

**POWER Inquiry Witness Session – London****10am-3pm, 9 December 2004****Congress House  
23-28 Great Russell Street  
London, WC1B 3LS****Digest of London Witness Session**

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

**Witnesses****Professor Vivien Lowndes [VL]**

Professor of Local Government Studies in the Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University, Leicester

**Professor Philippe Schmitter [PS]**

Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the European University Institute in Florence, Department of Political and Social Sciences until September 2004

**Professor Stuart Weir [SW]**

Director of Democratic Audit at the Human Rights Centre, Essex University and a Visiting Professor with the Government Department, Essex University

**Why do you think there has been such a significant decline in General Election turnout since 1992?**

**VL:** It appears that there are higher levels of activity in areas with what you might call strong *social capital* in terms of community identity. However, there's no simple relationship between high social capital and political participation. Social capital needs to be switched on or mobilised in terms of democracy.

I think the electoral turnout and participation more generally is crucially influenced by what I would call *institutional design*, that is the way in which public agencies and decision-making bodies are organised in order to encourage, facilitate, enable and crucially respond to participation.

**PS:** we know from surveys and research that most of the decline in voting is young people, in fact people over 50 years of age have not declined in their voting behaviour.

we seem to know that the larger the country, the lower the turnout; the larger the constituency, also the lower the turnout – so there's a scale effect. We seem to know also that in countries which have so-called semi-parliamentary or semi-presidential elections, that is to say when there is direct election of the President and of course direct election of the lower house, you get lower turnout.

Also proportional representation systems have larger turnout, especially when that proportional representation is in relatively smaller districts, so to speak.

And then finally you get a higher turnout when you have a lower anticipated margin of victory between competitors.

We know that the decline in voting turnout is associated not with a disinterest in politics but with dissatisfaction in politics.

**SW:** Jack Straw once described our government system as 'executive democracy' and I thought that was quite a telling phrase. I think it does encapsulate the attitude of those who rule, not only at national but also at local level.

The counterpart of executive democracy is what I think could be described as reactive democracy. Broadly speaking I think most people in this country do not expect to participate in politics, they're very rarely asked to, so normally they only get involved when something touches upon their lives and then they do get involved, so you get protest and opposition in a reactive way rather than a positive kind of way.

I don't think that low turnout is due to apathy, it's due to people understanding that there's not much point to them voting because they don't really have much effect and they don't think that politicians tell them the truth and that's becoming a very, very strong factor in British politics.

There's two important things about lower turnout it seems to me. One is that if you look at the parliamentary constituencies where the turnout is lowest, it's some of the most depressed areas in this country where people are basically giving up hope.

And the second thing is Local Government reform, re-organisation, in this country has been an absolute disaster. We've removed the sphere of local government and placed it far too high above the heads of ordinary people in this country.

**If it's a product of dissatisfaction, can you explain to us more precisely the nature of that dissatisfaction? Is it becoming more intense with the newer generations?**

**PS:** As far as we can tell there is a very general phenomenon of youth dissatisfaction, it is very age graded and each successive generation is less likely to vote for example. But I'd also point out they are even less likely to join political parties – the proportion of young people who join political parties is so low. They do not perceive significant differences between parties and when you can't perceive significant differences between parties, you have very little incentive to get yourself mobilised and to go to party meetings etc.

I think that that phenomenon of professionalisation adds to this sense of distance. One measure would be to say let's try to de-professionalise and get more people involved in politics who are not professional.

**SW:** An important factor is the resentment about politicians and sensing they don't tell the truth and the belief that only the BNP and UKIP can tell the truth and that's mixed in with nationalism, xenophobia and things like that. That is a very, very strong factor in the support that goes to the BNP and UKIP in this country.

**Is the decline similar at both ends because some people talk about localisation as a way out of the current problems. Is there as much disenfranchisement with the local as well as the more publicly recognised centre?**

**VL:** The problem is more severe at the local level so in the last ten years average turnouts in local elections have reduced from approximately 40% to something more like 30%, in some areas they're as low as 10% in some very deprived areas. So yes I think at the local level, that is where there is a capacity to engage people through non-electoral means and certainly some recent survey work that I was involved in, estimated something like 14 million people were involved in some way in consultation, participation activities, with local authorities. That was scaling up from a survey so you might be a little sceptical but it's certainly at the local level where I think it is possible to begin to change the type of institutional arrangements and mindsets that we were talking about earlier.

