



“People regard elections as too blunt a tool for the increased influence they seek over political decisions”

Chapter 7— Downloading Power

So far, this report has detailed two of the three big shifts in British political practice required to address the severe problem of disengagement from formal democracy. The first of these shifts is the rebalancing of the political system to give our elected representatives more power. The second is changing the way our electoral and party systems work to better reflect the diversity and complexity of British life today. Some of the recommendations have been new, some have been adaptations of long-standing demands.

This chapter outlines the newest and possibly most crucial step in any effort to re-engage citizens with democratic political decision-making. This is the introduction of institutional and cultural changes which place a new emphasis on the requirement that policy and decision-making includes rigorous and meaningful input from ‘ordinary’ citizens. Before detailing the recommendations, it is necessary, given the significance of this shift, to explain why we feel it is a central part of our overall approach.

Calling for a more direct role for citizens in political decision-making is a straightforward response to two of the six explanations of disengagement arising from the evidence outlined in Chapter 5. These are:

- many citizens feel they do not have enough influence over political decisions;
- 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.

The strong sense from all our sources of evidence that many people want more influence over political decisions, but regard elections as far too blunt a tool for the exercise of that influence, led us to investigate the possibility of giving citizens a more direct say over specific areas of policy and decision-making.

The evidence generated by this part of the Inquiry confirmed that the majority of citizens are attracted by such direct mechanisms and that many are willing to engage with them. Nevertheless, a convinced minority certainly exists who regard it as the elected representative's rather than the citizen's role to deliberate and decide upon the important issues of the day.

The first part of this aspect of the Inquiry's work was to undertake an investigation of different innovations in democracy from across the world. This resulted in the Inquiry's *Beyond the Ballot* study. Reference to the detailed findings of this report will be made later in this chapter, but what the study clearly highlighted to us was that across the world democracy is far from a static form. Interesting, even inspiring, experimentation is the order of the day, especially the expansion of approaches which the report's author, Dr. Graham Smith, described as 'deliberative', 'co-governance' and 'direct' innovations. The first is an approach which gives citizens a chance to discuss specific issues in detail, without conflict with other citizens or decision-makers. The second actually gives citizens some significant decision-making power over key issues alongside that employed by elected representatives and public officials. The third gives the final say on key political decisions to citizens. This important study made

it clear to us that there was no shortage of successful techniques being used across the world to re-engage people with democratic politics by offering them some degree of influence over specific policy issues.

When these techniques and the ideas informing them were put to members of the British public, the response was enthusiastic.

In the survey of over one-thousand non-voters, respondents were asked about more direct mechanisms. This found that more than 70 per cent of respondents said they were either "very likely" or "likely" to take part in three out of six techniques. These were a referendum, a citizens' initiative referendum (a process which allows citizens to demand a referendum on a specific topic) and a participatory budget (a process which offers citizens significant influence over how money is spent by a municipal authority). Of course, expressing a willingness to take part in such mechanisms and actually doing so are two different things and these figures almost certainly overstate likely involvement. However, given that these are high responses from a group who did not vote in 2005, these findings suggest that a more direct approach to involvement may offer a powerful means of re-engaging a significant proportion of those alienated from the existing processes of formal democracy.

A similarly positive response was provided by *Power's* Citizens' Panel based in Newcastle-Gateshead. This group of thirty randomly selected individuals met three times during the life of the Inquiry. A clear consensus was formed within this group that offering a more direct say to citizens over decision-making was the most important way of re-engaging people with democratic politics. In the final session, the panel discussed the three major shifts which we have identified as crucial to engagement. The notes of the research team that ran the Newcastle-Gateshead project give a strong sense of the Panel's feeling about giving citizens a more direct say:

... participants gave this idea their greatest level of approval. They find it hard to pick out a favourite from the list of recommendations designed to give citizens more say over political decisions, as they like all the concepts. The whole idea leads to their most emotive and animated reaction.

However, it should be stated that there was no sense on the Panel that power should be handed over without qualification to 'ordinary' citizens. The popularity of more direct involvement was tempered by the oft-cited view that elected representatives have an access to expert information, resources and a broader view that should not be discounted. The panel broadly agreed that except on the biggest issues, the final decisions over most areas of policy should be left to elected representatives, once the public had had their say.

This positive view of more direct and focussed involvement was reflected in the many public submissions received by the Inquiry. One of the seven questions put out for public consultation specifically asked about this approach:

Some people argue that voting in elections is not enough. They believe today's citizens need an opportunity to discuss and have direct say over individual policies through other means such as referenda, internet forums and public meetings designed to have significant power to influence political decisions. Would more opportunities to do this attract participants and would they encourage greater trust in the policies pursued by politicians?

The overwhelming response to this question was positive. The great majority of the submissions accepted that these methods would encourage participation in politics and may help to increase trust. However, these responses were very widely qualified with concern that such processes should be designed to be more than simply consultations which politicians could ignore; they should avoid populism

and should avoid the engagement of the 'usual suspects'. A minority of the public submissions did reject more participatory mechanisms, usually for reasons akin to the qualifications which other submissions placed on their positive response. However, there was also a common view amongst this minority that representatives were elected to do a job and should not 'pass the buck' to the wider public.

Indicative submissions to the public consultation regarding greater use of participatory and direct mechanisms

Having lived in Switzerland where the system is referendum-based and where an ordinary citizen can create an act of parliament I know that attraction of people comes from accountability and from knowing that one can actually make a difference. Why have referenda on things about which we all know very little. We want referenda on the things which we have shown we care about, and we want to be listened to.

I would like to have the opportunity to vote on issues that I feel strongly about. ... why not let the people themselves vote on policies? Can we not be trusted? A party's policies frequently seem to change during the course of a parliamentary term so why should I vote for a person belonging to a party and not be sure that he will not carry out his election pledges? What about all the issues that were not mentioned during the elections? How will I know at the time of voting that my representative will act in my best interests?

Yes, there should be more referenda. Of course the political apparatchiks will denigrate this as leading to populist policies, but in these days of good communications the whole raison d'être of the MP as representative is undermined.

