

**POWER Inquiry Witness Session****Witness Session with Rt Hon Michael Howard MP****11.30am-1.45pm, 4 March 2005****MacDonald Burlington Hotel  
6 Burlington Arcade, 126 New Street  
Birmingham, B2 4JQ****Witness****Rt Hon Michael Howard 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
PD	Philip Dodd	Commissioner
MC	Michael Howard	Witness

HK: Mr Howard, if we can just start by asking you what your sense is of that public disenchantment and why you might think that is the situation at present?

MH: I certainly think there is no doubt that it exists and I think it's a cause of very, very serious concern because whatever your party politics, the future of our democracy is something that ought to be extremely precious to all of us. Many people have given their lives for our democracy and if turnout at elections continues to decline in the way in which it has for the last two elections, I do fear for the very future of our democracy and that is a deep concern.

Why has it happened? I think there is a disillusionment with politics and with politicians, people think that politicians glibly make and break promises, I don't pretend that this is a phenomena which is entirely the responsibility of the present

government because it is true to some extent of previous governments as well. I think that in 1997 when Mr Blair was elected, there were very high hopes, he presented himself as an entirely different kind of politician and he had a lot going for him, he had a very benign economic legacy, he had a huge parliamentary majority and I think there was a great appetite for reform and for change in the country and that hasn't happened and a lot of people see that. The sense of disillusionment has spread to the whole of the political process and one of the things which I find so frustrating in the context of the current pre-election campaign is that so many people, I think you touched on it, so many people... that the things which make them frustrated in their daily lives around their schools or hospitals or their concerns about law and order or tax or whatever it is, so many people think that that's disconnected from the way in which they vote and people are increasingly I fear beginning to think that these are things which they have to put up with, sort of just like the weather and there's nothing they can do about it. But I passionately believe that the way people vote matters enormously and can make a difference otherwise I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. So I agree with you, there's a problem, that's my take on why it exists.

HK: One of the things that we're trying to do with the Commission is that having received evidence and recognising that there is this problem and you have described very well the disconnect that people feel, is to try to dig more deeply into that disaffection and to seek to focus on solutions. I just wondered Ferdy if you would like to come in on some of the things that have been repeated to us in the course of our evidence gathering?

FM: Yes, Michael thank you very much for coming and also for letting us hear your what I think should be called the botanical gardens speech rather than glasshouse speech which is the alternative. One of your solutions which I think chimes with quite a lot that we've heard is the importance of restoring accountability and particularly in restoring local accountability and providing local democracy. I wanted to ask you, this of course as you said is something which goes back beyond this government and to the last Conservative administration which had real strong centralising tendencies. So the Conservatives, now, if we believe this speech have a really quite massive change of direction which would involve a considerable retreat not only from capping but also from interfering with local decisions, local town decisions and so on. Could you elaborate a bit on how that would happen, whether it would happen or whether the itch to interfere wouldn't revive rather soon?

MH: It would happen because partly I think we've learned lessons and partly I think because it's a different set of challenges that the country faces today. We can spend a lot of time arguing about whether it was right to have centralisation in the 80s but I certainly don't think it's the right response to the challenges the country faces today and we have seen over the last eight years a huge increase in centralisation. I entirely accept that it didn't start under the present government but it has gathered pace to an extraordinary extent so that people tell me who are in local government that the extent to which they can exercise their discretion for say the amount of money that a local council spends, is now a pale shadow of the responsibilities which they had even eight years ago. As we know most of the money that local councils spend actually comes from central government, it's much less than half would come from the council tax and whereas it used to be the case, although there were always arguments about whether central government gave enough money to local authorities, at least it used to be the case that what money local authorities had, they were able to spend in accordance with their judgment and priorities for the people who elected, which is as it should be. Now, so much of the money they get from central government is hamstrung and circumscribed, some of it specifically by ring-fencing, they're told you can only have this money if you do "x", some of it not quite

so straightforward as that but money given only in response to delivery of certain services to certain performance targets and so forth and the extent to which local councillors can exercise their discretion is extremely limited. Now that is not good for accountability, it is not good for healthy local democracy, it's not going to encourage people of the right calibre to stand for elections in local government so I can assure you that what we say we will do.

FM: And moving on from that then, another form of disillusionment expresses itself obviously in the plummeting membership of political parties and this of course has a tremendous effect on the local activity, aren't you if you give real power over a greater proportion of the budget to the local authorities, aren't you giving it to people who are representing a shrinking political base, do you see any way of reviving parties?

MH: Well at the risk of blowing my party's trumpet, we have actually increased our membership quite substantially, we now have more members in the country than the other two major parties put together, we have roughly 330,000 members which is up 20-30,000 in the last fifteen months...

FM: That's still a shadow of your...

MH: It's not as many as we used to have but it is an increase however, it's going in the right direction. Labour claim to have about 250,000 although you can argue about that claim, the Democrats have about 70,000 so we have more than they have put together. We are increasing our membership in the universities very significantly so I don't accept that it's always going to be a sort of downhill spiral but having said that you are right to say that even as we are increasing membership, it is not as high as it was... I don't know, say probably twenty years ago. I think the reason for that is due to the fact that there are many competing activities now, there are many competing opportunities which people can devote their leisure time to, there are many more things for people to do than were available even twenty or perhaps even ten years ago, you've only got to think of the Internet as an example. And so I think that it would be perhaps a bit facile to link the decline in membership of political parties with the decline in interest in political issues.

FM: And what do you think is the reason for the decline in actual national turnout, local turnout has remained consistently low but national turnout has suddenly fallen off the cliff?

MH: Well I tried to answer that in my first answer, it may be the last two elections were probably regarded as foregone conclusions and that will maybe affect the turnout. I hope and believe that this one is looked at in a very different light and that may increase turnout. But I think if you're looking specifically at the last two elections, that may be a factor and the other factors to which I referred earlier on the growing disillusionment with politicians and with the political process.

EB: I just wanted to go back very, very quickly to the new party membership and how have you managed to do that? What kind of method did you employ to increase those numbers?

MH: I think people have become more interested in the Conservative party, I think we... well over the last two months I think most of the independent commentators would say that we've been setting the agenda, we've been putting forward a lot of fresh and distinctive policies, not everyone's going to agree with that obviously, I accept that and understand that, this is not to say that there isn't those policies but we are

attracting attention and certainly within the Conservative party the morale is much higher than it's been for a long time and I think that transmits itself to people and that's what's increasing our membership.

EB: 45% in 1964 identified very strongly with a party, it was 22% in 1979 and only 13% most recently. My age group's views and attitude to ideology and party are very different now than the equivalent group fifty or sixty years ago. I wondered what you thought about that?

