

POWER Inquiry Witness Session

4.45pm-7.15pm, 23 February 2005

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

Rt Hon Robin Cook MP

Abbreviations

AM	Audience Member [individual names indicated]	
BF	Ben Freeman	Commissioner
BM	Bano Murtuja	Commissioner
EB	Emma B	Commissioner
FM	Ferdinand Mount	Commissioner
FOG	Frances O'Grady	Commissioner
HK	Helena Kennedy	Commissioner
PC	Phil Carey	Commissioner
RC	Robin Cook	Witness

HK: Can I welcome all of you to this evidence session, of the Power Inquiry. For those of you who are new to these events, the Power Inquiry was established and has been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. This is their centenary anniversary and they have made the Power Inquiry their big initiative for this year. And the purpose of the Power Inquiry is to look at the state of democracy in Britain and the questions that we've been asking of the public and of experts so far have been about the declining turnout at elections, about a sense of disenchantment and distrust of politics and politicians.

And so we are very honoured that tonight, Robin Cook, former cabinet minister who is known to all of you, who's been a strong supporter of constitutional reform, who's a real believer in the political party system and who's been writing regularly in The Independent and now more recently in The Guardian in a regular column about the political issues of the day and particularly around these issues of revitalising democracy and re-engaging the public, the citizen, with the political parties and in turn with government.

HK: So Robin can I start – and forgive my informality – but you're an old colleague, can I ask you first of all about your sense of the malaise that we have been identifying in the general public. This concern that's been expressed about not being listened to: how do you re-engage the public with politicians?

RC: I think there is a real problem, there's no two ways about that, 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'. The public, in my judgement, has actually never been more interested in politics, and you can measure that in a number of different ways: they sign petitions more, they write to their MPs more than ever before, they go on demonstrations – the demonstration against Iraq dwarfed any previous record by two or three or four times, even more than the number that went on Suffragette rallies. So there's a willingness of the public to become engaged in a political issue and indeed to participate in lobby groups. What has happened is there has become a massive distaste and disengagement from party politics.

Now there's no magic bullet to that and I wish I could offer you a five point programme that would then solve the problem, I can't but I think there are a number of things we can say that would have to be part of any solution. First of all, the political parties need to change their culture and I think a culture change perhaps is more important than an institutional change. I think the truth is that 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. And possibly my own party has embraced pasteurised politics in precisely the wrong moment secularly in our society. The public want to hear more people speaking frankly and openly.

I think we are too adversarial, we are too inclined to spend time finding fault with the other side, rather than playing at our own strengths – and you can see that in some of the criticism around the current general election campaign we're

experiencing at the present time. And I think 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, but I think nothing is more corrosive in British politics than importing the American system of triangulation, of trying to cross dress and sound like your opponents. If we want to animate the public, we want to show that there is actually something different, distinctive for them to identify with us, we have to appear different.

I think the media have got a lot of responsibility to accept as well. I think that politicians need to change but so does the media. The media is far too negative. There was a fascinating study of two weeks in the press in 2003 compared with 1974, and it found that for the same two weeks in 1974 there was a ratio of negative/positive stories at 3:1, but by 2003 the ratio was 18:1. Now one of the many puzzling things about this is I was around in 1974 and there was an awful lot to be negative about in 1974 [laughter] and it's certainly not the case that things were six times more negative in 2003! But 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. And then I think the other big media problem which has been very marked in my time in politics: it has become much more celebrity driven. They're much more interested in who's on the way up, who's on the way down, who's on the way out – and you end up with a sense of politics as something that top people do; it's not something that actually belongs to the masses out there and you also end up writing about politics as process rather than outcome.

Now both I think politicians and the media need to change if we're going to address this problem and those are cultural issues. 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.

FM: You are one of the few leading politicians who has consistently offered a programme of reform for reviving politics and, as you say, electoral reform has always been at the heart of that. One of the things that we've noticed in all the evidence that we've had is that it may have other virtues but the PR doesn't seem to have a particularly brilliant effect on turnout, whether measured in the Scottish elections or the Welsh elections. Why do you think that is or do you think that even so it would have an effect on reviving enthusiasm?