Yes. Events evolve and change by the week/day. Elections every x years assume a snapshot in time of public opinion, which may have been appropriate 100 years ago – not today.

We sent representatives to a London Parliament by horse and carriage and trusted them to act in our best interests. Nowadays with instantaneous communication why do we need to continue this archaic practice? Why can't I vote for issues that I have views about? What political candidate or political party can I vote for with the certain knowledge that my own values, concerns, ideas will be represented? Political parties do not always deliver on their promises or election manifestos and anyway the differences between the main political parties seem to be in name only.

If one argues that some issues may not attract sufficient numbers of them to vote then we need only to look at voting statistics in the Houses of Parliament. No parliamentarian is sufficiently interested or knowledgeable on every issue so rather than allowing them to be persuaded by their party whips on how to vote, why not allow the population to vote?

I do not trust politicians to vote for what they promise in their election manifesto. I also realise that no politician or political party shares all the same views as myself. I want to vote on issues that affect me and that I am interested in. I would prefer to vote for issues not for people or parties. I can represent myself and my family and my community. Why should I ask a stranger to do it for me?

It would certainly help me to feel that my little vote is making a difference, as a general or council election can seem to encompass such huge issues that you feel you are a drop in the ocean. Also, I think less and less people have faith in just one party as they may agree with certain issues from one and others from another.

It seems silly to me that all our democracy is voting in someone who then takes it from there and makes all the decisions. It would be more democratic to have more referenda and opportunities to vote on issues and not just parties. I think people feel more strongly about specific issues rather than parties nowadays anyway.

The evidence received from the experts and practitioners was more divided than that received from the public. However, the majority view was clearly that experimentation with a more participatory approach was necessary and desirable. The expert witnesses who objected to this raised very similar concerns to those raised in the public submissions. However, those who favoured wider experimentation and use of a participatory approach were also commonly concerned about the damaging influence the media and wealthy may have over such processes to promote populist or self-interested causes. We noted with interest, however, that while not all MPs opposed a more participatory approach, all those experts and practitioners who did oppose such an approach outright were, in fact, MPs.

Given that this was likely to be the newest aspect of our recommendations, it was decided to learn some more detailed and practical lessons by undertaking an experiment in participatory democracy ourselves. This was the Open Budget designed and managed by the Inquiry in association with the London Borough of Harrow. The Open Budget was based on a set of principles and practices drawn from the Inquiry's earlier *Beyond the Ballot* research and was designed to give Harrow residents a more direct and detailed say over their local council's 2006/07 budget, largely through the organisation of a large deliberative assembly. However, the success of the project indicated to us that such techniques can prove popular with the wider public. The Open Budget assembly itself attracted some 300 participants to take part in six hours of deliberation on a Sunday afternoon, and generated a great deal of interest and debate in the local press and local community organisations. A brief look at the main findings from the assem-

bly participant evaluation form indicates how effective deliberative political events can be:

- 90 per cent regarded the event as “good” or “very good”;
- 74 per cent felt the process should “definitely” be repeated next year;
- 43 per cent stated they now had an improved view of the Council, 55 per cent reported no change in their view;
- 80 per cent stated they would now be more interested in Council decisions;
- 64 per cent felt a similar process should “definitely” be used for other areas of Council work, 33 per cent felt the process should “possibly” be used for other areas.

The Harrow Open Budget Process

At the heart of the process was the Open Budget Assembly. This brought together 300 Harrow residents on 23rd October 2005 to discuss and vote on key priorities for the 2006/07 budget. Prior to the Assembly there was a period of consultation with council officers, councillors and community groups to identify the types of choices about different sections of the budget that should be put to the Assembly and to write the ‘Assembly Discussion Guide’ which would guide participants through those choices.

At the same time, a pro-active recruitment campaign was launched to encourage people to attend the Assembly. Any Harrow resident over the age of 16 was free to register for the Assembly. However, the recruitment campaign was designed to ensure that Assembly participants were as close to the ethnic, age, gender and social composition of Harrow as possible and that not only the ‘usual suspects’ took part. Councillors and officers were free to observe the Assembly but could not register to take part in the deliberation and voting.

As well as choosing budgetary priorities, the Assembly also elected an Open Budget Panel from amongst the participants. The Panel’s main role was to produce a report for Assembly participants assessing how well the Council’s final budget met the priorities agreed by the Assembly. It also kept participants informed on an ongoing basis prior to the budget setting in February, of how the budget was being developed and what efforts were being made to address the Assembly’s priorities.

How did the Assembly work?

The Assembly was designed to allow a large number of people to discuss and decide on complex issues in a considered and deliberative manner. The 300 residents who attended were randomly divided onto tables of ten. Each table discussed the budgetary options in five sessions over six hours. Each table had its own trained facilitator who ensured equality in the discussion and fed back the table’s views via a laptop computer to an analytical team. This team collated common views from all the tables and any particularly interesting ideas.

Plenaries were held between table discussions which allowed a lead facilitator to feed back the views collated by the analytical team to the whole room. The plenaries also gave participants the chance to vote as individuals on each option they had just been discussing by using voting keypads. The results of the vote were fed back to the whole room immediately on large screens.

Diversity in the Process

Efforts were made to ensure the Assembly represented the complex demography of Harrow. The Assembly was a very accurate reflection of Harrow’s ethnic diversity. Geographic spread from across the borough was also good. All age groups were over-represented (including 16-19 year olds) at the expense of the 20-44 age group which was under-represented. There was also a small gender imbalance with forty more men than women attending. However, these imbalances

were rectified in the Panel on which the 20-44 age group over-represented and which had only four more men than women. It is also notable that there were eight 16-19 year olds on the Panel of thirty-four.

Following the consideration of all this largely positive evidence, we are convinced that participatory approaches to democratic decision-making are now coming of age. There is clearly a public appetite for their wider use and, as stated above, they offer a clear policy response to two of the main causes of disengagement identified by the Commission.