MH: Yes I'm not sure that's an entirely bad thing, I mean obviously I would like as many people as possible to be strongly identified with the Conservative party but if you look at it generally I suspect and probably mentioning ? is a dangerous but I suspect that forty years ago an awful lot of people voted as their parents did, probably without thinking too much about it for themselves, just like very often you support a football team because your Dad did and it was that sort of old loyalty. Now if in fact fewer people identify strongly with a political party, it means that more people are thinking for themselves, deciding on the issues as they come up, are prepared to take a pragmatic look at what the parties have to offer at any particular General Election. I don't see that as a particularly unhealthy or undesirable thing. I don't think that is necessarily something which those of us who are concerned about the future of our democracy should necessarily regret. As a party leader I have mixed feelings about it but for someone who cares about the future of our democracy, I don't think I'm too bothered about it.

HK: But perhaps where it does have some relevance is that because if you like those tribal loyalties where Labour was seen as the class of the worker and the Conservative party the class of the employer, the boss class, because that has all if you like softened around the edges and people now trawl through the waters of the other party for votes too and you no longer have that ideological divide, it gives a sense to people that there's not very much difference between the political parties, that somehow political parties are no longer entities that have a clear value system and so it makes it less compelling in terms of the voting, that you and our Prime Minister and perhaps even the Liberal Democrats are fishing in the same waters and you have defined your policies pretty much around the same issues and that there's not a lot of difference. Is there not a sense of that about?

MH: There's a sense of that about but I think it's misplaced but I think there is a difference, I think forty, even twenty years ago, the differences between the parties were more obvious and easier to understand, one party stood for more nationalisation and public ownership, the other party was opposed to that, one party stood for nuclear disarmament, the other party was opposed to that, those are very easy concepts to grasp. I would argue that the differences between the parties today are actually just as great but they are more complicated, so for example... let's try and talk about examples because it's probably easier. If you take health, the health service, the future of the health service, the differences between what we are advocating and what the Labour party are I think very considerable. We all believe it is true in a National Health Service, a free point of use, so on that fundamental issue we are all agreed but we for example think that patients should have much more choice, they should be able to choose any NHS hospital they want to choose and hospitals should have much more freedom and they should be free to decide who they employ, how much they pay the people they employ, they should be free to borrow, they should be free to decide how they arrange their affairs, scrap the targets which the government sets down and which tells doctors and nurses exactly what they've got to do and what they can't do. So we would free up things considerably because we think that choice and having more competition are the things which drive up standards. When

we produced our health plans in the summer, the Labour party immediately started talking about choice themselves and saying that they would pay for choice too, now what they mean by choice is very different to what we mean by choice but that does mean that we have to work hard, we have to work hard as politicians to explain the differences because they're not as obvious and as clear-cut as they were twenty years ago and indeed the public perhaps have to work harder too if they want to understand the differences because they're not as clear-cut. So my take is that the differences are still very big and I've used health as an example but we could go through a whole range of policy issues, the differences are very big but they're not quite as simple, not as easy to explain, not as easy to understand and that's what makes it a bit difficult.

HK: Now given that we would not for a minute suggest that the public's got any less smart than it ever has been, in fact it might have got smarter, better informed, better educated, isn't there an issue here about the media and the way in which the media if you like mediates those issues and doesn't perhaps create the potential for debate?

MH: Well I think there is, although I'm very hesitant to criticise the media...

*(Laughter)*

HK: Especially not at the moment!

MH: Enoch Powell once said that a politician who criticises the media is like a fish who criticises the sea...

*(Laughter)*

MH: ... so I criticise them but yes I think it would make the political process work more effectively if everyone involved was prepared to spend more time explaining more clearly these differences between the parties but I don't exempt practising politicians like myself from that criticism. It's hard work to try and get people to understand exactly what your policy would entail when the differences as I say aren't quite as obvious and simple and as glaring as they were twenty years ago.

HK: Philip?

PD: I wonder if I can follow up what you're saying because you make two different kinds of statement, one has been about the failure of the political class to engage fully and positively and transparently enough with the population and then you made a different kind of point which is the point about what you might call the larger culture within which politics has to operate in. I was very interested in your observation that actually in a sense belonging to a political party now has to compete with other leisure time activities which I think is just... I think you are if I may say so slightly over-defensive about the media because I just read the interview you did, you will notice that this month the topic has turned around because they think somebody's going to say something nice about them...

*(Laughter)*

PD: ... the interesting interview you've just done in 'Glamour' magazine. Now there's one way of responding to this which is to sneer at it and I think that's entirely wrong because it seems to me what it's a recognition of is that not only do you need as a politician to speak in different places, it's not enough any longer to speak on Newsnight or the Today programme but actually you've got to find different ways of

speaking to this much more sophisticated, much more emotionally aware audience. This isn't a party political point at all, it's a point about the ways in which the cultural politics has ineluctably changed and my one disappointment with all political parties is you're not sufficiently honest enough, open enough is a better term, opening up about that change of political culture which at your best you are trying to address.

MH: I agree with that entirely.

HK: A simple one line answer is very desirable but...

PD: Forgive me, it isn't good enough, what I want Michael is what does that entail for you as a politician? What's entailed in the shift of language? What's entailed in that remaking of yourself, which is not only the remaking of you but of everyone who has to think those...?

MH: I wouldn't, I don't think it is a remaking of myself but what it involves is giving interviews to that kind of magazine, it involves doing that sort of thing, it involves doing what Mr Blair has done, Mr Kennedy has done and I'm going to be doing next week, which is spending a whole day at the mercy of viewers of Channel 5. You can't really imagine Harold Macmillan doing that can you!

PD: No but forgive me, it's not only a question of where you are, you're asked questions in 'Glamour' that you would not normally be asked which means you have to think differently about how you tell the story about yourself as a politician.

MH: Well I mean that sort of implies that you make up different identities depending on the audience you're talking to.

PD: And you do.

MH: No, I don't agree with that I'm afraid, it's not that I deliberate... I am which I am for better or for worse and I'm the same person whether I'm talking to 'Glamour' magazine or anyone up here or on Newsnight or on the Today programme. What you have to do is use different language with different audiences and because you're asked questions about different things, you have to be prepared to talk about different things and that's fair enough and I will certainly accept that probably we're not good enough at using the right kind of language to completely different audiences but I don't think that it means presenting a new kind of personal identity every time you talk to a different audience. I think that is very close to charlatany...

PD: Shakespeare invented different kinds of speech for different kinds of audiences so it's not necessarily charlatany but I just wanted to...