RC: Well, I would dispute your premise. The turnout in Scotland was 15% higher than in the parallel local elections on the same day across England. 15% is not bad. It's less than the first time round, that's true – but then the scale at that turnout the first time around surprised us. You know there is quite a significant indication that the voter system in Scotland has actually encouraged turnout. And, by the way, I don't think any political party would get away with seriously tampering with the idea that you have a Scottish parliament elected from a proportional basis, from a first-past-the-post basis. 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; so there was no way in which if all 100% of them voted, it would have had a different impact on the make-up of the House of Commons.

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. That I think is part of the reason why British politics has become so pasteurised and lacking in colour and lacking in anything that might be regarded as different and distinct, because the people might respond to that message and impact on the character and the ones with character are the ones in the centre of homogenised opinion.

FM: 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?

RC: 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. I mean the Labour party only in relatively recent times has actually had individual membership. We used to have the wonderful fiction that every party had 1000 members and indeed you could go round to party committee rooms and disappear under membership cards pouring on top of you in an avalanche. The Conservative party has only recently introduced actually charging a subscription for membership. So to be honest figures going back more than 20 years for party membership are totally and utterly meaningless. I suspect we have always had a relatively small percentage of the population actually as card carrying members of a party.

What has changed and that is quite clear is the identification of the supporters in the public has declined – and you can chart that quite markedly. I mean if you go back to the end of the Attlee government, at that time something like 90% of the population were strongly identifying with one or other of the major two parties. Even in the Thatcher period it was something like half. It's now less than a third and falling. 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.

HK: Can I ask you about the business of constitutional reform with which you have been very strongly identified? I mean the government in many ways embraced a platform of constitutional reform and has done lots of things on that front in that we've had the Human Rights Act, we've had devolution, Lord's reform. 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.

RC: Well first of all, the changes we made were right to do and I don't think we should recoil in any way from that. And 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 has resulted in a focus for the debate of Scotland that was not there before. 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. So we've got a significant number of parties and minorities like the Green Party... do not misunderstand me, I do not vote for the Green Party, nor will vote for the Green Party, but they have a proper meaningful contribution to Scottish politics and I think the electoral system that enables those who want a Green party representative to have it, is a useful part of the regeneration of democracy.

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. I do strongly think that a change in our electoral system is an important part if we want to revitalise interest in the parliament. The first-past-the-post system plainly is increasingly creaking and groaning as it tries to cope with the plurality of modern British politics. It's a system that works well with a two-party system, but we barely have a two-party system now. In the European Elections last year the total vote for the two major parties actually fell below 50%. It won't be like that with the coming General Election but I would not be surprised if the aggregate vote of Labour and Conservative was to decline, which I can say with some confidence because if queried by the press office I can always say that the Tory side would suffer more than ourselves. But I think you'll see an increasing tendency for people to vote for the third party option, which means the first-past-the-post system becomes increasingly difficult to cope with that pluralism of public choice.

HK: Can I just ask you about House of Lords reform so that we don't leave that one behind? You have certainly put your cards on the table about wanting to have a fully elected house. Would it solve any of these problems?

RC: Well, actually, it's interesting, this morning we had a debate which I started in Westminster Hall on a package of proposals that a number of us have signed up to and published on Monday. It's a matter of regret that it didn't actually get the coverage in the press that possibly we feel it deserves ...

FM: You can have it now.

RC: Well that's very kind of you!

[Laughter]

RC: And it's also the case that we had a full debate in Westminster Hall with the parliamentary reporter there from Hansard, but I rather suspect from the point of view of the press we had our meeting in total privacy, which is sad and unfortunate. I mean one of the problems that we now have actually is that when the national papers report what they call "politics", they don't actually report parliament, they report what they claim to see happening in the corridors of power rather than actually what's happening before their noses in the parliamentary democracy.

