

“We were struck by the strength of the contempt felt towards formal politics”



## Introduction

All inquiries are a journey. They start with a few apparently simple facts. These offer brief glimpses of a wider landscape that has to be explored. Along the way, however, perceptions change, understandings deepen and those leading the inquiry can end up looking at a very different vista than they first expected.

So it is with *Power*. As with much of the public debate about political participation, the key fact which led to the establishment of the Inquiry was the decline in the numbers voting in general elections in the UK since 1997. However, our journey soon revealed a democratic malaise that has spread far beyond some disappointing turnouts, and which is a cause of grave concern.

It is clear now to the *Power* Commission that the recent downturn in general election turnouts is not merely a ‘little local difficulty’. Popular engagement with the formal processes and institutions of democracy has been in long-term decline since the 1960s. Party memberships have been falling continuously since that time to the point where they now stand at less than one-quarter of their 1964 levels. The number of people who say they identify with one of the main parties has followed a similarly severe trajectory. Turnouts for other elections – local and European parliamentary – have remained stubbornly low for decades. Even the new devolved institutions in London, Scotland and Wales have failed to achieve strong turnouts.

Most worryingly, there is now a well-ingrained popular view across the country that our political institutions and their politicians are failing, untrustworthy, and disconnected from the great mass of the British people. This last point cannot be stressed too strongly. We have been struck by just how wide and deep is the contempt felt for formal politics in Britain. A message of disappointment, frustration and anger with our elected leaders and the institutions of politics came through loud and clear in all the different methods of evidence-gathering employed by the Inquiry.

The Commission's sense that this was a more profound problem than the simple fact of declining election turnouts was confirmed when evidence revealed two further factors. Firstly, **this is not a problem confined to Britain**. The majority of the established democracies are facing similar problems despite the differences in their recent political and economic histories and the variations in their constitutional arrangements. Secondly, **British citizens are not turning away from participation in other areas of life**. Recent research shows that Britain still has a vibrant culture of volunteering for charitable and community activity. In addition, other forms of political involvement through campaign groups, pressure activity such as signing petitions and consumer boycotts remain innovative and vigorous, and have even grown considerably in some areas over the last thirty years. Participation in formal democracy, rather than participation itself, seems to provoke a unique distaste amongst British citizens.

A hard look at the evidence to discover explanations reinforced the depth of the problem. **Explanations which saw disengagement as a short-term problem or the result of relatively straightforward causes simply did not stack up against the wider facts**. The great mass of expert, research and public evidence we received did not support the usual theories. For example, the notion that political disengagement was the product of economic contentment or the time pressures of modern life or could all be blamed on a cynical media were simply unpersuasive when fully explored.

Instead, the causes of disengagement which kept appearing in the evidence suggested a deeper, systemic problem. These causes were as follows.

- **Many people feel that their views or interests are not taken into account** when key policies are developed and key decisions are made even if they do get involved in formal democratic politics.
- **The main political parties** are widely held in contempt. They are seen as **offering no real choice to citizens**, lacking in principle and acting as though a cross on a ballot paper can be taken as blanket assent to the full sweep of a manifesto's policies.
- Our system of electing our parliamentary representatives is widely regarded as a positive obstacle to meaningful political involvement. For millions of citizens it seems, **voting is simply regarded as a waste of time** because the candidate or party you favour is either not standing or has no chance of victory while the candidate or party that does stand a chance of winning is positively disliked.

These are not simple problems. They are causes that go to the very heart of the way politics is conducted in Britain. And, asking ourselves why these problems have developed in the last thirty years or so to their current level of intensity, we believe they reflect an even deeper dichotomy which has arisen between politics and society.

It has become clear to us that while **British society has been fundamentally transformed in the last forty years, the political system has not**. There has been no strategic or thoroughgoing rethink of the way politics is conducted in Britain despite the fact that our world is now immeasurably different to that which existed when our two-party, parliamentary system took shape.

Put briefly, our political system is structured to reflect the values, expectations and lifestyles of industrial Britain not post-industrial Britain. It is a system dominated by two parties whose values and grassroots networks were based on the values and networks of the two dominant classes of Britain's industrial past. It is a system that prizes a powerful, central executive occasionally held in check by a Parliament whose members are not expected to take much account of popular opinion between general elections: an approach developed in an era of modest educational attainment, deference to authority, limited flows of information and strong popular allegiance to the philosophies of one or other of the two main parties.