In addition, a more participatory approach seems well suited to our post-industrial age. The traditional arguments which have been used against participatory democratic approaches have increasingly less relevance in the twenty-first century. *The claim that the great majority of citizens do not have the intellectual capacity or expertise to make important decisions is less convincing in an era where educational attainment has risen significantly and where detailed information is increasingly easily accessed by very large numbers of people through the mass media and digital technology.* We are totally convinced, given the evidence we have seen from across the world, and our own experience with the Harrow Open Budget, that when 'ordinary' citizens are presented with clear information and are given the freedom and structure to deliberate on that information, they will come to decisions just as reasoned and balanced as those made by elected representatives or public officials.

For example, the leading scholar of citizen-initiated referendum and recall in America concluded:

Voters have been cautious and have almost always rejected extreme proposals. Most studies suggest that voters, despite the complexity of measures and the deceptions of some campaigns, exercise shrewd

*judgement, and most students of direct democracy believe most American voters take their responsibility seriously.*¹⁴¹

There is also the linked claim that citizen initiatives will produce outcomes unfavourable to minorities. While there are some well-documented examples of successful initiatives which have promoted discrimination, it appears that *voters are more tolerant than critics contend.* It is important, when making these claims, to compare the decisions made using this mechanism with those passed by legislatures that do not use such initiatives, and research displays no clear evidence that the former leads to less tolerant legislation or policy.¹⁴²

The other common argument against a participatory approach is that in an era of very much larger societies than that which existed in Ancient Athens, it is simply impossible to involve statistically significant numbers in decision-making processes. *As a result, it is often argued, only a representative system can offer the necessary focus for decision-making in large, complex societies.* However, as is detailed below, we are convinced that new technology and new techniques in public engagement will increasingly allow large numbers of citizens to become engaged in political decisions in a focussed way. They can also secure the confidence of the wider community in the legitimacy of the process.

A frequent objection to participatory approaches is that they are antithetical to representative democracy. We are not convinced that such a polarised view is now relevant. *Representation and participation can exist alongside each other and even influence each other without unsustainable tensions arising.*

Furthermore, at a point when the great mobilising ideologies, organisations and networks which connected people to political decision-making have lost their appeal and resonance, whether temporarily or forever, it is vital to find other ways of engaging the governors with the governed. The last chapter was clear that we do believe that political parties and the ideologies which sustain them may well re-

formulate around new identities, values and interests in the future. Indeed, a chief aim of creating a more responsive party and electoral system is to allow such reformulation to happen, without resistance, if necessary. However, such a process could take many years to occur if it happens at all. The current severe levels of disengagement simply cannot be allowed to continue for that length of time, so more participatory mechanisms should be introduced to address disengagement while parties and political value systems are allowed to develop anew. Of course, a much more rigorous and widely adopted approach to participation by the political system would also inform and may hasten the complex process by which political organisations and values are shaped by, and in turn shape, the wider social constituencies to which they are connected.

It should also be acknowledged that participatory approaches respond directly to the new sets of expectations of today's citizen created by post-industrialisation. As outlined in Part One of this report, the first of these is the expectation of citizens that they should have much greater control over many aspects of their lives. Today's citizen is not constrained by the traditional bonds and values of old, and the aspiration to shape one's own life with regard to major life choices, as well as the trivial material consumption of everyday existence, is now very widespread. Thus, not only are choices expected but options within those choices are expected too. The opportunity to participate in the detailed decisions of political life that concern or affect us most deeply clearly reflects this spirit and may go some way to explain the popularity of the approach amongst the many members of the public from whom we have heard.

Part One also detailed the less positive outcomes of post-industrialisation: the creation of a section of society struggling against the problems of structural unemployment, poorly paid work, low educational attainment, high crime levels and many other forms of disadvantage historically associated with low income and poor living conditions. As was pointed out in Part One, these sections of society

are doubly alienated from political processes. Not only are they widely disgusted at the permanence of their situation and the apparent inability of politicians to make any significant difference to their lives, but the organisations and networks of organisations which articulate the political concerns of other sections of society and offer them some level of engagement with political decision-making, at least informally, do not exist for these lower income groups. Hence, if these citizens are the ones most in need of wielding influence over political decisions, since they have the most pressing concerns, they remain the ones with the very least influence. As such, the use of participatory methods which offer genuine influence to the most marginal groups in our society over the design, implementation and evaluation of the policies that affect them would have a major impact on some of the most severe political disengagement in the country.

We are clear that for all the enthusiasm we observed in relation to greater public involvement in decision-making, we do not believe that participation should be regarded as an alternative to representation. The vision that informs the recommendations below is a 'mixed economy' of participatory methods and a more open and responsive system of elected representation. This is for four main reasons.

- The complex processes which bring together the values and interests of people and decide upon the major allocation of public funds are still best carried out by processes of election between opposing candidates offering different, broad programmes for government. Participatory methods can inform such processes at every step but they cannot resolve large-scale political disputes as conclusively, or comprehensively, as an election.
- Linked to this point, elections are not purely about the election of a representative but also about the election of a government. Clearly, participatory methods cannot fulfil this role.

- The existence of an assembly of full-time elected representatives offers a degree of detailed and ongoing scrutiny and deliberation of an executive's actions which participatory methods, however well-designed, cannot hope to offer.
- Finally, our representative system is one of the oldest and best-established in the world. It is a crucial part not just of the way Britain works but also of its national identity and culture. Such a fact cannot and should not be simply dismissed in favour of some other way of working. However, neither should it be used as an argument for having no change at all.

We believe, therefore, that a more participatory approach to democratic decision-making should be developed alongside the representative traditions which have been so important to effective government in Britain. The recommendations below show that if we are imaginative, participation and representation can not only exist alongside each other, but, by addressing disengagement, can actually strengthen representative democracy and ensure it is carrying out the functions for which it was designed.

Recommendation 23: All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes.

In order to imbue government and service delivery in Britain with a **culture of participation**, it is recommended that an Act of Parliament establish a duty of public involvement for all public bodies. It is expected that the Act would require public bodies to have such a duty written into their remits, targets and performance criteria.