Well the package that a number of us have signed up to provides for a majority-elected second chamber. We have not gone for a wholly-elected second chamber because we recognise there are a number of people who feel that there should be an alternative entry into the second chamber – for instance through a statutory appointments committee, appointing independent people who have ability and have something to contribute but would never ever dream of standing for election. Now I personally don't have a problem with that, provided you're clear about the principle on which you have based your second chamber which is it must be democratic, which can only be achieved if the great majority of those in it are there by election. There are lots of hybrid second chambers around the world; there's no reason why you shouldn't have that degree of hybridity here provided you're clear what the organising principle is, which is elections.

Would it make a difference? Well, look, 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. No disrespect to you, Helena, and to all the excellent people who are currently in the House of Lords but an average age of 69 does not help to bridge the need to encourage young people to take an interest in what goes on in parliament.

HK: I can only tell you that it's very rejuvenating for someone like me to be one of the young ones there!

[Laughter]

RC: There was an elderly Labour MP who when taking constituents around the Houses of Westminster, when he got into the House of Lords would say "This is the final proof that there is life after death".

[Laughter]

HK: Emma?

EB: 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 want to fill a second chamber with?

RC: Well first of all – purely as an arithmetic proposition, our proposal will result in a smaller aggregate total in the two chambers. Indeed one of our problems at the present time is that the second chamber is far too large. There are very few countries in the world in which the second chamber is actually larger than the first chamber and that's what we have in Britain. And we propose a dramatic reduction in the numbers, so in fact it should be easier, not more difficult to staff.

I personally don't have a sense that there's a dearth of talent of people wanting to get into parliament. I think the '97 intake was actually quite bright and quite energetic and quite talented and I have a lot of respect for them. 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.

HK: If we did it your way and we had proportional representation – a party list – then the power goes back to the party to choose the people who would be on those lists. And so anybody who might be out of kilter, the independent voice, the colourful character that you have described, the person that isn't all teeth and smiles and telegenic, but who's got interesting things to say, might not be the person chosen by the parties to be on those lists. Is that not a risk?

RC: Well that is certainly the kind of person you would get if you had an all-appointed a second chamber. I mean that's what the alternative is. In terms of how you do the election, you don't have to do it by party lists. We actually floated this morning that our preferred form of proportional representation might have been the single transferable vote, because that enables you, that enables the public, to make their choice between the parties and does not have you voting by a party list. And that could enable each region to produce one or more members from a minority to represent the third-party alternatives. It would also mean that every single candidate would have a strong incentive to maximise their own profile and their own appeal rather than simply the party's appeal, because on an STV basis I think it's quite competitive.

FM: If there isn't a dearth of good people seeking to get into one or either Houses of Parliament, do you think there is a dearth in local government? And is there a way of attracting the talent and decentralising? I mean is the agenda of what's called the *new localism* part of your prescription for that?

RC: I'm personally a bit of a heretic with the *new localism*. 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.

FM: So a genuine localism would be something quite different?

RC: I think a genuine localism essentially would revive interest and enthusiasm in local democracy. And I have got to say here with a strong degree of respect for people in local government and I myself was a councillor before I became a Member of Parliament and I have immense affection and respect for local government...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.

I think, for instance, if you take one of the big issues of debate within education, the Labour government of the 1960s that pioneered comprehensive education on a national basis did not think it up itself – it didn't get elected with this new policy. It was actually acting with what had been done by the Labour councils up and down the land already, and had provided local pathways to do what was then adopted as a national policy. It's a bit challenging now to think of any significant number of Local Authorities feeling that they have freedom, the financial room for manoeuvre, the initiative, in order to do something quite so radical as introduce the equivalent of comprehensive education on their own, that's what Local Authorities were doing 40 years ago.

FM: And how do you revive that self-confidence? By a self-denying ordinance or lack of ordinances from Whitehall?

RC: Yes, I mean you have also to understand that it's not simply the politicians in Whitehall who are able to make that decision, in all fairness to them. We have also got to recognise that what happens on the ground is the responsibility of the local democracy, of the local people and the local politicians. Part of the reason why Whitehall keeps putting its nose in is because it knows it is likely to get kicked up the backside by the press if anything goes wrong anywhere in Britain. And if you're made to take the rap for it, then one's going to try and prevent it from going wrong in the first place. So, it is a two way street. I do think but yes you need to restore freedom to the local authorities but you have to accept if you do that, that means local authorities are going to be different and you've got to stop worrying if some of them are different from others.

