

A photograph of a woman smiling, wearing a headset with a microphone. The image is overlaid with a quote in white text on a semi-transparent background. The quote is: "Disengagement is not primarily the fault of politicians - the problem is systemic not personal".

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## Conclusion

Midway through its inquiry the *Power* Commission travelled to Manchester to hear witness testimony from a group of people who worked hard to bring about change for their deprived and marginalised communities. We heard from Gaafe Ali, a leading activist in the Sudanese Cultural association, Mandy Powell, who has been at the forefront of regeneration in East Manchester, Nasima Rahman, who works to involve Asian women in community affairs, and Anne Stewart, who works for the greater engagement of women and disabled people with decision-makers.

The following month we travelled to Cardiff where we heard from leading national and local figures in the established political parties. The witnesses included Matt Carter, General Secretary of the Labour Party, Alan Duncan, Conservative Transport Spokesman at that time, Simon Thomas, Plaid Cymru MP for Ceridigion until 2005, and Simon Wakefield, a Liberal Democrat Councillor in Cardiff.

The contrast between these two events was striking. The Manchester witnesses impressed us with their manifestly high levels of commitment to, and understanding of, the needs of their community. These were intelligent, energetic people motivated by humanity and concern for the well-being of others. Equally striking was the fact that they felt that the established parties and processes of democracy, national and local, could offer them little or nothing of great benefit to

their communities. Indeed, there was some strong feeling that formal politics was often a positive barrier to change.

The experience of Manchester only confirmed what we had discovered in so much of the rest of our evidence. A great many British people are active participants in their various and diverse communities, and in many different ways, but formal democracy has become a turn-off of unique proportions.

In Cardiff, we could not help being struck by how willing the witnesses were to acknowledge the problem formal democracy faces. These committed politicians, like most of their contemporaries, know that severe disengagement exists. They also had a thoughtful and sophisticated understanding of why the problem has come about. They knew that peoples' values, expectations, lifestyles and interests had changed dramatically in the last four decades and that the main parties and the political system as a whole were struggling to respond to that.

What was disheartening for us, however, was when the issue of political change was raised. Not only was no clear agenda for reform expressed by either one or the whole panel of politicians, but there was also a resistance, even a tetchiness, when some of the ideas we have been considering were put to the witnesses. Interestingly, it was at this point, that some of the 'red herrings' about the causes of the problem – identified in Part One – emerged in place of the more thoughtful analysis of the earlier discussion. Suddenly, change became a matter for the people rather than the politicians. The Vice Chair of our Commission, Ferdinand Mount, quoted Bertolt Brecht to characterise what he had heard: "Would it not be easier in that case to dissolve the people and elect another?"

It is important to be very clear about what we are saying here because all our experience tells us that **many politicians are very defensive about this problem**. We are not saying that politicians are to blame for disengagement. We have specifically rejected the notion that our elected representatives and leaders are of a lower calibre than

their predecessors. We have rejected the popular view that all politicians lie, break promises and pursue nothing but their own careers.

**The problem is systemic not personal.** Disengagement has arisen because a disjunction now exists between the way formal democratic politics is structured and conducted in Britain and the values, interests, expectations and lifestyles of the British people. The failure of politicians is not the way they behave in their professional lives but the fact that they have not yet developed a strategic and thoroughgoing response to address this disjunction.

The contrast between the witness sessions in Manchester and Cardiff was not between honest, hardworking grassroots activists and evasive, self-interested politicians. The contrast was between active citizens who could not see meaning in formal politics and formal politicians who could not see how they might offer that meaning to those active citizens.

For the politicians' own sake, let alone anyone else's, this is not a situation that can continue. No doubt, the agenda of reform detailed in this report would prove painful for many elected representatives. It amounts not just to a great shift in the culture and ethos of professional politics in Britain but, almost certainly, to a major restructuring of the way in which political parties are aligned and do their campaigning. Of course, other reforms, such as the re-empowering of Parliament and local government relative to the Executive, will be welcome to many MPs and Councillors. The report has been clear, however, that the three big shifts in political practice proposed here cannot be cherry-picked. We are willing to accept that there may be various ways of achieving those shifts beyond the detailed recommendations proposed here, but the shifts themselves must be implemented alongside one another if democratic renewal is to follow.