We are aware that consultation with 'stakeholders', interest groups and members of the public is an increasingly common feature of the way public bodies make decisions. We also note that 'commu-

nity engagement' is a central feature of the latest performance assessment for local authorities.

However, the evidence received by us in all our sources of evidence is that popular cynicism towards public consultation is very strong. The process is widely regarded as meaningless, in that it is often unclear how a consultation process can influence final decisions taken by officials or representatives. Many people feel that consultation is undertaken by public bodies simply to "tick boxes" or to give a veneer of legitimacy to a decision that has already been made.

We believe that if a **duty of public involvement** is to make a genuine difference to disengagement, then it must mean more than simply consultation. It must genuinely mean 'involvement' in that the public can clearly recognise that their participation has led to their views being taken into account when a final decision is made.

This requires a willingness on the part of public bodies to learn from the many innovations in public involvement being conducted across the world, and which have been detailed in *Power's Beyond the Ballot* study. It also requires a greater consistency in the will to implement meaningful public engagement by the senior management of public bodies. This is why the duty of public involvement cannot simply be left as an aspiration asserted by Parliament or the Government but must be written into the specific documents and processes governing individual public bodies.

Most importantly, it requires that public involvement is based not on vague goals or even on attachment to certain models of engagement, but on clear principles which should inform all efforts at involvement. We have drawn up the following five principles based on the evidence we received of best practice across the world. However, we are well aware that other principles may also play a part in ensuring effective public involvement. The five principles are as follows.

Influence: Any involvement process must offer some measure of real influence to citizens over final decisions. *Power's* own research,

the evidence it has received and its experiment in public involvement in the London Borough of Harrow is absolutely clear that it is influence that encourages participation in any process and makes it meaningful. This reflects the wider concern about lack of influence being a major cause of disengagement which was outlined in Part One.

Our work also makes it clear, however, that influence need not mean participants having a final or absolute say over a key decision or policy. The majority of citizens simply want to know that their views and interests have been taken fully into account and have been treated with the respect due to them. Our evidence and our experience in Harrow has convinced us that it is simply untrue that citizens are no longer able to understand the imperative for negotiation and compromise or to appreciate wider collective needs that are fundamental to democratic decision-making. It is notable, for example, that, despite the ongoing public disquiet over council tax rises, when the Assembly in the Harrow Open Budget was asked what values should inform local authority decisions, cost was ranked fourth out of six values below efficacy, environmental impact and long-term impact.

We believe, however, that certain processes of engagement will encourage these democratic characteristics to come to the fore, and others will not. The remaining principles ensure that such characteristics are encouraged.

Feedback: The research seen by the Power Commission is clear that a major cause of alienation from public engagement is the failure of the relevant authority to explain to participants how their views were taken into account when a decision was taken. It is this failure which often leads participants to conclude, maybe rightly, that their views have in fact not been taken into account and that the engagement process was just a bureaucratic or cosmetic political exercise. Thus it is vital that any public involvement process includes effective feedback processes for participants. If this feedback can come from a trusted source, then the involvement exercise will have even greater

credibility. The Open Budget in Harrow, for example, established a Panel elected by the Assembly from amongst their own number to report back to the Assembly participants on whether and how their decision had influenced the final budget set by the Council.

Deliberation: We are aware that interaction between elected representatives or public officials and members of the public is now often conducted in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and even hostile conflict. This reflects the high levels of cynicism towards political authority detailed throughout this report. It is also clear that some of this conflict arises from the fact that elected representatives and public officials understand themselves to be making decisions on behalf of the public good, while individual citizens are often pursuing their own self-interest when pressing a particular point.

The power of creating a structured space within which elected representatives, public officials and members of the public can speak to each other resides in the fact that it erodes mutual antipathy by encouraging face-to-face interaction on equal and courteous terms. It also allows members of the public to understand and appreciate the public good imperatives which officials and representatives have to take into account, and weigh these against their own interests.

The Harrow Open Budget made wide use of such deliberative techniques to encourage facilitated, well-informed discussion which dealt with both the detail of individual policies and the wider context within which they were being proposed. It is in large part the careful use of such techniques that leads to the very high satisfaction ratings for such events.

Information: Effective involvement relies heavily on the fact that participants have equal access to all relevant sources of information. A great deal of consultation or engagement is currently conducted without great thought as to how the relevant information about a policy area can be communicated. Is it clear? Are the risks set out as well

as the benefits? Indeed some popular forms of consultation, such as the telephone survey, make no effort to communicate detailed information before participants are asked to come to a conclusion. One of the reasons why citizens juries are so successful is because the group hears evidence on all sides of an issue and can make evaluations which are evidence based.

Provision of all relevant information in an accessible format is therefore vital if deliberation is to occur in a context in which all participants are on as equal a footing as possible.

Independence: The evidence taken by the Inquiry suggests that exercises in public involvement often work best when they are designed, managed and facilitated by an independent body. This adds legitimacy to the process by reducing the possibilities for political manipulation or the perception of it. However, in practice, such independence may only be possible for large-scale involvement exercises due to cost restrictions. If a culture of public involvement was genuinely to infuse all public bodies, then it is highly likely that many small exercises in involvement would be occurring all the time and would be conducted 'in-house'.

Introducing a duty of public involvement for all public bodies based on these principles would begin to imbue all public decision and policy-making with a culture of effective involvement which would, in turn, begin to challenge the widespread sense of lack of influence which is a major cause of disengagement.

However, it is clear to us, that many elected representatives see public involvement as a challenge to their role and position.

The evidence presented to the Commission and its own experience through the Harrow Open Budget suggests that some of these objections are motivated simply by a distaste for wider public participation in politics or by an unwillingness to share power with others. We feel that such motivations simply cannot be accepted at a time

when disengagement from formal democracy is so severe and the wider participation suggested in this chapter offers a clear way to address this disengagement.

