

Foreword

This is not a report simply about constitutional change. It is a report about giving people real influence over the bread and butter issues which affect their lives. The disengagement from politics described in these pages cannot be dismissed as the preoccupation of the chattering classes. Its substance has come from the voices of thousands of people around the country who feel quietly angry or depressed. When it comes to politics they feel they are eating stones. Principle and ideas seem to have been replaced with managerialism and public relations. It is as though Proctor and Gamble or Abbey National are running the country. And in answer to this malaise, the parties seem to believe that all problems will be solved by having a new face replace the one that has fallen out of favour alongside the colonising of each other's policies.

However, the blame cannot all be put at the door of politicians and when people are moved beyond the first wave of emotion about political lying and politicians' self interest or ruminations about the fault of the media, a very different public complaint surfaces. The disquiet is really about having no say. It is about feeling disconnected because voting once every four or five years does not feel like real engagement. Asking people set questions in focus groups or polling is a poor substitute for real democratic processes. Voting itself seems irrelevant to increasing numbers of people: even supposing there is a candidate you like, if you are in a constituency



where the outcome is preordained and your favoured choice is not IT, there is no point turning out to the draughty church hall and inserting your vote in the ballot box. It is also about feeling that there is no choice, despite our living in the era when CHOICE is the dominant political mantra – there is very little on offer as the main parties now seem to be much the same. It is about a belief that even Members of Parliament have little say because all the decisions are made by a handful of people at the centre and then driven through the system. Politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the hands of privileged elites as if democracy has run out of steam.

The world has changed immeasurably in the last fifty years. When I was a child our politicians were grainy photographs in the newspapers, distant voices on the radio, ghostly figures on television. We knew next to nothing about their wives or their children or their sexual predilections. Now we have the Prime Minister and other party leaders sit on the confessional sofas of daytime television and, as though being counselled by a therapist for marital breakdown, apologise for creating distrust and promise a sceptical public that they will do better.

People have changed. Lives are being lived in very different ways but the political institutions and the main political parties have failed to keep up. What was most stark in the Commission's work was that the insiders, the people within the political mainframe, could do the analysis. They could describe the shift away from an industrial society where two main parties represented two clear interest groups but their response was all about strategy. They tell us class has disappeared into a meritocratic land of opportunity when what has happened is a reconfiguring of class with new margins, growing inequality but increasingly ugly consequences. I remember seeing the writing on the wall back in the days of Mrs. Thatcher when a young woman who helped look after my children remarked that my mother and family did not seem working class, having seen my background described in a newspaper. I asked her who she thought were working class and she

said people who did not work. While it is true that people no longer have the same tribal attachments or ways of describing themselves as in the past, class divisions are as defining of life chances as they ever were.

As we took evidence the difference between the public response and the 'insider' response was palpable. The politicians have no idea of the extent of the alienation that is out there. The people round the Westminster water coolers are clearly not having the same conversations as they are everywhere else. Their temperature gauge is seriously out of kilter. When politicians or party managers were asked for ideas for re-engagement, the suggested solutions were almost all about tweaking the existing system, with a bit of new technology here and a consultation there. The result is that no political space is being created for new politics and new ideas to emerge; a new politics – whether in the form of new parties or the genuine revival of the existing parties – will only be born once the structural problems within the current system are addressed.

We have no doubt that concern will be expressed that this report does not deal with certain issues close to the hearts of some reformers. At our meetings and in our evidence, issues as diverse as an English Parliament, the relationship between the civil service and government, and the emasculation of the Cabinet were raised along with others. There are many different problems with the political system, some of which need urgent attention, but we were specifically addressing non-engagement and not all of these problems relate directly to this concern. We do, however, feel that if the programme of change we advocate is put in place many of the other problems will begin to find solutions.

What political leaderships seem to misunderstand is that if you want to unite people around a distinct and common purpose you have to draw people in. Too often citizens are being evicted from the processes.

Ways have to be found to engage people. Markets, contracts and

economic rationality provide a necessary but insufficient basis for the stability and prosperity of post-industrial societies; these must be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty to the community, trust and political engagement. People in Britain still volunteer; they run in marathons for charity; they hold car boot sales to raise funds for good causes; they take part in Red Nose days and wear ribbons for breast cancer or AIDS. They sit as school governors, do prison visiting, read with children who have learning difficulties. They take part in school races and run the school disco. They march against the Iraq war and in favour of the countryside. They sign petitions for extra street lights and more frequent bin collection. They send their savings to the victims of tsunamis and want to end world poverty. What they no longer want to do is join a party or get involved in formal politics. And increasingly they see no point in voting.

This is a travesty for democracy and if it continues the price will be high. The only way to download power is by rebalancing the system towards the people. This is the agenda. Now we need the political will.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Helena Kennedy." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Helena Kennedy QC
Member of the House of Lords
February 2006

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of thousands of people. We would like to thank all those who took part in helping us form and refine our ideas. Those who gave evidence, attended our public sessions, organised events in their communities, discussed ideas with us and who looked through drafts of our report. All of you I hope will find your name listed in the back of the report.

This report would not have been possible without our Power Commissioners: Emma B, Paul Boakye, Phil Carey, Ben Freeman, Bano Murtuja, Frances O'Grady and our insightful Vice Chair Ferdinand Mount. Phillip Dodd was unable to stay with us until the end but his insight and understanding of contemporary Britain helped shape our early thinking and I hope this is reflected throughout the report.

Sadly one of our number, Barbara Gill, the chairman of the Women's Institute, died last November. She was a highly valued member of the Commission, bringing good sense, a refreshing non-metropolitan perspective and a teasing sense of humour to our meetings.

I would also like to say a special thank-you to the team who supported the Commissioners. Especially to Pam Giddy, our Inquiry Director, Sarah Allan, Daniel Leighton, Adam Lent, Natalia Leshchenko, Michael O'Carroll and Caroline Watson.

And finally none of this would have been possible without the financial support of the Trustees and Directors of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. In particular, I would like to thank those who met regularly as part of the Inquiry's Steering Committee, ensuring the project kept both to time and to budget and kept its focus: Lord Shutt (Chair), Peter Coltman, Tina Day, Andrew Gunn, Stephen Pittam, Mark Ross, Diana Scott, Susan Seymour, Lord Smith and Tina Walker. Your advice and generosity has been invaluable.