MH: Different kinds of speech? Now I'm with you, different kinds of language, I agree with you but not re-inventing... I would never try and re-invent my identity.

PD: You spoke earlier and this is my last question, you spoke earlier about the decline in emotional identification with parties has not only been a bad thing, it can be a good thing but of course given it is now an emotionally literate culture, you need not only to be able to respond to the people in terms of rational clarification policies but in terms of encouraging an identification with you, how do you go about that?

MH: Well I don't have the answer, all I can do I think is tell people what I'm about, talk to them about the values which motivates what I do, try and explain the policies that I'm

putting forward and how I believe those policies relate to their lives and how they could make their lives better and at the end they have to judge.

PD: But Harold Macmillan might have done all those things to quote back at you, you have to do it differently now...

MH: You have to do it differently.

PD: ... so how is it different now because of this?

MH: Well it's different because you do it to different audiences, it's a much more sophisticated world, it's a much more... I think in a way we're a much more fragmented society now, I mean I hope we are still a cohesive society as well but fragmented in a sense that there are many, many more different interest groups out there. You've only got to look at the magazine section in any newsagents to see the range of special interest magazines now which presumably all the publishers profit and at a level so that there's sufficient profits to justify the fact that they're printed, catering for an extraordinary range of leisure pursuits and not just leisure pursuits but interests and pursuits of the people of this country, far, far more than was available twenty or forty years ago and that affects the fact that people's horizons have widened, that they're better educated and that they're interested in a much wider range of things. So if one of those specialist magazines like 'Glamour' comes along and says 'We'd like to interview you', you say 'Yes' of course.

PD: But why are you saying yes?

MH: You say yes because you recognise that the people who read 'Glamour' magazine have votes and I'm in the business of winning an election so I want to talk to anyone and everyone who has a vote, that I might be able to persuade to cast that vote to my party, that's the business I'm in.

HK: To pick up on that, isn't that the way in which the electorate have changed, in that what you've described in the selection of magazines is about how individuals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century now have very different dreams of a good life and therefore it's harder for political parties to meet those aspirations and expectations of those many different dreams. The dreams were if you like much more coherent, the dream of the house of your own, of hot water, of central heating, now the dreams are much more complex and different and therefore surely politicians are just bound to disappoint?

MH: No I don't agree with that but here we are going to touch upon the party political I'm afraid because you see I think it's essential to the beliefs of my party and to my beliefs that all individuals are different, that you can't have a 'one size fits all' approach to public policy and that all of what the government should concentrate on doing is creating a frame in which people can live their dreams and make their dreams a reality. I talk about the British dreams, I mean I call it the British dream, I did a year in America when I finished university and I have great admiration for America, in America they talk a lot about what they call the 'American Dream', they talk about people who achieve, and make it from a log cabin to the White House. It actually doesn't happen very often in America, it happens more often here but we don't talk about it much, we don't celebrate it as we should, I want everyone to want the British Dream.

HK: Well I want to talk about that because the British dream, from what everybody says to us is we want to be able to take control over our own lives and so what we want is much more direct involvement and we've been looking as a Commission and in fact

we've just had a report created which is looking at democratic innovations around the world and what we would be interested to hear from you is to what extent would you as a leader of an opposition party be prepared if you were to take office, to actually turn that into a reality? To what extent would you have raised direct democracy?

MH: Well it's central to... I mean in a way what do you mean by direct democracy because there is sort of economic democracy as well as direct democracy so when we say we would give patients the right to choose any NHS hospital, I regard that in a way as a form of democracy, it is empowerment, it is making ordinary individuals more powerful by giving them that choice. When I say I want to give parents a much wider choice of school, that is empowerment; that is actually giving parents more power. We've just announced what I think is quite an imaginative policy in terms of the police, at present the kind of local democratic control of the police is exercised through police authorities, now police authorities are worthy bodies full of worthy people, but I'm afraid nobody knows who they are. I would be astonished if anybody in the audience today could name the Chairman of the West Midlands Police Authority. So what we have put forward is an alternative of directly electing a police commissioner to replace the police authorities, having the same powers as the police authorities, they wouldn't be able to tell a Chief Constable what to do in terms of arresting anyone but they would be able to influence the general approach to policing. The police authority have considerable powers now, they set the budget and so on and they set the three year plan and they help to guide the new constabulary's priorities and we would give to that an elected police commissioner and I think that's a very good example of a new kind of accountability.

FM: Excellent. So is that as it were to be a single initiative or can you imagine others that the British dream of accountability and democracy might follow the American dream in the sense of your ballot papers on election day could have several other decisions, they could have referendums brought about by popular initiative, would you welcome that sort of longer ballot paper if I can put it in a single phrase?

MH: I wouldn't have it as long as it is in America, for example they elect judges in America, I'm not in favour of elected judges ...

PD: Why?

MH: Can I answer that question by telling you a story, it's a true story. When I was in America for a long period, I was in Philadelphia. A woman I knew had a parking ticket and was so incensed she decided that she would go to court to challenge the parking ticket. And she was astonished at what happened, this is a true story, all the defendants who were at the court were called to the front of the court and the magistrate said 'My name is Mongolooso, I want you to all to remember that, Mongolooso, all cases dismissed', the following week there was an election for the magistracy you see...

HK: Mongolooso wins!

MH: He did, that's why I'm against elected judges.

FM: All right then, not judges but what about school boards or as I say referendums?

MH: There is a case for elected school boards and that's not yet our party policy but there is a case for that, I can see that, and I'm not ideologically opposed to more referendums. I have a suspicion and I may be wrong, I have a suspicion that the public appetite for voting is limited and that there is still probably a majority view

which is that on most things apart from the really big things like whether we go into Europe, whether we join the European Constitution... for most things, most people would prefer to elect their politicians and let them get on with it. But if there was evidence that the public mood had changed and that the public wanted a direct vote on more issues, I wouldn't have a hang-up with that, it's a question of what the public want.

HK: But Michael you only see this sort of democracy as being about elections but you could have other forms, other more deliberative processes. You don't look very excited about that!

*(Laughter)*

MH: I did look at some of those things quite seriously at one time not very long ago, I was very interested and I looked at them and in the end I wasn't entirely convinced but I think you see giving... I don't want to repeat myself but I think giving patients and parents a real choice is a form of democracy, it's certainly a form of empowerment, we're giving them much more power and I regard it as a form of democracy.