However, for many elected representatives there is the more considered fear that the type of direct participation being suggested here undermines the fact that they are elected to pursue a particular programme of change based on their party's manifesto. For example, some Harrow Councillors in the ruling Labour group were understandably concerned that the Open Budget process might have identified priorities fundamentally different from those which they were elected to uphold, although this did not prove to be the case in practice.

These are tensions which the *Power* Commission believes need to be addressed in practice rather than be treated as insuperable obstacles to greater public involvement in democratic decision-making. This is primarily because greater public involvement cannot be ignored as a necessary response to the types of dissatisfaction and changes in citizens' expectations that we have encountered in our evidence. In particular, it is clear from the evidence that while elected representatives may feel a strong allegiance to their manifesto programmes as a whole, a far greater number of citizens resent the assumption that their vote should automatically be taken as assent to everything that is contained in a manifesto.

We have also taken account of the fact that even given the supposed endorsement an election provides for a party's broad programme, there is still a great deal left unsaid in a manifesto which could be the subject of much greater public involvement. This could include the detail of how certain policies or aspirations are implemented, the development of future policies which have not yet found a place in a manifesto and government response to unforeseen developments and events. Greater public involvement in such areas would not necessarily undermine an elected authority's manifesto commitments.

In addition, we feel that when public involvement is well-designed and meaningful it will enhance rather than undermine the standing of elected representatives. As has been pointed out earlier in this report, and as is discussed in more detail below, the main cause of the low esteem in which politicians are held is the widespread perception that they fail to engage with citizens between elections and are more accountable to their party leaderships than their constituents. Thus, an emphasis on public involvement which offers a role for elected representatives will begin to counter this perception and gradually persuade people that their representatives are genuinely interested in, and are responding to, their views and interests.

Recommendation 24: Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.

The right of citizens to initiate referendums on legislation by collecting a pre-ordained number of signatures on a petition is widely used across the world, although it is most famously employed in a number of US states and in Switzerland.

The great benefit of such citizens' initiatives from the point of view of the *Power* Commission is its capacity to address the two key causes of disengagement relevant to this chapter. Firstly, it provides citizens with a very tangible power over the most crucial issues confronting a democracy. Most importantly, it allows those citizens to decide for themselves what those issues are, even if the Executive and legislature have ignored the issues. Secondly, it allows citizens to bring single issues into the formal democratic sphere in a far more precise way than voting or membership of a political party allows. It is this focus on specific policy areas which is increasingly popular with citizens, but operates largely outside of formal democracy, and which has contributed to the declining appeal of parties and elections. Citizens' initiatives have the potential to capture the political energy generated by single issues and make them a source of re-engagement

with formal democratic processes.

We believe, however, that the power of citizens' initiative should be extended beyond legislative processes to include public inquiries and to include hearings into the performance of public bodies. It is felt that this is important because governments have proved themselves unwilling on occasion to establish major inquiries or hearings on subjects which, at the very least, could be regarded as matters of major public concern.

In addition, it is felt that the power to initiate hearings on the performance of public bodies is an important boost for accountability in a period when the capacity of elected representatives to scrutinise and control such bodies has been eroded (see Chapter 6). This power would, in particular, offer citizens, who feel that a local public body was failing to deliver an acceptable level of service, a significant power to effect change without having to wait for the attention and decisions of government departments, local authorities or regulatory authorities. We note that the current Government has itself recently floated the idea of allowing citizens to initiate inquiries or hearings into local public bodies.

We also note that the power of initiative is not the fact that it is used regularly – it is not – but its very existence exerts pressure on governments and other authorities to take account of public feeling, and address popular concerns, for fear that if they do not a citizens' initiative is always a possibility. In this way it helps create the more open and responsive government which is so crucial to the resolution of disengagement.

In short, citizens' initiative would add to the overall perception and reality of direct citizen influence which would address this key cause of disengagement.

We recommend, therefore, that legislation is introduced to Parliament which would allow British citizens to initiate legislative processes on issues of their choosing, to initiate public inquiries on issues of their choosing, and to initiate hearings into the performance

of public bodies and their senior management.

We are aware that serious concerns are raised about initiative procedures, particularly that they can be hijacked by professional lobbying organisations and by sections of the media, and that they can lead to ill-informed, populist measures. To address these concerns, we recommend a process which allows time and freedom for the public and elected representatives to enter into a debate about whether an initiative proposal is appropriate and then whether it should be approved.

The following is a possible model which might meet such stipulations, but we are aware that there may be a number of different ways to ensure that time and opportunity for detailed public deliberation is a feature of an initiative process. Hence, this model is provided not as a firm recommendation but as an indication of the type of process we have in mind.

For a national initiative the process would be as follows.

- i. A legislative proposal receiving the support of 1 per cent of registered electors on a petition within the space of one year (approximately 400,000 signatures across the UK) must be formally debated and voted on by Parliament or the relevant devolved assembly. Negotiations between MPs and the principals leading the initiative can be part of this process. If Parliament rejects the proposal or amends it in a way that is unsatisfactory to the initiative's principals or other members of the public, the process moves to (ii).
- ii. A proposal already debated by Parliament or devolved assembly which receives the support of a *further* 1 per cent of registered electors within the next six months is then presented as a referendum question to the people of Britain. We are wary of the use of internet and email petitions for the launch of an initiative since this may reduce the time and

freedom for public deliberation which a traditional paper petition would allow. Therefore, it may be that only paper petitions would be an acceptable way of launching an initiative at either stage (i) or (ii).

- iii. If over 60 per cent of registered electors turn out, and if the proposal is passed by a simple majority, it passes into law.
- iv. At any point, this process may be halted if the High Court rules that the referendum proposal is contrary to the Human Rights Act.
- v. If a proposal fails at the referendum stage, it cannot be brought before the British people within the next five years.
- vi. Initiative proposals relating to public finances or taxation would be barred on the grounds that they could be used to derail the legislative programmes of governments or local administrations.

