sup>

- the number of households in temporary accommodation has continued to rise since 1997; in 2002/03, 129,000 applicants for social housing were accepted as being homeless and in ‘priority need’, an increase of 10 per cent on 2001/02;<sup>99</sup>
- Persistent poverty – defined as living at least three years out of the last four in poverty – is high in Britain compared to the rest of Europe; between 1998 and 2001, 11 per cent of UK citizens lived in persistent poverty. This compares to 5 per cent in the Netherlands, 6 per cent in Germany, and 9 per cent across Europe as a whole.<sup>100</sup>

Assessing the impact of a shift as complex and profound as post-industrialism on political participation in general and formal democratic involvement in particular is never going to be straightforward. However, a number of authors have tried to understand how the wider post-industrial context affects political involvement<sup>101</sup>. Most fundamentally, it can be gleaned from their work that post-industrial society has at one level created a new type of citizen. The findings can be summarised as follows.

- The shrinkage of the manual working class and the expansion of the professional class has greatly increased the number of individuals who no longer hold a strong class allegiance or, at least, identify with the cultural and political forms associated with the economic classes once engaged in the social conflicts of the twentieth century.
- The grand ideologies of the last century, which were based upon broad-brush approaches to traditional class interests and material concerns, have an inevitably reduced appeal for many citizens today, given the decline of historical class divisions and identities. Instead, the political values of today’s citizen

are likely to be shaped by the more or less unconnected range of post-material concerns mentioned above.

- The rise of a better educated and more socially and geographically mobile population who are valued for their intellectual skills rather than their physical capacity has created individuals who hold themselves in higher esteem and take for granted their right to control their lives and take many decisions, from the most trivial to the most important, for themselves.
- The ‘cultural revolution’ experienced by Western nations in the sixties partly came about because of the gradual shift to a post-industrial economy. This revolution enhanced the emphasis on individual self-worth and self-determination and greatly reduced popular deference towards established authority. Indeed, it could be argued that the decline of deference and the ‘cultural revolution’ have created a citizen who automatically exhibits scepticism or even cynicism towards those in authority.

In short, the changes of the post-war era have gradually created citizens who are better educated, have a higher sense of self-esteem, enjoy and expect to make decisions for themselves, and either lack or choose their own geographic, social and institutional bonds.

However, this should be set against the simultaneous creation by post-industrialisation of the section of society that suffers from persistent poverty. This group has not seen its education, self-esteem and freedom of choice rise in recent years. Quite the opposite. As Audrey Bronstein, Director of the Oxfam UK Poverty Programme, testified to the *Power Commission* people on low income are often engaged in a constant, and usually unequal, struggle to assert their rights and decisions against the institutions they rely upon for their

limited well-being – whether that be their employers, the Department for Work and Pensions, the police or the National Health Service.<sup>102</sup> A rising sense of powerlessness rather than self-determination has been the lot of those individuals, families and communities hit hardest by post-industrialisation.

It is our contention that it is this dual outcome of the post-industrial era which has created the growing alienation from formal democracy. Clearly any political system with its roots and design in an era that predates such profound changes would be confronted with a major challenge. The situation has, in fact, thrown up two such challenges for the British system.

1. The British parliamentary system of elected representation and considerable executive power was built and designed in an era of very limited educational provision and in which deference and rigid hierarchy, and static social relations were taken for granted. The Executive and elected representatives relied on these factors to ensure that they commanded the respect of the population and a broad acquiescence in their decisions. However, many citizens, if not all, now exist in an era of increasing educational attainment, popular scepticism and fluid social bonds based around individual choice and self-determination. Many people now expect respect and an adequate response from the very professionals, businesses and public services who once expected the same from ordinary people. There is no obvious reason why the state and elected representatives should be any different.

