

POWER Inquiry Witness Session

4.45pm-7.15pm, 23 February 2005

Jolly St Ermin's Hotel, 2 Caxton Street,
London, SW1H 0QW

Digest of Witness Session

This paper provides a detailed summary of the much longer transcript of the witness session by paraphrasing witness answers to specific Commission questions.

Witness

Rt Hon Robin Cook MP

How do you re-engage the public with politicians?

I think there is a real problem but I think you've got to be quite clear that the public is not apathetic. I get very cross when I hear the use of the word 'apathy'. What has happened is there has become a massive distaste and disengagement from party politics.

There are a number of things we can say that would have to be part of any solution:

- The political parties need to change their culture: we are too disciplined and the public find it extremely difficult to understand when they see a politician speaking from the hymn sheet rather than from the heart.
- We are too adversarial.
- We also have perhaps lost the will to be different. There's too much interest at the present time in minimising the differences between us and all trying to stand at the centre ground.
- I think the media have got a lot of responsibility to accept as well. The media is far too negative. If you always serve up the public with a sense of the political process as one of failure, it's hardly surprising you lose confidence in your democratic process. The other big media problem which has been very marked in my time in politics: it has become much more celebrity driven and you end up with a sense of politics as something that top people do.
- There are some institutional changes you could make and of those I put at the top of my list a system of voting which actually resulted in a parliament that properly represented the way the nation voted instead of the present way.

It may have other virtues but the PR doesn't seem to have a particularly brilliant effect on turnout. Why do you think that is or do you think that even so it would have an effect on reviving enthusiasm?

The turnout in Scotland was 15% higher than in the parallel local elections on the same day across England. 15% is not bad. Also, if you do international comparisons, those two countries that have a first-past-the-post system, predominantly the UK and the US, do tend to produce lower turnouts than those other countries, notably on the continent, who use forms of PR.

In a way you have to say that the public are quite rational when they respond to the present system, not turning out in large numbers. In the 67% of public in Liverpool Riverside who didn't vote – in a sense I could understand their position because even if they voted they were going to get one Labour MP and however often they voted they were still going to get one Labour MP.

There is another feature of the electoral system which I find even more insidious, and I think in turn depresses turnout. And that is that the first-past-the-post system makes it rational to hunt for the centre ground because that's the dividing line between Labour and Conservative. And so we put enormous energy, imagination, creativity and money into tracking down the floating voter in the centre ground in the marginal seats. Probably less than 5% of the total electorate and if you look at the message that comes out, it's tailored to that. It's never actually addressing what you might describe as our core vote or indeed the other 90% of the electorate.

And that distinctiveness you think might help to revive party allegiance and party membership, which after all is the more dramatic and more continuous phenomenon of decline than turnout at elections?

I personally would take a dump truck of salt to any series of figures about party membership, because I know from inside how unreliable those figures are. What has changed and that is quite clear is the identification of the supporters in the public has declined and it's that strong identification with political parties that is all part of that miasma of alienation from party politics and therefore the political process.

The government in many ways embraced a platform of constitutional reform and has done lots of things on that front. All of this supposedly being about more power in the hands of the people. And yet it still hasn't done much to stem the flow of the growing alienation. If it was argued that that would be a way of revitalising a system, a new architecture would actually engage people more and yet it doesn't seem to have had that effect.

I do think you can argue that in some respects they have actually resulted in a regeneration of democracy. Certainly if you take the specific case of Scotland which I know well as I am a Scottish MP, there is no doubt whatsoever that the devolution of Scotland has revitalised politics in Scotland. And, because of the proportional system, has given us an even more colourful Scottish parliament than we anticipated at the time when we created it.

No, it hasn't cracked the alienation that you've described and as I said earlier I think to tackle that you'd probably need a change in the culture more than a change in the actual mechanics of how we go about the constitution. That doesn't mean to say that the remaining reforms of unfinished business are not important and helpful to that task.

You have certainly put your cards on the table about wanting to have a fully elected house. Would it solve any of these problems?

I wouldn't want to exaggerate any one particular course of action we might want to take but I think it could make a contribution for a start. It actually doesn't much help in terms of respect for parliament that we have one chamber of parliament to which absolutely nobody is elected at the present time. And I do think those of my colleagues who worry about a democratic and therefore legitimate second chamber becoming a rival to the Commons are missing the real threat. The real threat is not actually the Lords getting above themselves; the real threat at the moment to parliament is the public losing any interest in parliament and if we actually had a more vibrant, colourful, democratic second chamber – that might help.

Taking that scenario of a majority-elected second chamber, isn't the problem then that the pool from which you are taking those elected members – from party members – is dwindling? And therefore the calibre of person that we have a choice to vote for is getting weaker and not giving us the choice of people that we may want to fill a second chamber with?

I personally don't have a sense that there's a dearth of talent of people wanting to get into parliament. And I think that if you had a second chamber which was deliberative, inquisitive, but which was not itself seen as part of the ladder up into government, there would be a different type of person who might be interested in making contribution to a political debate with a little bit of character.

Do you think there is a dearth in local government? And is there a way of attracting the talent and decentralising? Is the agenda of what's called the *new localism* part of your prescription for that?

To be frank I think this can too easily turn into the *new centralism*, because what the advocates of the *new localism* are proposing is that you have a direct relationship between Whitehall and schools, Whitehall and hospitals, Whitehall and the other institutions of local services, without it being mediated by the local authority carrying out its own distinctive and different strategies.