Initiatives for legislation would be managed, and any disputes about process resolved, by the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission would also have responsibility for reviewing the petition thresholds which would trigger the two main stages of the initiative process. The threshold level should ensure that launching a successful initiative is not a common event but neither is it likely to be a rarity. If it became clear that petition threshold levels were allowing too many or too few initiatives, the Electoral Commission would conduct a consultation and research process to decide on a new level.

The process would be broadly the same at local government level as at national level but petition thresholds would be set at a sliding scale depending on the number of registered electors within an authority's area. These levels would also be set and reviewed by the

Electoral Commission. Of course, initiative proposals would be submitted to the local council for discussion and decision by councillors rather than by Parliament.

Initiatives designed to launch public inquiries or hearings into public bodies would have a different process.

- i. Demands for public inquiries or hearings relating to national public bodies which receive the support of 2 per cent of registered electors nationally over a period of one year would automatically be referred to an independent Commissioner for Inquiries and Hearings. Demands for hearings into local public bodies would require the support of a percentage of electors in the area covered by the relevant public body. This percentage would be set on a sliding scale akin to that used for legislative initiative as detailed above.
- ii. The Commissioner would be charged with drawing up the remit for the inquiry or hearing – in negotiation with the principals behind the initiative – and inviting independent individuals to sit on the inquiry or hearing including members of the public. All inquiries and hearings would be led by a commission rather than a single individual to ensure that evidence and conclusions are given the fullest consideration.
- iii. The inquiry or hearing would have the power to compel attendance by witnesses. In the case of a hearing, testimony would be given under oath.
- iv. In the case of an inquiry, findings and recommendations must be formally debated and voted on by Parliament or relevant devolved institution. In the case of a hearing, recommendations would require a written response from the elected authority to which a public body or its management is

accountable. If action is not taken in response to a hearing's recommendations, the Commissioner for Inquiries and Hearings will judge whether the reasons given are sufficient. If they are not judged sufficient and the relevant elected body refuses to take further action, then the Commissioner will assume responsibility for enacting the hearing's recommendations as he or she sees fit.

We believe that the introduction of citizens' initiative in the way described above would amount to a major symbolic and practical step towards rebalancing the relationship between the state and citizen in a way that meets the expectations and preferences of the modern citizen and reinvigorates the British political system through the application of the democratic ideal of self-determination. In this way, it would make a major contribution to ending disengagement from formal democracy.

Recommendation 25: The rules on the plurality of media ownership should be reformed. This is always a controversial issue but there should be special consideration given to this issue in light of the developments in digital broadcast and the internet.

The *Power* Commission received little evidence to suggest that there is widespread public concern about the oft-heard claims that the media is unnecessarily negative towards politics and politicians (see Chapter 3). However, another aspect of the media did arise as a common cause of concern and which was a contributing factor to disengagement. This is that the media is widely regarded as a significant unelected influence on government policy and decisions. Many people feel that this reduces the significance of citizen influence over government and hence weakens the incentive for engagement.

Indicative submissions in response to public consultation regarding the political power of the media

The media have been behaving like a political party in recent years. They should step away and concentrate on factual information and pure entertainment. Currently they are turning people off by being clearly politically biased either towards the right, or as is more common with the BBC, towards the left.

The media is more of an opposition than the Opposition. They should avoid dragging up stories about politicians, private lives that are not in the public interest and focus instead on the importance of voting and democracy.

A powerful media which lacks diversity, combined with an apathetic electorate is worrisome. I would support restrictions on the number of media outlets that can be owned by one person, and hope that greater diversity, in views and forms (i.e. the internet) improves the situation.

Ownership of media companies is not well regulated in the public interest. It should not be possible for an individual or company to own more than one national newspaper title nor for an individual or company to own a newspaper as well as television or radio stations/news-gathering networks. Commercial considerations influence too greatly how newspapers and other media gather, edit and represent news stories about politics.

The media's agenda is largely directed by the vested interests of political parties and capital and in selling its coverage of hot stories (I'm not saying this is wrong since the media is largely a profit making concern). The media routinely and systematically ignores the serious problems of our times, such as climate change, global poverty,

massive political unrest social instability and dispossession all over the world and spends much of its time analysing party political rhetoric, the behaviour of the Windsor family and the wranglings of religious establishments.

The media largely serves its own (financial) interests and barely serves the interests of the public.

I think it is a disgrace that so much of the media is concentrated in so few private hands. I think it is a disgrace that it is allowed to 'self-regulate'. The media should be forced to maintain professional standards of impartiality and factual correctness. Perhaps this could be done through a directly elected regulating body or through legislation to prevent ownership of controlling stakes by individuals or corporations. There should be no room for Murdochs or Berlusconis.

The control of most of the national press by a very small number of wealthy individuals with their own agenda (e.g. Rupert Murdoch, Richard Desmond) is a major influence here and ways should be found to limit the ownership of too great a share of the media by any individual or organisation.

The media is owned by those with vested interests – big business interests and reporting is biased accordingly. The media can start to improve by explaining how our democracy is meant to work, how people can participate and reporting not just news but using features to give more depth and balance. See for example The Herald.

The media's main aim is to sell papers and good news stories do not achieve this. Hence every day people are bombarded with over the top horror stories. Many of the tabloids and even some of the broadsheets refuse to have sensible debates on issues. They give one sided political view points that tend to be the opinion of the owner. This can be

resolved by forcing the media to give unbiased accounts of events and facts rather than opinion.

We are also aware that the efficacy of many of the recommendations made elsewhere in this report could be limited by a media lacking in political diversity and the will to use its political power responsibly. This is particularly the case with regard to the proposals on citizens' initiative immediately above. Although care has been taken in the suggested model to ensure that detailed and lengthy public deliberation is a part of the process, such deliberation can only be aided by a diverse media in which distinct but considered perspectives on a particular proposal are put before the public by the main organs of the press, broadcast and internet media.