The society out of which our political system grew no longer exists. People have changed. The political ideologies and networks of the industrial middle and working classes have lost their hold and gone into decline, just as the economic classes themselves have dwindled with the great loss of large sections of British manufacturing and their replacement by service sector enterprises. In the place of the industrial economic classes, we now have a much more diverse society in which the bonds of place and class are not nearly as strong as they once were. Large sections of British society are now far better educated, expect self-determination and choice over many aspects of their lives from the most mundane to the most fundamental and, as a result, hold themselves in much higher esteem while viewing those in authority with a considerable degree of scepticism. For this group, a system built on old class divides and an inherent assumption of popular deference and trust towards authority has become increasingly meaningless.

It is also true that the unifying visions of what is meant by the 'good society' are less clear. For very many people in the fifties the idea of the good life meant a job, a home with hot water and an indoor bathroom, good healthcare and education and fair prospects for your children. Today, for most, those aspirations are taken for granted but the impoverishment of lives takes other forms. Beyond basic needs,

people have very different individualised ideas about what would make a good life and reach for different priorities. The parties in their turn have been unable to capture all those hopes and dreams in one easy package.

While post-industrialism has weakened the bonds and identities of class, this does not mean that great inequalities of wealth and power no longer exist. Alongside the affluence and new freedoms of contemporary Britain, there exists serious marginalisation and deprivation created by the same shift to post-industrialism. Despite the facile claims that we now live in a classless society, class is still with us but it is reconfiguring in different ways. Recent studies have found that it determines life chances of British people more today than at any point since the Second World War. Social mobility has ground to a halt. A child born into a rich family in Britain will almost certainly live and die rich, while a child born into a poor family will almost certainly live and die poor. Globalisation has brought tangible benefits to some – the wealthy are becoming considerably better off – but the growing inequality in society is undermining social cohesion. The middle classes too are changing; no longer enjoying jobs for life because of the new flexible employment market, they feel deep insecurity and are unsure which political party will protect their interests.

Those living in areas hit hard by the loss of manufacturing face long-term unemployment, or the insecure, low-paid jobs available to those without academic qualifications in those areas where manufacturing has been replaced by vibrant new service industries. Levels of crime, illness, drug use and family breakdown are more common amongst these groups than those enjoying higher incomes and status.

These social groups are deeply alienated from and marginalised by the political system. The social, cultural and political organisations which gave the industrial working class major political power and shaped their political aspirations have little or no purchase amongst these newly marginalised groups and as yet no new organisations

have filled the political vacuum. Thus, a wide section of society enjoys only a very limited and fragmented dialogue with those in power.

The transformation of our society in these post-industrial times has serious implications for many aspects of society. Politicians have redesigned large areas of policy to meet the new demands. Choice and flexibility in public services have become watchwords to match the choice and flexibility that people have come to expect from the private sector and now expect in many areas of their lives. Policies designed to achieve economic regeneration and community development and help people back to work in those areas that have not benefited from post-industrialisation have replaced the historical emphasis on short-term unemployment benefit, the expansion of the welfare state and housing programmes.

Yet the political system itself remains unchanged. It still assumes inherently that today's citizens are satisfied with a choice between two main parties, with the rare – once every four years – election of representatives who make decisions without any clear ongoing reference to the people they represent, and with an Executive so powerful and centralised that it can simply choose to ignore popular or even parliamentary opinion in the name of a supposedly deeper understanding of the issues.

To us, it is clear that this is a system significantly out of step with the values, expectations and interests of the individuals and many groupings that make up British society. It is hardly surprising that anger, frustration and disengagement result. This may express itself in the widespread cynicism about politicians and the belief that they further only their own interests and deal in electoral promises which they have no intention of keeping. This is a symptom, however, of the deeper structural problem rather than a cause in itself.

### **Why Re-engage?**

Despite this profound problem, we have come across the view that efforts to re-engage British citizens with formal democracy are

unnecessary or mistaken. This view seems to be based on a number of different perspectives. The first is that the new, informal forms of participation is where politics is really taking place and that the formal processes and institutions of democracy should be allowed to wither on the vine until they are replaced with something new. The second is a perspective that we have heard from a number of politicians. This is the view that those who rule themselves out of formal politics have forfeited the right to be taken account of, or to be responded to. The third is favoured by those who often describe the country as “Britain plc”. They believe that the business of government is now so complex that new times need ‘executive democracy’, with the constant testing of public contentment through polling, focus groups or public consultations.