HK: Robin, Philip here is involved in his local youth parliament and he's got an issue that he'd like to raise with you.

PC: I've been following the government quite closely on its views on voting at 16, and I was just wondering what your take on this was? 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?

RC: To be honest it's an issue with which I am rather agnostic. We talked earlier about the question of turnout and I'm passionately concerned we should try and do everything we can to raise turnout. From all we know about the representative vote of younger people, 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. Now, maybe that shouldn't bother us, maybe the fact that 20-30% of 16 year olds voted

would be regarded as a sufficient gain; but you have to accept that the impact on the overall turnout would be to depress the general percentage figures.

HK: One of the things that has become very clear in our evidence sessions is that people have changed. 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, and they feel to be asked to vote once every four years is really not enough. 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?

RC: 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. Once you stop having a democracy mediated through elected representatives, you no longer actually have a functioning democratic system. You can't actually make a nation this big work on the basis of a universal referendum on every major question. And in any case what the evidence says, is that the public don't particularly like being invited to come out and vote all that very often, even if they dislike it being only ever 4 years.

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... and certainly should not themselves be party political figures... being confronted with a dilemma and coming up with a solution. It has shaken-up the debate in other countries and we should try it here.

I think it's also noticeable that in some places where we have provided direct forms of localised democracy there have been some quite impressively high turnouts - for instance in the election of the boards of regeneration programmes. That does show that when people believe that their vote has a direct bearing on something of immediate consequence to them, then they do see the importance of their vote and they accept the relevance of representative democracy.

To be sure, Helena, 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.

EB: If that's the case then, does that mean that the ideologies behind the two major parties are outdated, are irrelevant? And, if so, what do you replace it with? How do you then differentiate? What do you use to differentiate if those basic ideologies are not relevant in the same way now that they were 50 years ago, 60 years ago?

RC: Well it would be quite pointless to try and produce a party picture which was now class based, because those classes are to a large extent part of history. And, frankly, I think it's entirely for the good – that class no longer needs to be the sole determiner of how people cast their vote or choose their parties. I think that is a healthy development. That doesn't mean to say though that you should not have a very clear distinction between the vision and the values, to use your words, 'the ideological basis' of the British parties.

I think I would slightly disagree with the way in which you pose your question, in that in the last 10 years we have drifted into a sort of post-ideology politics. And Mrs Thatcher did give ideology a bad name. Now, 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.

EB: But is that possible?

RC: It is possible.

EB: How, is that possible? I'm just interested, sorry!

RC: No it's a perfectly reasonable; perfectly fair question. It's possible and we have done it in the very recent past. Indeed, to take my example, Mrs Thatcher had no difficulty demonstrating that she had a coherent set of values and principles and vision. And, indeed, one of the features of Mrs Thatcher was even if you didn't know what her policy was, you could always predict what she was going to do in a certain set of circumstances, and you knew what the animating principle would be. Now there was a clarity there – I personally disagree with much of what she did, but you knew where she was coming from. I think now, we are perhaps a little bit too timid in making it clear that we do have a set of principles and values which we stand for. And we have many people in the House of Commons who have no difficulty expressing that individually but we perhaps need to get better expressing it as a party.

We also need to have courage if we are going to do that. And to go back to what I said earlier, we have got to stop constantly chasing the centre ground full of people with no particular fixed political views. And if we regard them as the sole people we're trying to scoop, then we end up soft-peddling what we believe in, which is not actually healthy for democracy and certainly not good for animating the masses of the public who might be identifying with one or another of the two parties. We need to be different, so that people can have a choice.

HK: But following up Emma's point about the way in which ideology has disappeared out of politics: do you think that its return would mean that people would join political parties? You said earlier that the numbers were always a bit questionable anyway about those who belonged. But do you think that there can be again a powerful set of parties? Do you think there is life to be breathed back into them?