The issue of plurality in media ownership was obviously a key feature of the debate surrounding the passage of the Communications Act 2003 through Parliament. After a rebellion in the House of Lords led by the Chair of the Joint Committee on the Communications Bill, the Government agreed to make the public interest a criteria by which Ofcom and ultimately the Secretary of State with responsibility for the media should judge any change in the ownership of media outlets. This would be in addition to the usual matters of commercial competition by which mergers are judged.

However, the Joint Committee had other concerns. These were that the relaxation of the restrictions on foreign and cross-media ownership proposed in the Bill should only occur once Ofcom has established itself as an authoritative regulator in the area of commercial public service broadcasting *and* if it recommended such a relaxation itself. In addition, the Joint Committee felt the same restrictions for newspaper proprietor ownership of Channel Three should also apply to Channel Five. Both of these concerns were rejected by the Government.

However, we feel that much greater public debate on the issue

of media ownership needs to be conducted than occurred in the case of the Communications Act of which the contours were ultimately decided by intense whipping and politicking in the Lords. In the short to medium term, this means that when a major change in the ownership of the media is afoot, the decision taken by Ofcom and the Secretary of State about its impact on the public interest must not be taken without an independent, structured and thoroughgoing process of public deliberation and involvement. It should also be clear how any decision taken by the Secretary of State has taken account of the conclusions of that public deliberation process.

However, in the longer term it means there is a need for a much wider public debate about the future of media ownership in Britain, given the radical changes currently taking place in media provision with the growing importance of digital broadcasting and the internet. The launch and maintenance of such a debate is particularly necessary because the practical implications of these changes will only become clear over time. Thus it is vital that the provisions of the Communications Act are kept under very close scrutiny by Parliament and other interested bodies in the context of such ongoing debate and that an openness about the possibility of revising the Act is accepted by government and the main political parties.

Recommendation 26: A requirement that public service broadcasters develop strategies to involve viewers in deliberation on matters of public importance – this would be aided by the use of digital technology.

A further aspect of the media in relation to disengagement relates to the advent of digital technology. The evidence presented to us makes it clear that broadcast media is now key to the seizing of a major opportunity to engage very large numbers of citizens in public deliberation on issues of political importance.

Light entertainment television shows such as *Big Brother* and *The X Factor* have shown that there is a public appetite to engage with the

broadcast media in a relatively simple interactive fashion – in most cases by casting a vote for or against a particular individual engaged in a competition. In addition, the rise of political debate on the internet – charted in Part One – has revealed the potential for the development of a new culture of deliberation on current issues.

The prospect that television and the internet will be combined into one media form over the coming years offers the exciting possibility that interaction with television programmes could become highly sophisticated. It could be based more on a debate between broadcaster and viewer, and viewer and viewer, rather than on the simple casting of a vote. It could be both national and on a local basis, with the planned licencing of local television stations. The potential in this to take the techniques and spirit of public involvement in politics to a very large audience is clearly great. Of course, the switchover to digital transmission for all television broadcasting in the UK between 2008 and 2012 will only make the potential reach and impact of such involvement that much greater.

As with the recent development of successful interactive programmes on television, the technology and techniques which will make political deliberation effective through such media will take much experimentation and time to develop. However, the evidence presented to *Power* indicates that little if any work is yet being conducted by broadcasters to plan for the future by developing this potential. Indeed, the history of analogue broadcasting means that the prevailing view of the television audience is still to regard it as a passive body unwilling or unable to become involved in sophisticated or detailed interaction.

The Commission feels that if the potential of the digital revolution is to be seized to tackle political disengagement then any public service remit for either the BBC or commercial television should include the requirement to do just that. They should be expected to develop a strategy for engaging the public in deliberation on issues of public and political importance.

Recommendation 27: MPs should be required and resourced to produce annual reports, hold AGMs and make more use of innovative engagement techniques.

So far this chapter has concentrated largely on the need for institutions to encourage and allow much greater public involvement in their decision-making processes. However, we believe it is vital that individual MPs also adopt this ethic.

As has been made clear elsewhere in this report, public attitudes to MPs are not positive. We have specifically rejected the notion that this is due to any weakening in the calibre of MPs themselves but that it is more the result of major changes in the expectations citizens now have of their elected representatives. In particular, the Inquiry's research and evidence shows that citizens feel particularly alienated from their parliamentary representatives in two related areas:

- it is widely felt that MPs do not engage with or listen to their constituents enough between elections;
- it is widely felt that MPs are more accountable to their party leaderships and whips than they are to their constituents on the key issues of the day.

These concerns clearly relate to the wider causes of disengagement identified by the Commission, most notably, the sense of a lack of influence over political decisions reported by many people, and the dissatisfaction widely felt towards the main political parties.

We are, of course, aware that many MPs work extremely hard to maintain links with their constituencies and spend a great deal of time working to benefit their constituents. Indeed, some MPs have taken time and effort to adopt innovative ways of keeping in touch with their constituents. Some are making wider use of consultation by internet, email and even mobile phone text to discover the views of their constituents. Others are building networks amongst the least engaged, holding 'policy workshops' with constituents or establish-

ing more accessible and informal offices and events at which they can meet their electorate.

However, what is lacking is the existence of formal, resourced and high-profile methods by which all MPs can listen and respond to the concerns of their constituents between elections. Such processes would not only show that MPs were taking account of their constituents' views, but might also help to counter the undue influence of the whips which is a major source of alienation for the public.

We were impressed that the Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham, Harriet Harman, publishes an Annual Report so that her constituents see what she has achieved in the previous year.

Drawing upon this idea the Commission recommends that all MPs should be expected to produce an Annual Report which is distributed to all constituents and is then discussed at an Annual General Meeting of constituents. This practice should be properly funded by an allowance to MPs to be used solely for this purpose. Such funding is vital because the MP's AGM must be structured according to the best practice in public engagement to ensure that the meetings do not become events at which the 'usual suspects' engage in unconstructive conflict with their representative and with each other. As such, the AGM should meet the principles of best practice outlined under Recommendation 23 in this chapter.