HK: One of the things we've done is we've had a look at... these are problems facing other democracies too, we've had a look at what they've tried in Canada, in British Columbia where they actually did try, they have been trying the deliberative processes, drawing the public into a different kind of assembly where you can have citizens assemblies making some political decisions. We've looked at the issues of citizens juries, we've looked at citizens being involved for example in setting the tariff on the whole taxes, why are you so disenchanted with deliberative processes?

MH: Because unless everyone votes, it's very hard to be sure that you're getting a representative judgement, democracy is full of imperfections but if you start doing things other than through voting, you inherently and inevitably run the risk that the group of people who make the decisions are not truly representative and the only way in which you can make sure is through voting.

HK: The only thing I'm thinking of is for example the British Columbia experiment, it really was demographically representative, it really was... I mean a great deal of effort went into making sure that it was reflecting all the different parts of that society but you're not convinced?

MH: Someone decided it was demographically representative.

HK: Well no, they were randomly selected but from those demographic...

MH: They were selected by someone. No I don't... in the end if you want to ensure that you have democratic legitimacy for what you want to do, I can't see how that could be a substitute for people voting.

HK: But our juries in the civil courts are randomly selected and we trust them and I know that you support that, the jury system.

MH: I do, of course but they are chosen to listen to the evidence in a particular case and to decide on that evidence, you are not... that is different from democracy, that is a different process.

HK: I'm going to bring in Ben and then I'm going to bring in Bano.

- BF: I'm very interested in the GM survey that was done earlier in the year – was that a flawed process? The issues that are emerging now are very complicated, they aren't left and right polarities and trying to... one of the problems we're finding is that there's less connect with what people think and what goes on in parliament so some deliberations are sort of helpful.
- MH: Well I'm not suggesting that these deliberations couldn't be helpful and I'm not saying we shouldn't...
- BF: Well they draw on policy then there's a link and that's what we're talking about.
- MH: Yes, what I am challenging is that deliberations of that kind should be the final say. I don't think that could work because I don't think deliberations of that kind have the legitimacy which the democratic vote confers. If you have exercises with people which would help parliament to make informed decisions, that's fine and parliament has its own... select committees for example, we have our select committees made much more independent of parties and independent of the Government and fulfil the role which they were given even more effectively than they do now and select committees are not entirely but relatively free of the party political divide – so I would rather build on the (*person coughing*) select committees of parliament which (*person moving around*) have that kind of legitimacy.
- HK: Bano?
- BM: I hate to labour on the point but our challenge I think from a lot of the witness sessions we've been having, one of the challenges we seem to have is how many people believe that they actually have power on the ground and often a lot of witnesses have said to us that one of the reasons they're not voting is that they don't believe that they have that power on the ground. I guess what I'm wondering is how you feel you can then integrate the degree of deliberative processes within current political frameworks so that people do actually feel they have real power rather than pick a) or b) but you can't have c)?
- MH: To be perfectly honest with you, I don't think deliberative processes of the kind we've just been discussing can help that. They might help in a consultative kind of way to help the decision makers to make better decisions, more informed decisions but I doubt that they could help the ordinary voter think that their vote is worth more, that their vote can change things and I don't think there's a shortcut there. You know we are probably the main people to blame, the politicians because it's up to us, it's our responsibility to persuade people that what we're saying is relevant to their lives.
- FM: I mean one way of making people vote or making them feel that it counts more and actually the reality of making it count more is by having some form of proportional representation which means that you have to go out and see every last person, there are no safe seats which are not worth canvassing. You're not attracted by that at all, or at least we've heard?
- MH: I've always had to seek every vote I don't have, no-one's ever described my seat as a safe seat! Every electoral system is a balance between what is called fairness and what is called effective governing and inevitably you get a compromise between the two. The only entirely fair system is a system which is perfectly proportional. I think very few people would hold up that system as an example to be followed. The trouble with systems like that is that they give a thoroughly disproportionate amount of power to smaller inexperienced parties, that you inevitably end up with coalition governments and very, very often you end up with a situation in which it's even more

difficult to change things, much more difficult to change things than it is under our system because you tend to find that at every election it's the same people from the same parties who make up the coalition, if one party has got a few more votes in that particular election, they'd have fewer people in the coalition government, if the other party's got more votes, they could have a few more but essentially it's the same group of faces, it's very difficult to change it. Our system is much more clear-cut, it means that you're much more likely to get a clear result and effective government. Now I'm speaking as the leader of a party which presently suffers tremendously from the system we have, if the same number of votes are cast in this coming election for the Conservative party and the Labour party, the Labour party would have many, many more seats than my party would, so it's a system that works at the moment very much to the disadvantage of my party but I still think it's the best system for the country.

HK: What about compulsory voting?

MH: No, I'm not in favour of that either, I think if people don't want to vote, that's their loss. If we as politicians have so failed that we can't persuade people that it's worth the effort of going to the polling station and putting their cross on a ballot paper, then the failure is ours and people shouldn't be compelled to do that.

HK: What about the funding of political parties, what about limiting the amount of money that's spent on them?

MH: I'm not attracted by that, I think if people feel committed to a party and they want to help that party and they want to donate to it, I don't see why they should be stopped.

HK: And state funding of parties?

MH: I'm not hugely attracted by that either, I mean would tax-payers really appreciate their hard earned taxes being used to support a party they strongly disagreed with!

HK: I suspect not at the moment!

MH: No, I don't think they would.

FM: But one ingenious suggestion of course is to have the existing cash which is after all not inconsiderable, that goes to political parties, to be allotted to them strictly proportionate to the number of votes they have got or indeed even the number of party members they have got, then one's money would be going to the party...

MH: You're talking about the short money are you?

FM: Well yes and the other...

MH: Well then there isn't much and what there is does sort of broadly speaking affect that I think.

HK: Philip Cary.

PH: Hi Michael, young people whether you like it or not are the next generation of citizens and I don't believe that there is enough done to engage young people in politics, how they can get involved in politics, our democracy, I don't care about what different parties are doing for young people, I want to know about what you believe is the way forward in engaging some people? Not all young people want to vote, not all young

people feel that they when they're older would like to vote but you know they might want to engage in some sort of action group or something like that. What do you believe is the way that we can engage young people and we can maybe turn them around to vote in elections to come?

MH: I don't think there's a short-cut or a magic wand and if you have any suggestions I am very much in the market for them (*laughs*). I think that it's the same challenge we face with young people as with other groups of the population, we have to make what we have to offer relevant and attractive to them and to the extent that we are failing to do that and it's quite considerable, it's our fault so we've just got to work harder. I'm very proud of the fact that my party is now the leading party in terms of voters in the universities, I'm hugely encouraged by that and excited by it but I know that doesn't mean that we've cracked the problem of getting young people really interested in politics and in the difference they can make by casting their vote and even more by getting stuck in and getting involved.