We do not believe any of these views are acceptable. This is in part because none is an adequate response to the evidence received by the Inquiry. More significant, however, is the fact that the failure to develop a meaningful response to the crisis of disengagement runs some very serious potential risks.

- Loss of mandate and legitimacy: Clearly, the fundamental feature of any representative democracy is that a government derives its legitimacy and mandate to govern by winning the consent of its community through periodic elections. An ongoing and serious decline in turnout could mean that British governments no longer have a mandate to govern. It is particularly worrying, for example, that while the victorious party at the 2005 General Election polled 9.5 million votes, 17 million registered voters failed to attend a polling station.
- Loss of political equality: A fundamental principle or aspiration of democracy is the notion that all have an equal say or an equal right to participate in government. However, the decline in turnout has varied considerably across different

population groups. Most notably, under-25s, black and minority ethnic communities, less affluent economic classes, and certain regions have lower turnouts than the population as a whole. For example, only 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2005 General Election compared to 75 per cent of those over 65. In the same election, 47 per cent of those from a black and minority ethnic background voted, while 62 per cent of those classed as white turned out. A similar disparity exists for social class, with 54 per cent of those categorised as D/E voting in May 2005 compared to 70 per cent for those in the A/B social class.<sup>1</sup> Very similar variations in turnout exist for the 2001 General Election.<sup>2</sup> This may suggest that, for whatever reason, **specific groups and individuals are being excluded from the democratic process**, leading to effective disenfranchisement and the undermining of political equality.

- **Loss of dialogue:** Dialogue between government and governed has long been accepted as a positive outcome of democracy, ensuring ongoing legitimacy between elections, the development of effective policies, and the creation of a sense of trust and ownership of government decisions. However, a decline in involvement in democratic processes means that this dialogue is under threat. Political parties are the institutions which should play a central role in maintaining this dialogue, so their serious decline in membership must be regarded as particularly worrying. There are also deep concerns at the way the **parties have been sidelined in policy-making processes** – voting for resolutions at party conferences which are then ignored.
- **Loss of effective political recruitment:** Political parties are the main instruments for recruiting politicians to represent the people and ultimately lead the country. The decline in party

membership means our leaders are increasingly drawn from a much smaller pool than was the case in the past. This may have an increasingly negative influence on the diversity of those being recruited to elected positions at local and national levels, and may, for example, explain why MPs are now far less likely to come from a semi-skilled and unskilled occupational background. It is also pointed out that **large numbers of politicians have never been employed outside the world of politics and only join parties as though they were a jobcentre on the way to becoming an MP.**

- **The rise of undemocratic forces:** The damage to legitimacy posed by declining turnouts and the unchecked rise of distrust in politicians may offer opportunities to anti-democratic forces to denigrate democracy because they can claim that they better represent the views of large sections of the British people. It could be argued that recent higher levels of support for the British National Party are early examples of this process. Only Britain's sustained economic growth over the last decade may have saved it from the more significant rise of fascist groups seen in continental Europe in recent years.
- **The risk of quiet authoritarianism:** The increasing failure of large sections of the population to engage with the political process may lead to a situation where governments are no longer effectively held to account. Over a period of time, this could encourage a gradual growth of 'quiet authoritarianism' in Britain where **policy and law is made in consultation with a small coterie of supporters** and with little reference to wider views and interests. Under such circumstances, the processes of democracy, including **general elections, become empty rituals.** The more critical commentators argue that this has already happened.

Given such views, we firmly believe that these risks are far too great and the problem of disengagement now too severe for anyone to be either dismissive or glib about the need for a thoroughgoing and strategic response.

### **Towards Recommendations for Change**

In considering the many different recommendations for change put to the Inquiry to address this profound problem, we were clear that there could be no single or simple response. A problem as complex and profound as political disengagement inevitably requires complex and profound solutions. During the course of the Inquiry it gradually became clear that at least three major shifts in the conduct of politics in Britain are required to address the many aspects of disengagement.