2. The British party system is based on the dominance of two parties constructed around the interests of the two dominant classes of the industrial era. Yet, as has been made clear already, these two dominant classes and their values and interests have significantly diminished. Instead, we have a far more complex society in which individuals construct their identities and values in a far more fluid and eclectic fashion in tune with a world where social, geographic and institutional bonds are far more open to personal choice. In addition, the organisations that shaped and campaigned for the demands

of the industrial working class for so much of the twentieth century, and ultimately brought them to the very heart of the formal political establishment through the Labour Party, have not proved able to do the same, to anything like the same extent, for that section of society now suffering persistent poverty. As a result, this is a social group that has found even less purchase on formal democratic institutions than the newly confident individuals of the post-industrial era. Their alienation is, in effect, doubled. Not only do they have no strong organisational link to formal politics but the stubborn persistence of their disadvantage has created a sense that politics has nothing to offer them anyway.

This analysis is reinforced when one observes the success of other forms of participation outside the formal democratic process. Many of these have developed during the shift to post-industrial economy and society and have grown organically out of the demands and expectations of today's citizens.

The rise of pressure politics and campaign groups has many origins – not least the fact that they offer an alternative to effecting change without having to take part in the less appealing formal democratic processes and institutions with their composite motions and their meetings in draughty halls. More importantly, however, is the evidence received by *Power* which suggests overwhelmingly that many members of the public value the opportunity to support change in a specific area of policy they care about. This contrasts with the clear distaste that is felt for the fact that active support or involvement in a political party means campaigning for a very wide range of policies, many of which they do not agree with.

The key to much of this is that political parties can no longer rely on traditional ideological or class allegiance to draw citizens to parties. Labour and the Conservatives had, in many ways, an extra selling point beyond their actual policies. They were, respectively, the parties of socialism and the industrial working class and of capitalism and the managerial and professional middle class. Their policies were

but one aspect of organisations that were at the very heart of those ideological and class commitments for many citizens. But with the decline of this particular ideological and class conflict, there is little reason for citizens to simply accept a broad programme of policies as entirely or mostly in accord with their interests or values. New ideologies may be in the making, rooted in different configurations of both well-rehearsed values and new ones, but the old-time political religions have lost much of their power.

Campaign groups, on the other hand, are much more focussed and require only that an individual supports change in one area or, at most, a bundle of related areas for which they feel sympathy.

Then there is the inspiringly vibrant growth of new participatory forms of democracy occurring across the world. Many of these were described and assessed in *Power's* own report last year, *Beyond the Ballot*.<sup>103</sup> These projects differ greatly in their format and goals, but nearly all offer citizens a chance to engage and influence those in power through deliberation and collective decision-making. The most impressive, such as the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia, the Participatory Budget in Porto Alegre in Brazil, or the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall' meeting on the redevelopment of Downtown New York after 9/11 involve many thousands in responsible discussion and decision-making.

Many of these techniques are only just starting to be tried in Britain, but initial pilots and experiments are proving positive. *Power* itself organised its own version of participatory budgeting in partnership with the London Borough of Harrow to test out the approach.<sup>104</sup> Against the expectations of the rather cynical elected representatives on the Council, 300 residents turned out for a six-hour Assembly on a Sunday to discuss and choose priorities for the 2006/07 Council budget. 90 per cent of those who attended rated the event either 'very good' or 'good', 80 per cent said they would take more interest in the Council's decisions, and 43 per cent said it had affected their view of the work the Council does for the better (56 per cent said it had not

changed their view).

Why should such methods be expanding and proving so positive? Once again it may be because they deliver citizens the focussed decision-making they demand and which elections and parties cannot offer. More importantly, as in the Harrow case, they appeal directly to citizens' own sense that given the right information, time and structure, they can make decisions that are just as robust and valid as anything chosen by their elected representatives. This is the experience described powerfully by most people who sit on juries in criminal trials, a process which lends legitimacy to our justice system so why not draw upon that inclusive experience elsewhere in our institutions of governance. In addition, as the *Beyond the Ballot* report explained, if people feel that a process may genuinely give them some influence, or at least mean that those in power will have to take account of their views, they are far more likely to get involved. One of the recurring themes of the evidence taken by *Power*, as mentioned above, is that today's citizens feel they have a right to be listened to and taken account of but that the formal processes and institutions of democracy – voting and parties – do not offer a genuine opportunity for that.