RC: Well, look, it's always very good to have a large number of people in your party, and please don't misunderstand me, I'm not against that – I'm all in favour of it. You couldn't necessarily mistake it with a healthy and functioning mass democracy. In the period in my experience in the Labour party when we had the largest attendance and the largest meetings – and if you like the most vibrant internal democracy – was in the early 80s when we used to meet regularly to beat each other about the head. And I remember those meetings vividly; we used to get attendances in my constituency party which would dwarf anything I can contemplate now. We would all put on our helmets and get our shields and go in there and thump each other heartily. On one occasion I remember sitting through an hour's debate as to whether I had the right to speak since I wasn't actually a delegate to the constituency party even if I was its MP.

[Laughter]

RC: This was a terrifically exciting time but it was not really a healthy democratic representative democracy. And I'm slightly doubtful Helena if the test of a strong democracy is how many people are joining political parties. I think how many people identify with these parties, who trust in them, feel that they speak for them and represent them is a very important consideration – but the number that actually join I think is a lesser part of the picture.

FM: But weren't those times of gathered shields precisely the times of passion and commitment and distinctiveness, flourishing as never before and certainly not since? And as you say they didn't exactly produce great connection between the party activists and the ordinary voters?

RC: I agree with you, but I'm not entirely sure why you think I should disagree with it. There was undoubtedly a problem then that we were talking to ourselves, we were not talking to other people. I did actually hear one famous national figure on that occasion say "We must never compromise with the electorate".

[Laughter]

RC: How do they actually think that democracy works! But it's one thing to say regarding vision and principles we should have connecting ideologies; it's quite another to say that we then spend our time discussing it among ourselves rather than portraying it to the public outside.

BF: Robin, can I ask you a question? I share the nostalgia of visionaries and believe in that idea and I agree with that and I think it is a good way of engaging people. Where I have trouble with this is that it makes the debate more sterile than when you actually discuss things because you end up having a polarity of views. The parliament has a whip system which is equally disempowering to people and I can't quite square the two ideas. It would be helpful to have your views on that?

RC: First of all there is no correlation between the adversarial system and a sense of having your own strong sense of value and vision. Indeed it is one of the mystifying features of Parliament that sometimes those MPs who do not appear to have a particularly deep sense of value and vision are the most partisan and play the party political game with the greatest aggression. And you've mentioned whips: some of the people in the whips' office might fit that bill...

[Laughter]

RC: I couldn't possibly comment on that! We've got to be realistic. 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. But perhaps one of the things we also need to do is just to make a positive case for the things that are creative about the political parties – 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.

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

RC: 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 that we proposed this morning is that you would have elected a proportional system. Therefore unlike the House of Commons, no one party would ever have a majority whether or not it was in government.

I think there's a separate question about which I have no fixed dogmatic views as to whether or not you should have any Ministers in the second chamber. I mean there are some people who argue that if you cleared up the Ministers, and you were then left with something more close, more analogous say to the congress of the United States, you would have a body that recognised its job to keep tabs on the executive, rather than being prescriptive about the executive.

FM: You said a little bit about referendums and participatory democracy and policy. Do I detect you're a little tepid about them as kind of...about local referendums and those sort of things?

HK: And citizens' assemblies...

RC: No I'm not against citizens' assemblies. Indeed I referred earlier to citizens' juries. I think that experimenting in those ways of participatory democracy are worthwhile and could actually cut both ways. It could also help government and those who make decisions to have a better fix on what is the public opinion. It could also be a way which is much desired of helping to educate public opinion in

what the real choices are. And every member of parliament is familiar with the fact that our electorate broadly speaking would want better services and lower taxes, and they want both at the same time.

Now bringing people face to face with the real dilemmas that if you make choice A then the consequence of B also flows from it. I think can be valuable and citizens' assemblies and juries can do that. I'm not hostile to referendums; indeed, in my time, from time to time I've called for a referendum. I do worry about it becoming too much part of the political system and indeed I wonder if our willingness to resort to referendums isn't in part an expression of our declining trust in confidence in parliament to make complex judgements for us.