HK: What about lowering the voting age, there was a bit of flurry for that from some quarters.

MH: I'm not in favour.

HK: Not in favour? Frances?

FOG: You started off by talking about the sense of disillusionment and I think there's a point of view coming through evidence we get that people feel it's not... that there is a failure of trust in politicians but not necessarily a failure of interest in politics, on the contrary, we've seen the rise of single issue groups, we've seen the importance of community organisations, civic institutions and so on, I wondered what you feel about what your observations are on that and whether you feel that your party has to look at negotiating a new relationship with civic organisations and community organisations and campaigns as one way through what appears to be a disconnect, not only between the electorate and parties but a disconnect between other organisations and parties that might actually revitalise our political culture?

MH: That is one way and we do it as best we can, I mean we try very hard to engage with the relevant interest groups or single issue groups on issues which they feel strongly about but I agree with you, you ask virtually any audience are they interested in politics and politicians and their hands will stay down, if you ask them whether they're interested in their schools, their hospitals, law and order, tax and their hands will go up. It's the disconnect, they don't see the connection between their ability to make a difference to their schools and hospitals and police and taxes through going along to the polling station and registering a vote and that is the challenge that I and all other politicians face. We have to persuade people that that connection exists.

FOG: In practical terms how do you bridge it?

MH: How do you do it? You just talk to as many people as you can, you do as many interviews for magazines like 'Glamour' as you can and you go on the radio or television and you tell it as you see it.

PD: Okay and it's demonstrably not working so what's the next move?

MH: Well we don't know, I tell you one thing...

PD: Sorry, it's demonstrably not working because there is a continuing decline, you know you're taking it very seriously and I'm deeply grateful for this but you must be thinking what's the next move if talking to 'Glamour' magazine will only...

MH: Well first of all why I say we don't know yet, we don't know yet what the turnout for the coming election is going to be and I would sincerely hope that it would be higher. I'll make one specific proposal, not a very original one. I have suggested that we should have televised debates between the party leaders at this election. In America the televised debates attracted a huge audience to many people's surprise and turnout at the American election was high. Now it always used to be the case that turnout there was much lower than it was here, I think the televised debates played a significant role and not only that but they played a significant part in raising turnout at the American elections and I have challenged Mr Blair to televised debates here and I think we should have that and I think that would actually help to raise turnout.

EB: Let's cast our minds forward to 9 weeks time, you win the TV debate and you're in government and you're Prime Minister, hopefully with higher than a 50% turnout. What are the first three things that you would do to reconnect people with politics, three things?

MH: Right...

HK: And it's to reconnect people with politics rather than the other things that we are sure you would do.

MH: Okay now I will give you the answers as to what I would do and it may be that the connection wouldn't be obvious but I'll try and explain why it is. The very first thing I would do and I've already said this, immediately when I move into number 10 Downing Street is to cancel the order which gave un-elected political advisors like Alistair Campbell the right to instruct civil servants what to do. Now I would freely conceive that the connection between that and the question that Emma has asked me is perhaps not immediately obvious but you see I think that the integrity of our political system is very important and I think that if we are to restore trust in our democratic process we have to restore that integrity. I think it's fundamentally wrong that un-elected political advisors should have that power, Ministers should be the only people who can ask civil servants what to do and it shouldn't be un-elected political advisors and I would cancel that order straightaway, that would be the first thing I would do.

Then very early on I would introduce, and it's on the same theme, a Civil Service Act. Now there's been a Civil Service Bill around for quite some time so it wouldn't take much time, we could do it quite quickly, in theory there's all party support for that so if the government, the present government and I know Mr Blair has intention to do this but hasn't done anything about it and that again would restore the integrity of the Civil Service. I think the non party political nature of the Civil Service in this country has been one of our great safeguards against abuse by government and although these things don't immediately seem to be relevant to your question, I passionately believe they are because I believe in accountability, I believe that just ? accountability and part of the accountability agenda of what I hold so dear is to make clear what Ministers can do and what Ministers can't do and I think those lines have been blurred quite a lot in the last eight years so I want to restore that fundamental integrity. So those are the first couple of things that I would do and I hope I've been able to explain, if I haven't, it's my fault but I hope I've been able to explain why although they don't immediately seem to be relevant to the question you ask, they actually are.

- EB: And you'd leave the House of Lords as it is?
- MH: No, our policy is to have a largely elected House of Lords.
- HK: Well let's hear more about that because your party's policy on that I think seems to reflect a general public desire to see an elected upper house but it's right isn't it that many members of your own party in the upper house are rather resistant to that?
- MH: It certainly is.
- HK: Will you hold the line on the policy that your party currently espouses?
- MH: Yes but to be fair I have also said that it's not necessarily number one on our list of priorities.
- HK: Just one final thing before we turn it over to the audience which is about choice, I mean you've placed emphasis on choice being one of things that you see as being actually a way of if you like creating accountability but of course one of the great things about democracy is that it takes place in the public domain, is that there's a negotiation openly and publicly for the kind of services we have rather than returning it just to individual desire for the kind of service they want for themselves or for their family?
- MH: Not at all, one of the things which we do in order to make choice a reality is to publish information about the kind of services that particular hospitals or particular schools offer and their records. If we're going to get rid of the targets which we are, then you clearly... you can't just say to people in a vacuum you can choose, people have to have a basis for making an informed choice and the way in which we respond to that challenge is to say that schools and hospitals would have to publish information about how they do and what they do and that would be in the public domain. So on the contrary, I think that they come together, the individual exercise of choice is made in the context of publicly available information, so I don't see any contrast or conflict between the two.
- HK: And finally on the choice thing, aren't there marginalised people, poor people who have difficulty in negotiating that kind of choice. It works for those who already are pretty accomplished at dealing with the system and that it leaves even further behind those how are already not joining in, not participating, the disadvantaged?
- MH: No, actually if you talk to people, many of them from pretty deprived backgrounds I think actually people have a good idea of what is good for them and their families, but if there are people from some backgrounds who need help to make the choice, then you can help them and actually I think that if we are given the opportunity to introduce our choice agenda I think you would find us ringing up those people probably in the voluntary sector who would want to help people make the right kind of choice. So I actually believe in trusting people, I think people are much more capable of making sensible decisions in the sense of their families than they are often given credit for but if there are particular groups who need help, they can get that help.
- FM: I just wanted to ask one little question on what seems to be in a way the most radical and certainly the most different from the other parties of the proposals you've outlined this morning and that's English votes for English laws which is a very dramatic way of dealing with the West Lothian question and giving only English MPs the power to vote on laws which affect only England but this in a sense is almost creating a mini

parliament, a mini English parliament within Westminster and how will that work when as will be the case you have a Conservative majority in England and a Labour party in the UK?