As was pointed out in Chapter 2, the relatively new technology of the internet is also providing a platform for burgeoning political expression, information, discussion and activism.

A big part of the appeal of the internet as a tool is the way, once again, it gives today's citizens a chance to exercise their intelligence as freely as possible on a matter that concerns them. It also offers them a direct and immediate route to others who may or may not share their opinion and opens up opportunities for debate.

Where it offers a possible route to influencing those in power internet politics provides a freedom and a respect for the citizen's intelligence which from the overwhelming evidence most people do not believe exists in parties or through the process of simply voting.

Finally, there is the increasing appeal for individuals to express their political values through their daily lives, for example, by us-

ing their purchasing power to ‘reward’ ethical business and punish ‘unethical’ business (see Chapter 2). This type of politics is obviously completely in tune with the ethos of individual choice which is so central to the outlook of many twenty first century citizens.

What this has suggested to us is that when participation meets the expectations of today’s citizen, those citizens will get involved. The problem for formal democratic processes and institutions is that they no longer meet those expectations. In fact, they work very much against the grain of those expectations. Part Two of this report develops recommendations for change designed to meet head-on the crisis of a nineteenth-century political system facing twenty-first-century citizens. However, before then it is necessary to briefly take account of how politics has responded to the demands of a new type of society and citizen to date.

#### **How has the Political System Responded?**

British governments and parties have tried to meet the challenges identified above through a combination of three responses.

- The existence of a more demanding, self-determined citizen has been met by drives to introduce greater choice and efficiency into the services provided by the state, either through privatisation or the introduction of market mechanisms, performance targets and greater independence for service providers.
- The pressure to respond to service user demands has also led to a trend under New Labour to make much wider use of consultation to discover needs and expectations and apply these to the delivery of services.
- The main political parties have responded to the decline of their traditional class bases by rethinking their identity and electoral strategies with more or less success. As it became clear during the 1980s that mobilising the core vote in the

form of a class base would no longer win elections, the main parties have adopted a process known as ‘triangulation’ – this involves throwing a handful of policies at you core vote as an appeasement, stealing the political clothes of your opponent in areas where traditionally your own party has been weak, and concentrating electoral energy on the marginal seats which are subject to swing votes. None has done this more successfully and completely than New Labour under Tony Blair with the resulting electoral success. The formula is now being adopted in full by David Cameron, the Conservative leader.

What has struck us, however, is that given the scale of the challenge to the old methods of democratic decision-making, none of these responses is good enough and none engages sufficiently with the citizen. There has been no significant rethink of how citizens might engage with the political decision-making done in his or her name. The first response is primarily about the flexibility of service delivery in response to the demands of the individual user. This may or may not be a good thing but it is not about citizen engagement with collective decision-making, which must be the key purpose of any democratic political system.

It has been argued that more flexible and efficient public services will revive trust in the system and encourage more democratic engagement. However, the notion that dissatisfaction with public services is either a direct or indirect cause of disengagement from formal democracy does not appear anywhere in the evidence received by the Inquiry. As a result, it is not clear to us how such reforms respond directly to the political causes of disengagement outlined above. Neither does our evidence suggest that there has been increased engagement as a consequence of the drives for efficiency and flexibility in public services which have been taking place since the eighties.

The use of public consultations is a wave in the right direction of democracy but such processes have to be real with no predetermined

outcomes. The idea of having a consultation about nuclear power when ministers have indicated that they favour the use of nuclear plants is a dubious form of public participation in decision-making. The complaint made by witnesses about consultations is that they are perceived to be largely cosmetic and designed to support policies which have already been developed. The agenda setting is not coming from the people.