The politicians might fear the pain of reform, but it would be less than the pain of dismissing change or the prolonged agony of vainly hoping that something will turn up like a new party leader to re-engage British citizens with their democracy. The outcome of inac-

tion will only be ever greater decline in the public esteem in which politicians are held. Ultimately, it is possible that the brief local upsurges in support for anti-democratic and populist parties and candidates will develop into local, regional and even national mutinies as popular disenchantment with the main parties, elections and political decision-making is mobilised and focused.

The potential for this to happen would be magnified vastly should Britain suffer a period of economic slowdown in the future. It would be foolish to underestimate the campaign value to an extremist party or candidate of combining popular economic alienation with the widespread political alienation which the Inquiry has highlighted. The report has already made reference to the research which demonstrated the electoral benefits that this approach had brought to the British National Party in parts of the country.

However, it is clear that **change of the magnitude proposed in this report cannot be left simply to elected representatives**. Certainly, an alliance for change needs to be built amongst the most clear-sighted MPs, local councillors, MEPs and members of the devolved institutions. The power of a growing number of elected representatives getting behind an agenda for democratic renewal would not only bring pressure on our over-mighty Executive but would also show the wider public that the message of disillusion is being taken seriously by some in the political establishment. This, in itself, might, in a small way, start to rebuild trust. Nevertheless, only a sustained campaign for change from outside the democratic assemblies and parliaments of the UK will ensure that meaningful reform occurs. The citizens themselves must be seen to demand this change if it is to have a real impact on decision-makers and prevent the cherry-picking which this report has repeatedly warned against.

Of course, it has long been a claim of politicians and columnists that the wider public are not interested in constitutional reform. The Charter 88 campaign of the 1990s was characterised as a movement of the ‘chattering classes’ while only ‘bread and butter’ issues such as

health, education and jobs mattered to the great majority of citizens.

Two factors render this argument obsolete. Firstly, there is the fact that in 2006, disillusionment with politics and politicians is more intense and widespread than it was even a decade ago. **The appetite for change and the interest shown in proposals for real change are palpable** – they have been felt by the *Power Commission* throughout its inquiry. This appetite and interest come not just from the metropolitan elites but also from the wider country. If anything, it is those elites who have shown themselves to us to be often quite wary of real democratic reform that offers influence to citizens whose views they often don’t trust or dismiss.

Secondly, the recommendations in this report do not amount to constitutional reform as conceived by campaigners in the late 1980s. Fundamentally, we have formulated an agenda which is not about rethinking the relationship between the institutions of the state to promote greater accountability, efficiency or justice – although these are undoubtedly part of the agenda. **What is proposed here is a reformulation of the relationship between citizen and state**, so that democratic reform will ultimately come to mean giving citizens some measure of the influence they want over just those ‘bread and butter’ issues which matter to everybody.

We should be clear this vision is not the activists’ utopia rejected by Anthony Crosland of a “busy, bustling society in which everyone is politically active, and spends his evenings in group discussions”. It is a world where democracy is meaningful in that it offers as many people as possible a real opportunity to have their views taken account of and to effect change either at the points when they feel it is necessary or when their community (local, national, ethnic or any other) is asked to take a crucial decision about its future.

Ultimately, this is why the issue of political disengagement cannot be avoided. **Democracy continues to exist because it allows citizens a collective voice and a point of peaceful negotiation over the issues that affect them**. When this collective voice is not being ex-

pressed efficiently, democracy is threatened. And we cannot improve on Churchill's famous dictum that "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried". We also know that attempts to offer people the services or society they want in other ways – through benevolent autocracy, through bureaucratic edict or through market-driven mechanisms – will ultimately fail without democratic input. Political participation, democracy, effective government and successful societies all live or die together.

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