HK: 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?

RC: Well politics is about communication and there's no doubt about it that the internet is an extraordinary tool of communication... and of the kind that is going to revolutionise communication ultimately probably more than anything we've seen since the invention of printing. And it is a two way process of communication, a multiple means of communication, and I think that will have a profound effect on politics over a period of time.

Actually where it's made a big impact already in the United States is that, although there may be very few people who actually join political parties and this is markedly true in the United States, there has sprung up in the United States quite a number of different internet-based organisations campaigning for a particular political perspective. The MoveOn organisation [MoveOn.org] in the United States has become like a surrogate Democrat Party and certainly could be described as being to the left of the Democrat vote. And it is very large, very influential, very active and also very participatory – because it's the nature of that organisation on the internet that you can participate in it. And I think that will happen here and I think that's also good.

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. Now there are famously problems that come with postal balloting but the gain in turnout is so big that I think it's one that we have to pursue.

- HK: I'm going to turn this over to our audience because I'm sure that people have questions for you while we've still got you. Right let's start with the young woman on the right?
- AM: I'd like to hear your views about engaging the black community who are less likely to vote?
- HK: Right, the gentleman with the glasses?
- AM: At the General Election I have a choice between Labour led by Blair, who used deception to take us into an unwise war, competing with the Tories on the centre-ground. Labour has also failed to honour its promise to give us a referendum on electoral reform as it seems that we only have a chance of electoral reform if we have a hung parliament. I'm wondering who to vote for as a democratic socialist.
- HK: Right, more questions: the gentleman with the beard there?
- AM: For your information Oregon was the first state in the United States to introduce postal voting. And the trend there although there was an initial increase in turnout, has now begun to decline. So in actual fact it hasn't made any difference in the long run. I just wanted to make another point and that is that in 1975...
- HK: A point or question? Because this is evidence and I want my witnesses...
- AM: This is a question. In 1975 the French National Assembly banned the use of postal ballots on demand as being intrinsically corrupt and liable to electoral fraud. Also, ballots which were introduced on demand in this country in 2000...and there was absolutely no opposition in the Westminster parliament to this. So I'd like to know how does Robin Cook explain the fact that the International Assembly unanimously banned the use of postal ballots on demand as being intrinsically corrupt, and the Westminster parliament had no opposition at all from any MP?
- HK: The gentleman over there with the glasses?
- AM: A question from Wendy Stern from Sheffield: dissatisfied with politics and the administration...why should I be interested in voting for any party? From what I can see that's supporting the administration both at local and national level. All parties seem to be unable to implement the spirit of the legislation.
- HK: Okay, the woman in the second row?
- AM: I would just like to question Robin Cook on his comment about votes at 16. I'm actually a member of the Youth Parliament in South East Bridlington and I know for a fact that Kent actually got more votes in its election for youth parliament than it did in its general election. That's an age range of 11 to 18. So I'd like to question your comment about voting at 16 saying it won't give a good turnout because if we can get more votes between 11 to 18 year olds than we can in 18+, then why aren't we doing it?

HK: I've got to go a bit further back and bring some hands in... the woman on the end of the row?

AM: I'm just very interested in dualism in politics. Whenever you go to a meeting it's always a two-party system and the effect of that on the media, you simply get very little coverage of the third party, which is particularly important now for some of us who find after the Iraqi War that the bottom line has been crossed. But we aren't getting coverage of a real alternative because the media doesn't cover it because they stick to the two main parties.

HK: Yes, concentration around the two main parties. Red arm up there?

AM: Okay probably more a comment rather than a question.

HK: I don't want comments, I only want questions! Sorry I'm going somewhere else!

AM: I can rephrase it!

[Laughter]

HK: It had better be a good question!

AM: Okay, simply, why should we, the general citizen, the general public, be concerned about voting in parliament no matter which method we choose? In the parliament we vote for, whether it's left or right, they're busy eroding our civil liberties in one way or another. How do you get around that?

HK: How does democracy of this kind protect civil liberties... The gentleman at the end of that row, yes?