The third response is essentially about how the existing dominant parties can use the vagaries of the British voting system in this new era to their own electoral advantage. A response which might, in theory, allow better representation of popular views but, in practice, has to be measured against the disengagement we have described. It can be argued that the first-past-the-post system is one of the reasons why **managerialism** has replaced **vision**. An almost mathematical election methodology combined with good public relations can secure victory without any reference to a philosophy. A central feature of this disengagement is the sense that the main political parties are no longer distinct enough and no longer base their policies on core principles – a result which it might be thought is an inevitable outcome of the highly pragmatic triangulation strategy.

Of course the current Government has introduced measures which are entirely or partly a response to political disengagement itself. All of these are dealt with at various points in this report. However, it is worth just providing some very brief descriptive detail at this point in order to frame the following section. The main governmental response to political disengagement is as follows.

- **Alternative voting procedures:** The Government has experimented with various alternatives to the traditional method of voting in person at a polling station. A number of pilots were held during the 2001 General Election and the 2004 Local and European Elections, including voting in shops, extending opening hours for polling stations, and holding all-

postal ballots. Only the latter seemed to make any significant difference to turnout although this remained under 50 per cent in the areas in which it was piloted. Concerns have also been raised about the integrity of an all-postal ballot.

- **More Consultation:** One response to the sense of disengagement expressed through opinion polls is to make greater efforts to consult the wider public and/or stakeholders. As such, there has been a recent increase in the use of forums and techniques such as Local Strategic Partnerships, citizens' panels, questionnaire surveys, internet consultation and focus groups. In addition, the Government has established processes such as the Big Conversation and the national debate on genetically modified crops to engage more effectively with the public.
- **Citizenship Education:** Courses designed to educate young people about civic values, democracy and politics are now part of the National Curriculum. This policy was developed and implemented as a direct response to declining levels of interest, knowledge and involvement in politics and community activity amongst young people.
- **Greater Regulation and Scrutiny:** A number of reforms have been implemented by the Government in a direct attempt to restore public trust in politicians following many years of political sleaze and scandal. These have included establishing a Parliamentary Ombudsman to enforce principles of good conduct and probity within Parliament; a code of conduct for local councillors; a compulsory register of donations for political parties; and making the register of interests for MPs mandatory.

## A Democratic Response

What has been particularly striking to the Commission has been the extent to which none of the above responses, whether to the rise of the post-industrial society or disengagement itself, have been fundamentally democratic in their inspiration. They are primarily technocratic or self-interested electoral responses. At best, one could say that citizenship education and tighter regulation of MPs and Councilors are useful addendums to a democratic system but no-one in government seems to have looked seriously at the principles, practices, or history of democracy as a possible source of answers to the worrying problem of disengagement.

We believe it is vital that this is done. It is our view that going back to first principles is necessary because recent technocratic and electoral solutions seem particularly ill-suited to resolving the problem. At heart, however, we argue for a fully-fledged democratic response to the major challenge of disengagement because we *are* democrats. We believe that at particular times in history it is vital not just to reassert one's faith and trust in democracy but also to rethink it in order to meet new challenges.

To this end, the principle of democracy and the historical practice of democracy have informed this report as much as the hard empiricism of the previous chapters. **We have been inspired by the possibility of a much more open approach to democracy than that which shapes current political processes in Britain and much of the rest of the democratic world.**

Particularly in Western Europe and the USA, democracy has come to be defined by the institutions and processes of representative parliamentary systems. Freedom House, the influential American body that promotes democracy across the world, defines it as:

*a political system whose leaders are elected in competitive multi-party and multi-candidate processes to which opposition parties have a legitimate chance of attaining power or participating in*

*power and that have a universal franchise.*<sup>105</sup>

Few historians of, or thinkers on, democracy accept such a narrow definition. Most refer to an ideal which has existed in different forms at different times and different places. That ideal is most commonly expressed as a system where 'the people' are sovereign, or govern themselves, rather than being governed by an individual or a select group of individuals. The etymology of the word 'democracy' itself reflects this definition, with 'demos' meaning 'people' and 'kratia' meaning 'rule' in the ancient Greek. Academics also commonly cite the famous funeral oration of Pericles – the Greek ruler who established Athenian democracy – in which according to Thucydides, the new system was described as:

*a government of the people because we live in consideration not of the few, but of the majority.*<sup>106</sup>

However, for some this definition is far too simplistic. David Beetham has proposed a more sophisticated approach based on his historical and philosophical survey of democracy which places greater emphasis on the political equality behind the democratic ideal (see box).