Firstly, there needs to be a significant rebalancing of power in Britain to challenge the overwhelmingly dominant position of the Executive relative to Parliament, and of central government relative to local government. Both Parliament and local government should be at the heart of citizen engagement with politics. The former is made up of people who, in theory, represent the views and interests of the 'commons' and the latter is, in theory, the set of institutions which governs the issues and areas which should be of most immediate concern to the great majority of citizens. Yet both bodies have seen their power seriously decline in recent years, making, in effect, the major channels for formal political activity less meaningful and attractive to citizens.

Secondly, the electoral and party systems need reformulating. Most fundamentally, a more open approach to electing our representatives and governments needs to be developed. We currently have a situation where two political parties with severely declining appeal and relevance have managed to maintain their grip on politics purely by virtue of the fact that the electoral system exaggerates their support when votes are translated into seats and removes incentives for

voters to support other parties or candidates. Instead, the electoral and party systems need to become truly responsive to the views and demands of British citizens. This means offering voters a wider and more meaningful choice of parties and candidates, so that new political ideas and alliances can develop to represent and shape the emerging values and interests of the post-industrial era.

Thirdly, institutional and cultural changes must be implemented which place a new emphasis on the requirement that policy and decision-making is never undertaken without rigorous, purposeful input from 'ordinary' citizens. At a time when broad parties and grand ideologies have less resonance than they once did and when many individuals expect control over their own lives, it is vital that clear processes exist for citizens to influence and challenge the specific areas of government and policy that concern them.

It is clear to us that there is an overwhelming desire for change amongst the British people. But there has, as yet, been no clear agenda for what such a change might look like. Part Two of this report is an attempt to identify what might be the key characteristics of this new agenda.

### **What is this report trying to achieve?**

The *Power* Commission agreed early in its life that while it wanted to develop a clear understanding of the causes of political disengagement, the purpose of this was to develop practical and effective recommendations for change rather than just an analysis.

We were also clear that we wanted to develop an approach that drew on as many public and expert submissions and as much rigorous research as possible. However, we did not want the final report to be a huge tome full of academic detail. The report, the Commissioners agreed, should be accessible and direct.

In addition, it also became clear to us that disengagement has very profound social, economic and political roots. Responding to a problem of this profundity and magnitude does not at this moment

require detailed policy formulations. We were unanimous that what was needed was a new agenda for political change that could guide both policy-makers and people who were keen to address the problem.

As a result, this report focuses largely on a set of recommendations. They set out our vision of a new, broad agenda for political reform in Britain designed to re-engage our democracy with the people.

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### **How Did Power Work?**

*Power* was established by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to celebrate their centenaries. Its mission was to understand how participation in British politics could be increased and deepened. To do this it established a Commission of ten people from a variety of social and political backgrounds to consider the evidence generated by the following activities:

- a series of seven meetings across the country at which the Commission questioned 35 witnesses about political participation;
- 143 face-to-face interviews with witnesses conducted by the Inquiry's research team;
- a major review of all relevant literature on the subject of political participation conducted by the Inquiry's research team;
- a process of traditional and on-line public consultation which generated over 1,500 responses;
- a further exercise in public consultation which encouraged people to discuss a series of 'key questions' about political participation at self-organised meetings called 'Democracy Dinners' which led to 400 events across the country;
- a telephone survey of 1,025 people who failed to vote in the

2005 General Election;

- a study collating and assessing over 50 'innovations' in democracy and participation from across the world;
- a practical experiment in innovative political participation, called the Open Budget, conducted in partnership with and funded by the London Borough of Harrow and involving 300 Harrow residents;
- a research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which brought together political party, campaign group and community group activists to discuss their perceptions of local political parties in Birmingham, Glasgow and Somerset;
- a 'Citizens' Panel' based in Newcastle-Gateshead which brought together thirty randomly selected people to discuss the same issues as those being considered by the Commission throughout the life of the Inquiry;
- an international seminar co-funded and organised with British Council Brussels bringing together civil servants from across Europe to discuss policy responses to political disengagement.

All of this work generated over a million words of evidence which was collated under thematic headings for the Commission in eight 'Theme Books' which can now be explored at: [www.powerinquiry.org](http://www.powerinquiry.org). The Commission spent six months deliberating on this evidence and discussing drafts of this report.

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