MH: Well I just don't think it's right and I certainly don't think it's fair and I don't think it's accountable to have a situation where top-up fees were imposed on England while they're not going to be introduced in Scotland by the votes of members of parliament in Scotland. Where an issue has been involved with the Scottish parliament and it's decided in Scotland for the people of Scotland, then I think it's wrong for members of parliament from Scotland to vote on those issues that they're voting for England. I think it's a question of fairness and accountability. So I think that's the way it should happen and the speaker could set a time when any bill fell into that category and people gave it a vote accordingly.

FM: But you speak as if this would be a rare occurrence but surely it would be a very frequent occurrence with the wide powers devolved to the Scottish assembly.

MH: It would.

FM: Well a lot of the time...

MH: A lot of the time, then I know it couldn't be an English parliament, I'm against having a separate English parliament, it would be that when those matters went before the House of Commons any members of parliament from each country could vote, simple as that.

HK: Right now I'm going to turn this over to the audience and before I do so I just want to thank you because you're the first leader of a political party to come before us and we hope it sets a trend and so we want to pay tribute to you for taking yourself into the lion's den and to thank you for doing it and I hope others will follow you. Can I now turn you over to the other lions out there, hands are already going up, who want to ask you some questions. Okay the lady in the second row?

AM: There's one issue that nobody's raised yet, I want to give my opinion and see what you think of it...

HK: Now I really am keen to have some questions, so try and put it into a question form or I'm going to jump on people!

AM: I think sometimes it feels as though citizens have got less influence on politicians than the American vote has, I think if you or any political leader wants to get more people to vote they should stand and say if we get into power we're going to minimise our connections with the American military and American economics, how do you feel about that?

HK: Shall we collect together the questions and I'll remind you of any so they don't slip through the net. Okay so the Americans, right if we can take this gentleman in the front row and we'll work our way around.

AM: My name is Dick Rogers and I'm a doctor and a clergyman here and I feel something very important that no party has... none of the main parties really engage you with and that is that we need a goal for our national life. There are certain things which are a real problem to British society today, such as the level of crime and I have to say I don't think the answer is just putting more police on the streets, the amount of drugs being consumed and the answer isn't... you can police it until you're blue in the face

but while people want them, they'll get them so there needs to be something which makes drugs less attractive and the number of children in schools not turned on by education and so we have huge social problems with unemployability and we miss out on all these engineers and scientists that we could be getting and I don't feel that I was hearing an answer to that from any of the parties so I've started my own called the Common Good, I don't know whether you've heard of it (*laughs*) and I've contested a couple of elections but I do think a goal to our national life is vitally important and it has to be for something outside of ourselves in the country which should be to make the world a fairer place and I know that sounds really twee but it is actually is vitally important because only when we've got unifying goals to our national life, will people of different ethnic groups, different religious backgrounds, people with different levels of ability feel themselves to be as a team together. Does that make sense because I believe that the lack of an answer to the basic problems is what made me turn to forming another party, I think it turns other people off.

HK: All right, basically that is the vision thing... can we have this young woman here with the black top.

AM: Okay my question is that while there is the decline in traditional forms of political participation, at the same time there are extremist groups who monopolise and engage with certain people and I'm thinking of say the far-right groups,...and my concern is that if the mainstream political parties don't engage with people and don't address these issues that are of concern, then there are going to be other people who are going to jump into that net and I monopolise the situation and actually make it worse and what would the consequence of that be for our democracy.

HK: Can you please come over to this side of the room, first of all the woman with the curly hair?

AM: Given the issues you've discussed today and the problems that you recognise, I was just wondering if Mr Howard would have a general election turnout prediction?

HK: Turnout prediction? Okay, can we have the gentleman with his hand up there at the back?

AM: If you win the next general election, if it's a low turnout and if it is actually a cultural problem that we are facing in this country, would you take drastic steps in order to finance the projects and organisations that are willing to actually solve this problem? Because if it keeps on going down, you face a situation that actually becomes authoritarian.

HK: The woman with the pink top please?

AM: Polly Billington from the Today Programme. I was listening to your speech this morning Mr Howard and I noticed that you spoke about accountability, and you said that in the real world if you say you're going to do something and you do it and if you screw up you can lose your job, that's accountability. In those circumstances surrounding Mrs Dixon, if that was happening on your watch, would your Health Secretary lose his job?

HK: The gentleman there with the red top in the middle?

AM: My name is Stan Marker and I'm a councillor and I'm 21 and I think it's important that we involve young people, I think the issue here is that not all young people can become councillors and for some time I wanted the candidacy age to be lowered to

18 but still there's a lot of barriers. I mean I'd quite like to get into the House of Lords because you can debate the policy once it's gone through the Commons but it seems to me there's a lot of barriers in place, however for most young people they're not even at the core of the system, I mean lots of them are going to the fringes. You mentioned a lot of young people joining your party, the BNP has got a lot of people joining their party and so has the Socialist Workers. You've got a lot of people in pressure groups, not power groups, what we need to do in Britain is incite and I'd like to know how are you going to do that? You ask a young person what's your view because I'm really interested, I'm worried that your party especially is adopting the American system now where you only contact people on marked registers and people who have previously voted and you're trying to get that vote out and I want to know a lot of political parties are now using systems where they only knock on the door that somebody's voted in the past and I want to know what you're going to do to get people out to vote, who might not vote for you but it's all in the cause of democracy.

HK: Okay two rows behind in the blue shirt, the gentleman with the blue shirt?

AM: Ian Angus from the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council. Mr Howard you made a couple of vague references earlier to the role of the voluntary sector and in my field of work I'm keen to know what's the future role you see the voluntary community sector having in being able to reconnect people with politics at both local and national level?

HK: Okay and then this chap with the white shirt in the front?

AM: I'm Jeff from Birmingham Race Action Partnership. There's all this talk about the current anti-migration and anti-asylum sentiment and I think there are wider reaching implications in terms of community cohesion so what will the mainstream parties such as yours do to combat the current rise in xenophobia which has not only led to increased segregations of communities but also there are parties such as the BNP that have been successful in attracting the disaffected electorate who feel that immigration and asylum is yet another ominous sign of the dangers of multiculturalism?