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### David Beetham on Democracy

Democracy can be most simply understood as a procedure for taking decisions in any group, association or society, whereby all members have an equal right to have a say and make their opinions count. In life we make many decisions as individuals – where and how to live, what job to pursue, how much of our income to spend and what to spend it on. But as soon as we

join with others in some common activity or enterprise, then decisions have to be taken for the group or association as a whole: who should be a member, what rules should be followed, how any necessary income should be raised or distributed.

In contrast to historically recurrent forms of collective decision making by one or few persons on behalf of the rest, democracy involves the principle that all members of an association or society should have the right to take part equally in the decisions that affect them. Democracy is therefore based on the following key ideas:

- All members have interests that are affected by collective decisions.
- Everyone (by the time they are adult) is capable of reaching a view about what the best or least bad decision would be, both for themselves and the association as a whole.
- The best decisions in the long run will be ones where all such views have been publicly aired and debated.
- Where debate and discussion fail to produce a single agreed outcome, decisions should be taken by a vote of all participating members.
- The principle of ‘one person, one vote, one value’ reflects a wider conception that all persons are of equal worth.<sup>107</sup>

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John Keane has recently gone one step further and argued that the definition of democracy as “the rule of the people” is a positively dangerous concept which has been used throughout history to justify all manner of despotisms both within systems which might broadly be considered democratic and those which most definitely are not. Keane rejects this “simple democracy” and instead calls for a “com-

plex democracy”. This is based on the acknowledgement of the fragmentation of values, identities and interests inherent in political and social systems and within any group and is therefore primarily about how to share power between those fragments in such a way that, in fact, “no body” rules over any other whether they claim to be doing so in the name of the ‘majority’ or ‘the people’ or not.<sup>108</sup>

The variation which exists in the definition of democracy is reflected, many historians now accept, in the way the notion has been put into practice throughout history. Ancient Athens itself used two different methods at different times. One was rule by an Assembly in which any Athenian citizen was free to take part and decide on key issues confronting the City. The other was rule by an Assembly made up of citizens from prescribed areas of Athens and its environs who were chosen by lot. Other systems include the consensual and deliberative processes used in parts of Africa for many years, the direct election of leaders and public officials widely employed in presidential systems and municipal government across the world, the use of referendums in many nations (used most regularly in Switzerland), and the more recent innovations in direct public involvement in complex decision-making used, most famously and recently, in Porto Alegre, Brazil and British Columbia, Canada.

However, it is striking despite this diversity of principle and practice that in Britain and many of the other established systems, democracy has become so closely associated with Parliament, parties and elections. This is not new. It was a problem noted many years ago by the hugely influential thinker John Dewey:

*We must renew our protest against the assumption that the idea (of democracy) has itself produced the governmental practices which obtain in democratic states: general suffrage, elected representatives, majority rule and so on. The idea has influenced the concrete political movement but it has not caused it...The forms to which we are accustomed in democratic governments represent the cumulative*

*effect of a multitude of events, unpremeditated as far as political effects were concerned and having unpredictable consequences. There is no sanctity in universal suffrage, frequent elections, majority rule, congressional and cabinet government. These things are devices evolved in the direction in which the current was moving, each wave of which involved at the time of its impulsion a minimum of departure from antecedent in custom in law. The devices served a purpose; but that purpose was rather that of meeting existing needs which had become too intense to be ignored, rather than that of forwarding the democratic idea.<sup>109</sup>*