I think a genuine localism essentially would revive interest and enthusiasm in local democracy. But people will go on to local government if they believe there is a real job to be done and in which they can make a real difference by pioneering different policies and being creative for the local area. And I do worry that we are in danger of too trammelling our freedom of discretion, the room for manoeuvre of local authorities.

Do you feel that lowering the voting age to 16 would make a significant difference especially if there better education in schools about how important the vote was, etc?

I think one has to face the reality that if you lower the voting age to 16, you are likely to result in a lower turnout than otherwise.

We now have a far better educated populace with people who can access information much more readily. Politicians are in their face because they're in their sitting rooms on the television. Do you think that representative democracy does its job effectively - or do you think that we have to revisit the old form of participative democracy?

Well I don't think you need to make a choice between them. I mean I think you first of all cannot in a nation of 60 million people walk away from representative democracy. You can't actually make a nation this big work on the basis of a universal referendum on every major question. But that doesn't mean to say you shouldn't actually experiment in other ways in which you can both involve the public and also find ways in which the public can express their views. And I think there is a lot to be said for citizens' juries in which one assesses some of the problems with people who themselves may not have strong views and may not be confronted with a dilemma and coming up with a solution.

You've touched on what I think is a serious issue and it's one to which there is no flip answer. I think it's as well to be honest about it. Our society has dramatically changed since the middle of the twentieth century, which we can see as the high point of the two-party system and identification of the public with it. The Labour government in 1945 was elected operating in the context of a command economy in which the government operated something like two thirds of the total economy: 7 million of the public had been conscripted; there was a very strong sense of solidarity and collectivism; and most people worked in very large places of employment. All of that is dramatically different; we live in a much more individualist society and can't avoid the fact that the universal franchise for the election for the government by process of 40 million people going out and casting their vote is the mother of all collective decision making. And if people have no experience and no cultural participation in collective decision making, it is difficult to get them to accept that that is the way in which they should behave once every four years.

If that's the case then, does that mean that the ideologies behind the two major parties are outdated, are irrelevant?

Everything is wrong with dogma but there's nothing wrong with ideology as a statement of visions and values and principle. And I think there is a very serious problem at the present time in that neither of the two major parties has a quite coherent message about its values and visions and principle. And if you want people to identify with what you stand for, you need to be able to demonstrate that.

Parliament has a whip system which is very disempowering for many people. It would be helpful to have your views on that?

First of all there is no correlation between the adversarial system and a sense of having your own strong sense of value and vision.

You can't have a mass representative democracy on the basis of 40 million voters voting for 1,000 different candidates who then operate as individual people once they get into parliament. As I said earlier the political parties are part of the problem, we need to change our culture. If you want to have a healthy democracy you do need mediating organisations that make it possible to do so. If we are going to have a real sensible choice at elections, when you vote for a party candidate you need to have some idea that they are broadly in line with the party programme – otherwise what are you getting

for your vote. And although I'm all in favour of us cutting more slack in the system and finding more freedom, we cannot allow that to degenerate into anarchy.

So you would still have whips in the House of Lords?

If you have people elected on a party ticket you are going to have a party system in the House of Lords – and I'm in favour of that. But what would be dramatically different about the House of Lords is that you would have it elected on a proportional system. Therefore unlike the House of Commons, no one party would ever have a majority whether or not it was in government.

What about the whole business of using the internet, using digital technology, having electronic voting, sitting in your armchair and not having to go to the polling booth? What do you feel about all of that stuff? Because those are the things that are rolled out often by politicians as being the answer, the convenience answer, to disengagement?

As a means of voting: I personally was quite enthusiastic about this when I was in government and indeed for a while I was Chairman of the Cabinet Committee on New Democracy. But I have to say that actually experiments that have been carried out on electronic voting have been a little bit disappointing, and those places that had electronic voting have resulted in a 2% lift in turnout. Now 2% is worthwhile, but it's modest.

What has made a big difference to turnout unquestionably is postal voting; which in a sense comes closer to the model you described in that you get the ballot paper through your letterbox and you can put it back in the post box and that has greatly increased turnout.

And yes there are the issues of concern about postal voting that are set out in the Electoral Commission Report. I think there is a concern that we can address and should address, but nothing is more corrupt than ending up with local authorities with multi-million pound budgets being returned on a 30% turnout. If we can turn that round to a 60% turnout by postal ballots, it's worthwhile trying to find a way in which we can make that work with confidence and I'm all for it.

Do you think compulsory voting is a good idea?

No. The right to abstain has to be a very important fundamental democratic right. I want people to vote; I want people to vote because they choose to vote, they've got the motivation to vote, I don't particularly want them to vote because they're terrified of the £200 fine if they don't vote. And I also think if they're going to go along to the polling station, you can go in the knowledge there's something we want to support, there's something we want to express: if you're simply corralling them into the polling station and say 'sign there' then they may well find themselves tempted to do something that is not serious.

On the back of what you were saying earlier about differences in party identification: what's your opinion about the rising role of interest groups, and do you think that's a positive thing?

I welcome the development of interest groups. I mean I think frankly if the public can get engaged in the political process in any shape or form, for instance through an

organisation to campaign for a better bus service or for more recycling... anything like that which makes the connection between what they feel, what they believe in, what they do and what the outcome is, that's healthy and that's positive. You can then build on that for local wider engagement, quite apart from the fact because the end in itself is worthwhile. So, I'm all in favour of that. I do think that one of the big problems with democracy is actually not so much people joining these interest groups or being active in that different way but the failure of people to join any organisation.

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