It seems to me at the local level that there's something like a 'new corporatism', whereby people come together from the private sector, from the public sector elected and non-elected aspects of Health Authorities and say local authorities and then there's people from this thing called 'the community sector' and that's the new third leg of a tripartite arrangement at the local level.

I mean yes there's a democratic deficit in a conventional sense but there may also be some lessons and some interesting new experience that could be part of some governance repertoire that expands our idea of what democratic practice is.

**SW:** I'd like you to seriously consider whether we have a genuine choice between national and local in this country. I think we really do need to consider the level at which citizens are invited to engage with political governance and I agree there are a number of very, very interesting experiments going on in local government as Vivien said, but those are patchy remedies here and there, they're not part of the general ethos

In a sense civil society and civic enterprise in this country has been diverted away from political parties into unelected quangos at national and local level. A huge plethora of partnerships and voluntary associations exist around every local authority in this country. I think in the case of Bristol which I studied, there were something like 40 local partnerships, quangos and so on that were actually running very significant public services in Bristol, and amongst those there were perhaps seven or eight people who overlap from one of those bodies to another and were actually unseen governors in a way in the city of Bristol and that's happening all over the country.

**If non-competitive elections always produce lower turnouts, then there's a limit to what we can do about it – we don't want to stage artificial ideological confrontations?**

**PS:** I think that we're missing one element here and that is a sense of a civic duty to vote. We cannot explain on rational grounds why people vote, it is irrational to vote – you shouldn't bother to cross the street to vote and that's assuming that the voting place is very easy to find. So we have to understand that voting turnout is linked to some kind of sense of obligation - civic duty. I think that's what's collapsing in addition to the fact that there is no mobilising effect around significant issues and parties that are backing those issues etc.

Obviously school makes some difference. We've got to think about that level of political socialisation and how do we get younger people to know, to learn about politics. Somehow in Scandinavia they do, young school kids know something about that, and of course it's not a competitive system, I mean who runs Norway is no big mystery.

**Why do you think there's been such a significant decline in party membership over the last forty years?**

**VL:** It's not that people don't vote because they're lazy or they're absent-minded, it's the same with political parties, people don't just forget to join a political party – they're making decisions in the context of the choices that they encounter around how to spend their time, how to express their opinions, with who to communicate.

We also have to ask if parties really want members? Their basis of finance no longer relies upon individual membership; their way of communicating with the electors no longer relies upon volunteers going to knock up, it happens but there's the telephone canvassing, there's obviously the role of the media, television is paramount; they don't need party meetings to formulate policy because we all know their policy, it's developed in all sorts of other forums. There is an issue around candidates. Where are you going to find your candidates? Which is a big problem at the local level but I think both my colleagues pointed out the role of professionalisation as creating new routes to being a politician that don't rely upon a party apparatus, you need the party as your ticket but you don't need it as your life blood.

At the local level the problem with parties is absolutely huge. Political parties and local government might be best described as chickenless heads! We see parties becoming ever more important in the way in which the authorities organise their business, independents have basically been squeezed out, the new political management arrangements that were put in place after 2000 really just entrench the power of parties and the formation of cabinets and so on, and yet parties become ever further from the civil society in which they're supposed to be rooted. So parties that now basically come in are managerial executive bodies rather than bodies of civil society and that I'm sure tells us something about perhaps the poverty of political discourse among our representatives because they're no longer connected to the members, parties no longer form this.

**PS:** I think political parties are not interested in members – and least of all when the members that they would like to recruit might be young people whose conformity to the present party line is dubious and who might otherwise upset, shall we say, relatively established positions.

But the idea is to put the finance in the hands of citizens, so instead of basing the financial onus on the previous elections, we suggest that voters actually have at the same time they vote, they vote for financing political parties so they will have an allocation of votes for individual citizen and the citizen then allocates, not merely chooses a candidate but allocates money to pay for the campaign.

Now the reason why I find this attractive is because it would make political parties very, very interested in getting people to vote because their amount of money would depend on who actually voted and allocated the money, rather than some formula based on the previous election.

As for nomination the problem with primaries is they quickly develop the same perverse features that the elections; they begin to get the same kind of oligarchic properties that we talked about.