It should be pointed out, of course, that important though such efforts at greater engagement by MPs may be, they will remain very limited in their success if the power of Parliament itself remains so restricted relative to the Executive. Even the most active and innovative of parliamentary representatives, when it comes to public engagement, will be stumped when a constituent asks him or her *why* they should actually bother to speak to their MP given the severe limitations on the MP's capacity to influence change. This only emphasises a point made throughout this report that the three big shifts in political practice informing these recommendations will reverse disengagement only when they are implemented with equal vigour.

We did receive evidence suggesting that constituents should be given the power to recall their MPs between elections through the collection of constituents' signatures followed by a local referendum. Many feel that such a power would offer significant influence to citizens; that it would act as a pressure on MPs to remain engaged with the constituents between elections, and that it would act as a counterweight to the influence of the party whips. The idea also proved particularly popular with the Inquiry's Citizens' Panel.

However, after considerable discussion, we felt that a responsive electoral system (see Chapter 8) in which voters could choose more independently-minded candidates from one party, or could vote, meaningfully, for candidates without a party allegiance, would be a more sophisticated way for constituents to express their views about the independence and public engagement of their representative, and would render recall powers largely redundant.

Recommendation 28: Ministerial meetings with campaign groups and their representatives should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.

When engagement is spoken about by politicians and public officials, it often means engagement with 'stakeholders' which tends to include other public officials and professionals or figures from campaign, interest and community groups. While the *Power* Commission believes that stakeholder engagement is a vital part of the effective operation of a modern political system, it should not be viewed as a substitute for direct engagement with citizens themselves.

It is not clear to us that all of these stakeholders are accountable or particularly well-connected to the sections of society they claim to represent, although many clearly are. Nor is it clear that their policy positions are always based on good engagement with their own members, supporters or communities. Do the male elders, for example, of minority communities adequately represent the views of women?

Of greatest concern to the Commission is the fact that stakeholder consultation can sometimes be as opaque as the interaction between business and political decision-makers (discussed in Chapter 6). Although the influence of stakeholder groups over government is not as great a source of concern as the influence of business, it is important that transparency is introduced into the relationship to prevent it becoming yet another factor which suggests to citizens that their influence counts for nought against further well-resourced and powerful players.

Thus, as with recommendations on the role of business, we feel that meetings between ministers, senior civil servants and stakeholder, campaign and interest groups should be placed on a more formal footing. We recommend that all such meetings be formally logged and regularly listed in an easily accessible format and without the requirement of a formal request under the Freedom of Information Act. MPs or members of the public should then have a speedy response when requesting documents relating to any particular meeting or meetings under the Act.

The strict limitations on funding of parties by organisations suggested above should also make the relationship between government and stakeholder groups more open and accountable and reduce the risk of impropriety. In addition, a more powerful Parliament should enhance the relationship between MPs and these groups and bring such groups out from the relatively more hidden world of ministerial briefings and agreements.

Recommendation 29: The creation of a new independent National Statistical and Information Service to provide the public with key information free of political spin.

As was pointed out under Recommendation 19, an effective public involvement exercise relies heavily on the provision of relevant and accessible information. The same is true of the wider, less bounded processes of public involvement suggested elsewhere in this chapter.

Ensuring plurality in media ownership is a central part of this, but we also feel that government and academic research bodies could also play an important role in informing debates. To quote Jack Straw in a speech to the Royal Statistical Society on 25th April 1995 when he was in Opposition:

In any democracy, the public should have a healthy scepticism about the claims, and practices, of politicians. But there can come a point where the cynicism goes so deep that it corrodes the foundations of our political system, leading to a wholesale lack of confidence in the system, and to a detachment between the governed, and what is perceived to be the governing class – in which I include MPs of all parties. I believe that we are dangerously close to that position today.

Jack Straw indicated that his concern was with the way statistics were susceptible to manipulation by government and then went on to say:

Democracy is about conceding power to those with whom you disagree, not to those with whom you agree; and about ensuring that every citizen has a similar access to the information on which decisions are made and governments are judges.

The Commission agrees.

We recommend the publication of regular information and briefings for the public, detailing the sum of government and academic research and statistics on issues of ongoing concern or of current relevance. An annual analysis assessing what the statistics and research tells us about progress or otherwise in areas of key concern to government and society would also be a particularly useful addition to public debate. This work should be conducted by an independent body similar to the National Audit Office to ensure fairness and rigour in the presentation of the findings. The body should be fully re-

sourced not just to carry out the statistical analysis and the adequate secondary research but also to ensure that its reports are professionally produced, highly accessible and widely disseminated, and that they obtain media coverage.

Recommendation 30: 'Democracy hubs' should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.

The cumulative impact of the recommendations in this chapter will be to create a wide range of opportunities and means for people to raise issues of concern with public officials and elected representatives. It is vital that resources are available to facilitate, advise and publicise these means and opportunities so that full use can be made of them by the public to ensure that they promote re-engagement with formal democratic processes as effectively as possible. It is recommended, therefore, that offices and resource centres are established in each local authority area, staffed by the necessary specialists and with sufficient resources to carry out these tasks. Most importantly, these 'democracy hubs' will offer a point at which citizens can obtain information and support on how to raise issues of concern through the political system. It would be important, in practice, to differentiate the role of 'democracy hubs' from Citizens' Advice Bureaux. The former would be concerned with aiding collective political activity while the latter concentrates on helping individuals resolve their legal and financial problems.

These recommendations, if vigorously implemented, will create a new sense of influence for the ordinary citizen over the policies and decisions that most affect their lives or about which they are most concerned. The ability of political power in Britain so easily to stone-wall public demands would be greatly reduced. In addition, the freedom of any authority to take decisions which deeply affect the lives

of citizens without serious consideration of their views and interests would also be greatly curtailed. If the recommendations are implemented, a major barrier to participation in democracy – the sense that ordinary citizens' views count for little or nothing – will begin to crumble. There is also, of course, the possibility, often overlooked in the debate about a more participatory democracy, that those in authority may actually make better decisions and more effective policy as a result of entering in to serious deliberation with those who will be affected by those policies or decisions.