Indeed, a well-established argument exists to explain why democracy can now only be implemented through representative parliamentary systems. It has been widely asserted for many years that the growth in size and complexity of modern societies compared to ancient civilisations means that the notion that all or even many citizens can take part in political decision-making is flawed. In a society of millions, rather than thousands, where nearly everyone of working age is usually involved in full-time work, decision-making powers must be delegated to a group of freely elected representatives who can devote themselves full-time to the understanding and deliberation of the many complex issues that confront today's societies. This emphasis on the special role of the parliamentary representative taking better informed decisions on behalf of the majority whose sovereignty is expressed only at election time has influenced thinkers as diverse as Edmund Burke, Joseph Schumpeter and the founding fathers of the American republic. It clearly still runs as an influential grain of belief through British politics expressed by politicians as diverse as Lord Hailsham who described our system as an 'elective dictatorship'<sup>110</sup> and Jack Straw who called it an 'executive democracy'.<sup>111</sup>

The *Power Commission's* investigation of the current problem of disengagement in British and other systems has convinced it that this over-reliance on the parliamentary representative in our defini-

tion of democracy has now become an obstacle to addressing that problem. We believe that there is now an opportunity as well as a necessity to draw inspiration from the diversity inherent in the principle and practice of democracy and to start being far more open and sophisticated about what the concept can mean in the post-industrial twenty-first century.

A system based largely or entirely on parliamentary representation no longer engages people in the way it once did. Indeed, it may be becoming a positive source of dissatisfaction and disengagement, as the ties and expectations which once led citizens to place faith in their representatives have declined with the end of the industrial era.

There is an opportunity to be seized for change because the factors traditionally raised as barriers to wider involvement in decision-making, and thus the extension of democracy, have been gradually eroding over many years. Citizens are now much better informed and better educated than they once were. The democratic ethos of peaceful deliberation and decision-making is itself now much more widely instilled in the majority of people in Europe than it was fifty years ago. And new technology and new techniques in public engagement raise the possibility of far greater numbers being involved in complex decision-making. In addition, the sites of democratic or potentially democratic decision-making in contemporary society are now many and diverse, encompassing a multiplicity of public bodies, non-governmental organisations, quangos and many civil society groups of varying sizes and types. Thus, the notion that the complexity and size of modern societies make wider participation impossible no longer applies as stringently as it once did.

In short, the contemporary problem of disengagement could be the tipping-point at which the expediency and the ideal of a wider, deeper democracy come together to spur reform.

None of this is to say that parliament, parties and elections are defunct. Far from it. A great deal, even the majority, of this report is about how these established systems can be strengthened and

adapted to re-engage the interest, support and activity of the British citizen. Indeed, two of the three grand shifts recommended by the Inquiry are about empowering elected representatives and re-invigorating parties and elections. But these must go hand-in-hand with the third shift which emphasises the rigorous and meaningful input from 'ordinary' citizens into policy and decision-making between elections. In addition, the details of the first two shifts have been developed in such a way that they lead not simply to greater efficiency or fairness in decision-making but in a way which allows representatives, parties and elections to act primarily as the voice of citizens.

The outcome of these changes would be a democracy which does not limit itself to any one historically specific model but reflects the sophisticated definitions of democracy developed by the likes of Beetham and Keane. This keeps open the possibility of variation and innovation in the never-complete pursuit of political equality, effective participation, enlightened understanding, peaceful power sharing and the other ideals which may be assigned to a truly complex notion of democracy for our truly complex society.

In this spirit, we concur fully with the words of John Dewey:

*The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by introducing more machinery of the same kind as that which already exists, or by refining or perfecting that machinery. But the phrase may also indicate the need of returning to the idea itself, of clarifying and deepening our apprehension of it, and of employing our sense of its meaning to criticise and remake its political manifestations.<sup>112</sup>*

### In Summary

We recognised the need to develop an evidence-based explanation of the problem of disengagement from formal democratic institutions and processes before deciding on recommendations. In doing this we have assessed the many explanations we have collected against

the Inquiry's own research and evidence, existing research and against three key factors about disengagement that are not always given prominence in the current debate. These three factors are:

- the very high levels of alienation from formal processes – particularly the main political parties and elections – on the part of the British people;
- participation in the areas of non-political and informal political activity is vibrant, innovative and growing;
- the problem of disengagement from formal democracy is one afflicting most of the established democracies in the world.