HK: Now I'm going to here take it back to Mr Howard and I'll give it to you in bundles Michael. So with the first question, I'm going to try and also keep it connected to, rather than to democracy, to the issues about revitalising our system. There was a question about the American connection, we're looking at where power lies in our system, does too much power lie in fact in the United States, is it influencing our policy too much, is it influencing policies in Britain too much and would you make it different?

MH: America is the strongest power in the world at the moment and it's long been our close ally. We have a great deal in common with the Americans in terms of values and interests and I have long championed that relationship, indeed I set up a project when I was on the back benches because I was worried that America and Europe were speaking apart and I think that all the world's problems are going to be easier to solve if America and Europe were partners and more difficult to solve if America and Europe became rivals. But having said all that, it is the responsibility of the British Prime Minister to make decisions in the interests of this country and that's how I would see it.

HK: Michael, the next one really was on... it was from our friend who had a new party but what he was really saying was haven't we moved into executive government,

government which is about managerialism and none of the parties really are presenting a vision of good society, a vision of a better world?

MH: Well I've tried to address that when I talk about the British dream because if you want one word to wrap up everything that I want to create, it's 'opportunities'. I believe that everyone is good at something and what governments should try and do is to create a framework in which everyone has an opportunity of fulfilling their potential, of being able to do what they're good at and I think it can be done, I think that's what governments roles should be. That's what I mean when I talk about a British dream and specifically relating to some of the points that were made, talk about drugs and you're right, it's not just a question of enforcement, that's why we propose an 18 fold increase in the number of residential rehab places for people who are on drugs so that they have a real opportunity of kicking their habit and leading useful and productive lives. You talk about borings lessons at schools, I agree with you, that's why we've suggested that 14 to 19 year olds who are not particularly academic in their inclination should have the opportunity of spending a day or two a week out of school with a perspective employer learning how to be a good bricklayer or a good plumber or whatever and not be forced to stay at school in classes where what's being taught is of no interest to them. So opportunity is my vision, I want to create the kind of society in which absolutely everybody has the opportunity to fulfil their potential and that means having a government that gets funded that way and not a government that gets in their way with a whole host of intrusive, interfering, meddling initiatives which actually have the consequence of cramping people's potential rather than the realising of a dream.

HK: Turnout prediction, will we get an increased turnout in May?

MH: Pass. I have no idea, I hope it will be, I can't make a prediction because I'm bound to be wrong, sorry!

HK: If it's a low turnout, will you be then prepared to consider more radical options like for example more on the ground direct democracy?

MH: I'm always prepared to consider it but you need to be persuaded and I would need to be persuaded that they have merit, that they would lead to improvement.

HK: The question that we had from the Today programme, Mrs Dixon, if that issue arose about health care where it seemed to be that delivery was not as good as had been promised, would the Health Secretary under your leadership have to resign?

MH: Let me answer that very specifically, I can't imagine that situation arising because the whole purpose of our reforms in the Health Service is to ensure that while we intend to spend as much money as the present government over the next few years, we will use it in different ways and it will get to the front line because we would do away with a lot of the bureaucracy which is currently getting in the way of allowing the doctors and nurses to use their discretion and if they use their discretion and they had the resources available, I can't imagine that this case could ever arise under the Conservative government but if it did, it would show that our policies had failed and if our policies had failed, then the Health Secretary would have to bear the responsibility.

HK: Michael, there's another little bundle of questions and I hope that people will forgive me for dealing with it in this way but there's a bundle of questions really around the whole business of how do you bring people in. Our youngest councillor there raised the fact that there are all these people who are in pressure groups and people who

are interested in politics, if they aren't drawn into the tent of the more traditional politics, then you're likely to get more extreme forms of political activity, how do you draw people in? Then we heard from the young man who mentioned the issues of asylum and immigration and how those can very often alienate sections of our communities, how do we counter xenophobia, how do we create the inclusive society and how do we reach the people who are not on the traditional lists of people who vote, how do we get out to the people who are not participating?

MH: It's quite wrong just let me say that we are only interested in using marked registers and only canvassing people who have voted before, it's not our approach at all. I'd want to get every Conservative vote I can at this coming election. But the only answer... look it's easy to say but it's extremely hard to do, so I fully accept that our performance isn't what I would like it to be but the only thing you can do is engage, so you have to engage the interest groups and you have to engage in different ways for all groups. You have to engage with the BNP, I am the only party leader who went to Burnley and made a speech directly confronting the BNP and saying that they were an evil racist party which had had no part in our party politics and I went to Burnley and made that speech because I don't believe you can brush these things and sweep these things under the carpet, I think you have to take these things head on. You have to engage, that's what you have to do, we're not as good as we should be at doing it.

HK: And there was a question there and I'm sure that the answer is yes, should we involve the voluntary sector?

MH: It's much more than yes, it is yes but it's much more than that because I think that the voluntary sector has a much more important role in delivering of services than the statutory sector often can and I want to involve the voluntary sector much more. I remember quite a long time ago I was Minister for Housing and I set up the first initiative for young speakers and what I did then, I got to know quite well someone who many people on the panel will know, he's someone called Nick Hardwick who was then running a hostel for the homeless in Soho called Centrepoin and I worked quite closely with him and he said to me and I've never forgotten it, he said 'If you want to spend government money and get the biggest bang for your buck, do it through volunteers' because actually you get much better results because they will have the enthusiasm volunteering brings with it, so wherever you can use volunteers and I haven't forgotten that and it's much more than a yes. I really want voluntary bodies and a voluntary sector to play a real front line row in delivering services and we've got a number of specific policies which will achieve that.

HK: I'm going to take a few more questions before we wind up this session, there's a gentleman there who's had his hand up for a long time?

AM: Electoral education, we've been looking for the last four years at quite how we might engage people and one of the questions to turn up was this, I always understood that when an MP is elected, they then represent all their constituents and not just those that voted for them, if this is correct, how can a three line whip be legitimate? Where can these constituents encourage the perception of more people to turn out for elections? The days as you said of the fixed party loyalty are past and eroded and no government can now presume that people will vote for them and they will accept any bill that's dreamt up by that government. If the government cannot convince the majority of the House of Commons that a Bill is worthwhile without undue pressure, then surely it is not a good Bill.

*(Applause)*

HK: And I'll bring us back to that again, the gentleman there with the beige jersey and then along that row?

AM: Mr Howard, as you said drug addiction is a serious problem in this country and concerns everybody and you've taken a strong line on it but there are huge numbers of young people who take drugs on a social basis and this is shown as an enormous proportion at university and school or whatever and I think it's one of the things that disengages people from the political process, the language that makes drugs spoken about when it's something that everyone they know in their good jobs did as someone in their teenage years or early 20s and I just wondered if you yourself had ever taken drugs when you were younger and whether that informed the way that you feel about drugs now?