AM: I'm initially from Australia, where voting is compulsory, and I was wondering whether you think that's a good idea?

HK: The hand here four or five rows back?

AM: I'd just be interested to hear Robin Cook's opinion on the line of argument that voter apathy could be seen as a positive thing, indicating a general consensus with a stable polity?

HK: A happy populace!

[Laughter]

HK: Right, green arm towards the back?

AM: Mr Cook, the electorate in Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales have two votes, one for their parliament and one for UK government: when will someone offer me an English parliament?

HK: England! Okay, great, a hand down here in the middle?

AM: 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?

HK: Interest groups rather than parties: what's their role in all of this? The chap with the lilac shirt?

AM: A very, very brief point from the Inquiry's briefing research paper: there was a section where it said that "a lot of the dislocation may have occurred as a result of the dissonance between the type of politics which was designed for a world of deference to authority and loyalty to the group"...

HK: End of deference, yes... I don't want you to read the paper out to us!

Am: No this is a point... "and the contemporary world of self-worth, choice and individualism" ...Can individualised and personalised, popular democracy ever exist or is that an oxymoron?

HK: The world has changed, the visions of what will make us all happy are as individualised as can be. How can you create some kind of political ideal which is going to be about the good life when everybody is going after their own individualised good life? Okay, I think I'm going to have to draw this down and ask Robin to answer because he's on to his last five minutes, thank you.

RC: Well let's be realistic in that I think a lot of what we heard from the floor was perfectly valid and obviously sincerely held views, and I respect those views. I think of those expressing those views, they don't really expect me to convince them otherwise in the course of the three minutes in which I respond. But let me try and respond to those points which came in the form of genuine questions.

First of all, 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. There is an American writer who has actually argued that if people even join the bowling club, they're more likely to go out and vote because it gets them into social capital. I wouldn't go quite as far as that, but I do think that a society where most people don't join organisations, don't take part in a campaigning, is going to have difficulty sustaining a functioning democracy.

The English can have an English Parliament whenever they want to as far as I'm concerned. Believe me, if it comes before parliament, I'll happily put up my hand for it.

AM: So you'll sign my petition!

[Laughter]

RC: That's a different question; I'm not myself English you see!

[Laughter]

RC: We have ours and it's not the Scots that are stopping the English getting their parliament. But I do think you have also got to accept the consequences of that; which is that the Westminster parliament is not your English parliament, the Westminster parliament is the British parliament and if you have a separate English parliament – and I can see the merits of it – you're not going to have Westminster as it, you have to start by recognising it's going to be something different.

Frankly, I'm disappointed that the North East of England did not go for a regional assembly. I do think one of the problems of our democracy in Britain is that England – by which I mean England, not Britain – England is now, along with France, the spectacularly most centralised state in Europe. All other states of Europe have very strong forms of decentralisation of devolution. Notably Germany – and we tend to talk about the German model and forget that actually we invented the German model when we were in control of Germany, but we forgot about it when we came home!

On the question of the apathy: first of all I don't like the word 'apathy' and I don't think the public is apathetic. I mean the public has quite strong views and it's quite interesting we're actually having this debate of the difficulty of our democracy at a time when the public has been better educated and probably better informed than they were before, and it has significant striking views on its own. So I don't like the word 'apathy'. I am not sure I'm convinced it's because they're happy. Perhaps I meet the wrong kind of elector. But it is I think the case that we are in danger of taking our democracy for granted. It's quite striking if you look at those countries that have had to fight for democracy and have recently got democracy, they do tend to produce quite substantially high turnouts. We, I think, are in danger of taking our democracy for granted and therefore putting our democracy at risk. It's not a universal truth, it's striking that in Europe, the country with the highest percentage turnout is actually Italy, well over 80%. At the last Italian general election some voters queued for 2 hours to cast their vote. It's difficult to conceive of us achieving such a display of commitment in our British polling stations. Now it's not initially obvious what it is about Italian politics that motivates and mobilises the public to turnout in those numbers, but there is something they're doing right that we are not actually getting right.

Should voting be compulsory? No. And 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.