This assessment has led us to conclude that the following causes are significant:

- many citizens feel they do not have enough influence over political decisions;
- the main parties are widely regarded as too similar and lacking in principle;
- the electoral system is widely perceived as leading to wasted votes;
- many citizens do not like the fact that support and voting for a particular party is taken as assent for a very wide range of diverse policies;
- many people feel they or others do not possess sufficient knowledge or information to participate in formal democratic institutions and processes;
- voting procedures are seen by many as unattractive and inconvenient.

However, these causes relate to features of the British political system which have been in existence for many years, including periods when participation in formal democracy was high. Therefore, we

have concluded that a deeper cause exists to explain the rise of these new explanations of disengagement. This deeper cause is the dual impact of the major shift in the developed economies from an industrial to a post-industrial economy and society. This shift has, on the one hand, created citizens that differ from their predecessors in that they are far less deferential to authority, better educated, hold their own views in higher esteem, expect to take many decisions for themselves from the most trivial to the most significant, and are not tied by the older bonds of class, place and ideology. On the other hand, the shift to post-industrialism has also created a social group that suffers persistent poverty and the various problems that are associated with life on a low income. These citizens have not enjoyed more freedom and well-being as a result of economic change, but less.

The key problem, however, is that the British political system – like many other democratic systems across the world – has not adapted to these changes. The approach to government and political decision-making and the structures which enshrine that approach remains predicated on a view of citizenship and social divisions that date back to an industrial era that no longer exists.

Fundamentally, the causes of disengagement outlined in this part of the report point towards the emergence of a population in Britain that wants and requires a more regular, meaningful and detailed degree of influence over the policies and decisions that concern them and affect their lives, whilst a political system continues to exist that has neither the structures, processes or culture to offer that level of influence. Indeed, the elements of the system that are supposed to allow such dialogue between governed and governors and offer the former some measure of influence – the political parties – are now so deeply unsuited to the task in contemporary Britain that they are only exacerbating the tension.

For us, this has meant developing recommendations which will both challenge the blockages to wider and more detailed citizen influence and create new channels for such influence to flourish. In the

broadest terms this means instituting three fundamental shifts in the way politics is conducted in Britain.

- A re-balancing of power between the constituent elements of the political system: a shift of power away from the Executive to Parliament and from central to local government. Much greater clarity, transparency and accountability should be introduced into the relationship between the Executive and supra-national bodies, quangos, business, and interest groups. The aim being to allow the freedom for our elected representatives to be the eyes, ears and mouth of British citizens at the heart of government.
- The creation of an electoral and party system which is responsive enough to the changing values and demands of today's population to allow the necessary and organic creation of new political alliances, value systems and organisations which better represent those values and demands.
- The creation of a culture of political engagement in which policy and decision-making employs direct input from citizens. The system should provide citizens with clear rights and processes by which to exercise that input from conception through to implementation.

These three imperatives stand or fall alongside each other. The implementation of only one or two of the three will not create the re-engagement with formal democracy for which many people now hope. Elected representatives need greater freedom, but if they still belong to parties which have lost their connection with the wider public or have no reason to enter into detailed dialogue with that wider public, disengagement will continue. If the electoral system is reformed to create more open, fluid and relevant parties but the representatives

who they support have no real power and have no understanding of how to listen to constituents between elections, disengagement will continue. If new structures and a new culture of public involvement is implemented, but citizens soon find that many of those to whom they talk have very limited power, and the established processes of democracy remain as sclerotic as before, then disengagement will continue.

We accept that those who are broadly sympathetic to this new agenda may like some of its detailed recommendations more than others and may well think that other ideas will prove better at achieving its professed goals. However, we do not believe that the three major shifts outlined above and which have structured the next three chapters can logically be cherry-picked or weakened if the genuine aim is the creation of a newly vibrant democracy for Britain in the twenty-first century.