HK: You're going to have time to think about that answer!

*(Laughter)*

AM: I'm Miles Weaver from Ashton Business School, I wrote to one of my local MP's, who you sat next to for PMQs yesterday or the day before and I wrote to him saying I'm an activist and I want to get involved in local community activities and then he wrote back to me and he said did I want to go into parliament and see him and then I told him I was a labour supporter and then I never heard anything from him again! I want to talk about engagement, I go and vote at the ballot box and also I watch the media, what else can I do, how else can I be involved?

HK: Okay the person in the front row, the student in the front row?

AM: Hi, if there's a conflict between the views of the public and your own personal views or the views of your party, what do you do if there was a turnaround, the views of the general public on the Euro for example, would you then change your policies or would you keep them the same and make it easier for people to vote?

HK: And then the chap with the white shirt and that's it.

AM: Hi, I'm John Richie, I'm a student at Birmingham University. Do you believe that personality politics is a running a risk of colliding with the political issues? More concisely does creating personalities of vulnerable members of the public such as NHS patients help proper engagement with issues?

*(Applause)*

HK: Now this issue which was raised by the gentleman on the right about the whips system is actually one that comes up time and time again in our evidence gathering sessions, people feel you're an MP, you vote for your MP, he's a decent guy or decent woman but they get in there and the parties make them do what the party wants them to do, the whips force them to go along particular lines and they feel somehow that means they don't get what they want which is a politician who really is there giving up what he believes in or she believes in.

MH: Well I'll tell you what a three line whip actually is, a three line whip actually is a summons to attend parliament and be there for a particular debate, that's what the whip is, that's what it actually says on the form. Now of course a government wants to get its business through and an opposition party wants to be united, so there will be attempts made, quite legitimate and reasonable attempts to persuade government

back-benchers to support the government and opposition back-benchers to support the opposition line but at the end of the day it is up to each individual member of parliament and people do vote against three line whips, we saw it last week, well this week as well, the beginning of this week to a very significant extent. The members of parliament, individual members of parliament are always free to do that.

The way to test it, is this surely... I hold regular constituency advice centres, and I always have and anybody can come in off the street and they can talk to me about anything they like and it's my responsibility and my job to justify to them what I've done. So if I voted with my party on an issue which I knew my constituents feel strongly that I shouldn't have done, they can come and see me and ask me why, they can also do it in person and then I've got to justify what I've done to them and if I can convincingly justify what I've done to them, I may continue to get their vote and if I fail to justify convincingly what I've done, I dare say I won't get their vote and that's what accountable democracy is about. So people aren't obliged, it's not... it's persuasion...

AM: Once every four years Mr Howard.

MH: Once every four years, well that's right. Well that's parliamentary democracy, what's the alternative? I don't believe it would make sense to have a referendum on every vote that came through the House of Commons so that's the system we have, parliamentary democracy.

HK: No I'm not having people shouting out from the back row, sorry you have to put your hand up and participate in the way that we have agreed. The young man in the front row made the issue of... it's really about principles which is what he was saying, supposing the general public on a referendum take a different view from your own party's position for example on issues to do with Europe, to what extent are you then prepared in leadership to then change your position?

MH: Well you have to accept the result of the referendum and if you know people feel so strongly about the issue and the referendum's been lost, you'd have to consider your position but you can't... if you have a referendum, then the people have spoken.

HK: There was a question there which was on the double speak around drugs, which it would suggest there's a real turn off to people because it's part of the experience of so many young people and that to hear denunciation from older politicians really it creates a disconnect and there was a question of you as to whether you have appropriately forgotten your misadventures if you ever had one, what is your answer to the question? Did you inhale!

*(Laughter)*

MH: It's one of the few issues on which I agree with government Ministers, we don't answer that question and you shouldn't draw any inference from the fact that we don't answer that question but I don't think it's right for people to go and ask every Cabinet Minister or every Shadow Cabinet member what they did when they were at university so I'm not going to answer that question but I do think that you have to face up to the fact that it is a real problem, there's more and more evidence that cannabis does a great deal of damage, quite apart from the other drugs, quite apart from crack and heroine and the other drugs, the amphetamines, cannabis does a lot of damage, that's why I think it shouldn't have been declassified by the government and those people who disagree with that are perfectly entitled to your views, I think it sends out entirely the wrong signal, we would reclassify it if we win the election which a lot of

people don't like but I think that is the right thing to do and I would do what I think is right in the interests of the country.

HK: There was a question about personality politics, I mean there's two parts to this question, one is are we becoming much more involved in the politics of personality where if you're not a charismatic leader then you haven't got a hope, I mean could we not do with a little less charisma and a bit more reality?

MH: I would love it if we could confine ourselves to just parading the issues and arguing on the merits and demerits of individual policy but I suppose people are entitled to their view of the kind of guy they're going to have as their Prime Minister and I suppose it's legitimate and it's part of the electoral process.

HK: But the second part of the question around personality politics was don't we all see the use of personalities within our community in ways that might be unacceptable? I think the suggestion was being made in relation to Mrs Dixon last night, that we find an example and we try to run with it in a very adversarial way, that perhaps debases the debate.

MH: Look Mrs Dixon came to me for help, she'd already been to John Reid, John Reid had been written to five weeks ago and telling all the details of her case and she hadn't had a reply and she wanted an operation, she's had it cancelled seven times so she came to me for help, there was no point in my writing to John Reid, someone had already written. Now she's been given a date for her operation and so that's a result but it's also true that this is not an isolated case, that 67,000 people had operations cancelled in the Health Service last year and there's a question given the very considerable extra money that's been spent on the Health Service about whether the tax-payers are getting value for money. We say that a lot of the money has been wasted on bureaucracy, 26,000 extra bureaucrats in the Health Service since the present government have taken office but we have particular policies which would scale down the bureaucracy. So that's a legitimate public argument between us and the government on the way the Health Service should be run and if you have an individual case where the person concerned is very happy for her case to be made known publicly and obviously it's quite wrong to do it if the person concerned wasn't willing for it, wasn't happy for it to be done, Margaret Dixon was very happy for her case to be made public and if her case exemplifies and illustrates a point which is an important significant political debate, I can't I'm afraid see anything wrong at all in letting that case exemplify that issue, that's what politics should be about, that's what democracy should be about.

HK: Well I want to draw the session to a close now because we have run out of time, I want to thank our witness, the leader of the Conservative party, Michael Howard...

*(Applause)*

*END OF SESSION*

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