HK: That fits into a question that Barbara has been aching to ask!

BG: Well thinking that the general election is not too far away: do you have any suggestions for all the parties on how they can engage the disenchanted voter in the run up to the general election? Should they perhaps use the system used in the American election recently of cold calling?

RC: I think we are doing cold calling. In fact thinking about this at the time the election comes around, you may begin to regret your question! Spectacularly on one occasion we did a spot of cold calling at 3 o'clock in the morning, which I don't think enhanced the vote!

[Laughter]

RC: No, you'll find that they've been exploiting the new technology of telephonic communication: we all get cold-calling, we'll get them ringing up, you'll get a lot more direct mail, you'll get internet communications. The last election we actually text messaged to a lot of the younger voters and we'll no doubt do so again next time round, which I think is fine. I think since politics is about communication, you have to exploit the new forms of communication and you'd be wrong not to do so.

I don't actually think that's a fundamental issue though. I think the fundamental issue is what is the message you're giving – what is it that you are trying to sell and what is the mode by which you are selling it? And I don't myself think that we will get back the disengaged voter by the negative campaigning of attacking the other side. If you spend the next two months thumping lumps off each other, all we'll do in those two months is convince the public that they're probably right and they'll have a distaste for both of us.

A few other points, if I canter through them quickly Helena: it's interesting what was said about 16 year olds voting, the higher proportion than others – that's a very interesting piece of data which we can consider and examine. It is certainly the case that if you go down the age groups, of those who have a vote at present, the further down the age group you go the lower the turnout: those below 25 voted about 40% in the last election as opposed to 60% for those of 30+. Now it maybe there's a kink in the graph that below 18 it turns up again – and I'm very happy to entertain that possibility, and to have a look at it – but I do think we've got to be clear that if we want to improve the turnout, then we've got to be careful of any step we take that may actually depress rather than increase that turnout.

Two or three people asked me how to vote. There's only one possible answer I can give you! *[Laughs]* I'm surprised you've asked me, just vote Labour! Nobody needs to lecture me on what happened in Iraq. Iraq was a career-changing event for me and I have no regrets about that at all. I believe that I did the right thing and I do not regret it, I particularly celebrate the fact I resigned every time they announce they can't find any of the weapons of mass disappearance.

[Laughter]

RC: I also do believe it is part of the problem we're wrestling with here. Not just in the conventional ways expressed in the loss of trust, but 2 million people did march against the war in London and around the rest of Britain. I think the fact that they took part in that, that their views were ignored, that the war happened anyway, and that they were then proved right, actually has been deeply corrosive of people's belief that there's a functioning democracy – particularly when nobody is held to account and the only people who are out of office as a result are those of us who resigned in protest when it happened.

[Applause]

RC: I think it is very important that we engage not just the Black community but all the different ethnic communities. It's very important therefore that messages are carried not just through the national press but through the many different niche market presses that cater for the different communities. And it is very important that we make sure that our parliament is representative not just in the sense of how people vote for party politics, but is also representative of the way in which the British public is made up and we do need to get a stronger ethnic representation into our parliament and I think we desperately need a much stronger women's representation in parliament.

In fairness though I should say that all the studies show that by and large the ethnic communities in Britain do have a much higher propensity to vote than the rest of the population. I think it's the rest of the population that can learn something from ethnic communities on this front.

I have no idea why the French, the National Assembly, took the view they did to postal voting and although I can accept responsibility for many things, I decline to take the responsibility for what the French National Assembly does.

[Laughter]

RC: 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.

HK: Can I thank you Robin Cook for coming and giving evidence to us and I want to thank you for laying so clearly on the table your position on this. And I hope you can persuade colleagues that this is a serious problem and actually more profound perhaps than any of us had recognised. So can we show our appreciation to our witness?

[Applause]

HK: Can I just tell the audience that the next evidence session will be on the 4th March in Birmingham where Michael Howard will be giving evidence to the Commission,

to the Inquiry. And if any of you are interested in attending that session, please let members of the secretariat know and give them your names, and they'll give you information and let you know where the event is happening. Thank you all for coming.

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