**VL:** Perhaps one way of encouraging voting would be to include on ballot papers, something called “none of the above”, so rather than spoil your ballot paper or just not turn up, you could say I want to exercise my civic duty but I don’t want to vote for any of those candidates or any of those parties: none of the above. And then that could also be linked through the vouchers for party financing to saying that you would like your bit of money for party financing to go into a “none of the above” coffer that would be a fund for stimulating, enabling, priming new political parties. Now I think that we would still need a change in the electoral system for this greater diversity of parties to really stand a chance of influencing governments, because you would then have all of the process of coalition-forming one incentive for citizens to vote for small parties and so on.

### **Is there a link between the decline in political party membership and the decline in turnouts?**

**PS:** We do know that the more people are members, not just of political parties, but of trade unions and various forms of organisations in civil society, the more likely they are to vote. There’s no evidence of a decline in civil society in Europe but that participation in civil society which you might have expected to translate into a relatively stable political involvement is not doing that. So there’s something about the new forms of participation in civil society which are not translating into a sense of civic obligation or a willingness to vote.

**VL:** I think the issue is that we still have a vibrant civil society but it is configured in a very different way – the size and style of organisations, their diversity in terms of their numbers, the way they’re established and also what people get up to within their civil society organisations. Just like I said earlier about political parties, people in civil society organisations no longer come to a weekly meeting in a drafty church hall, they may well be communicating through the internet, they may be coming together once a year in a particular type of get-together, they may be taking part in individual actions with an international flavour. So I think that the link between civil society and formal politics is being renegotiated or needs to be renegotiated and it’s not just a substantive disconnect but also an institutional one, the forms and the structures are no longer in alignment.

## Answers in response to audience discussion

**VL:** There's a lot of controversy around the issue of referendums because recent referendums in this country have not attracted turnouts of any magnitude, but I still think that this is something worth looking at because as so many people get exercised about particular issues and I would have thought that the referendum mechanism is one way of encouraging deliberation on people's own terms and that perhaps links to the contribution about deliberation days and more generally citizen education. One of the benefits of a referendum process is to crystallise and foreground debate on particular issues and if that could be linked to deliberative experiments or processes within communities and workplaces and so on, that would seem to be very positive.

In relation to citizen education, countries that have civics lessons don't tend to think much of it, people who have been exposed to civic lessons as children are always very negative about this as something dry, irrelevant, laughable and so on. I'm sure the best education is through practice. I think a colleague over here mentioned elections within schools and I doubt there's actually a school in Britain that doesn't have a pupil's council. but the problem is one that we cannot, again, avoid which is the disconnection between what vibrancy there is in civil society, whether it's schools or pressure groups or at the neighbourhood level and the more formal political process.

**SW:** All over Europe there are provisions for citizens' initiatives, often law-making initiatives where groups of ordinary citizens can put forward proposals to be seriously considered in the political arena. Why not do that?

When I was advising the Public Administration Select Committee on quangos in the UK, we suggested that there should be a place for people to go on quangos by lot. Why not? The government absolutely rejected that out of hand. if you suggest new ideas in this country, people think you're potty but it really is vitally important we do begin to experiment with these things.

**PS:** The Scandinavians, for example, are unbelievably open to experiments with new forms of democracy. Their agonising about where they are and fear that they may be in decline is actually transformed into an openness and willingness to experiment which I think is virtually unmatched anywhere in Europe and of course it would be wonderful if that would translate to the British Isles. Because of the way in which the British look sometimes at Europe as so different, they're perhaps less inclined to learn from experiments in other European countries than others. I mean if you were talking about all those continental countries or the Southern European countries, they're in constant connection and constantly referring to experiments.

I think that this business of civic duty is quite important. We had a proposal not for more civic education, that's a waste of time and there's no evidence that that makes a difference; but more programmes in which young people actually sit in on and observe government officials and politicians at work. So the idea – and this apparently now is becoming fairly commonplace – they elect people who then sit in various government offices up to and including the Prime Minister believe it or not, as just a way of familiarising them with what higher authorities and civil servants do.

The deliberation day - I don't think that's a very sensible idea. I think what makes more sense is to have much broader kinds of mechanisms of deliberation. We talk about smart voting for example which allows you to look at the voting record of deputies and also the proposed preferences of different candidates, take the test yourself and find out which candidate is closest to your preferences for example. To me that's much more feasible and much more exciting to the individual.