

POWER Inquiry Witness Session – London**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.

Witness**Professor Pippa Norris** [by video link] **[PN]**

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How can the way elections are organised affect voter turnouts?

PN: Arrangements for elections can really make a difference for the turnout in all sorts of ways. The first thing to ask is “what are the incentives to vote”? What are the ways in which we’re going to get people out? One thing which matters is proportional representation of electoral systems, we can compare those in many countries, Europe and other established democracies and they always have normally a higher level of turnout than majoritarian first-past-the-post system quite simply because you get fewer wasted votes.

The second factor, party competition, and again that’s related; so if you have more competitive elections, if you have in particular closer elections as you run up, then we know that again we get higher levels of turnout.

The third factor which matters in other countries is compulsory voting and again we don’t use that in Britain, wherever it exists in established democracies where it’s implemented, you normally get turnout about 8% higher than in other countries.

And other factors which are much more about the costs of voting are whether or not you have an election for example on a rest day, a holiday, or whether it’s a work day. Can people actually get to the polls? What are the number of contests? How many elections do you have? And again the frequency of elections in Britain for example, which has really increased in the last decade is one potential reason why turnout might have declined – voter fatigue.

We know that where we have universal postal voting, where it's automatically available, then it does make a difference that can be as we saw quite substantial. In the Electoral Commission tests of postal voting, turnout went up by 15%.

What challenges does the rise of extra parliamentary activity pose for an established democracy?

PN: I think there are three in particular that we want to consider and they're not consequences where we know a great deal about the actual evidence, but three potential issues. One is social inequality. We risk greater social inequalities, for example amongst the low skilled, amongst those who are less educated, amongst ethnic minorities or poorer sectors of the population because it's often thought to be the more educated who demonstrate. To counter that, we have to say that when we've studied demonstrators at the time they're demonstrating, we do find that there's quite a broad cross-section of the public that does get mobilised, depending on the organisation

The second issue is about consequences for the democratic political process. Does it mean for example that demonstrations are less effective than for example joining parties, joining unions or joining churches, the old forms of civic engagement, and there I think we have to say that you can have as much impact through demonstrations as you can through the older forms of civic engagement.

And the third consequence I'd like to raise is essentially for governance and for how representative democracies respond. And here again it's more difficult I think for governments to respond; is the rise of cause-oriented single issue politics, so you get a weakening of what we term in social science as aggregating institutions, it's just much more difficult to satisfy all those different constituencies.

How can the movements you have discussed feed into more conventional politics? How can that political energy be harnessed?

PN: When we've actually looked at people who demonstrate, what we find is that it isn't necessarily a trade-off. Those people who are active are often active across a wide spectrum of different types of activities; parties for example are very active in organising demonstrations, trade unions mobilise people to take part in public sector pay disputes, environmental groups will both use a variety of forms of consumer boycotts but they'll also use demonstrations and they'll also try and influence elections, for example through green parties and so on. So I think there is an interaction of the new forms with the old forms,

However, citizens have changed and quite simply cultural shifts and the rising levels of education and civic skills that people now have makes them feel more confidence that they can participate through a variety of different mechanisms. So they're not simply joining out of loyalties they're joining more out of choice

Another thing which has changed, which I think is really important, is where power is and again if you think back to the 50s, you tried to influence parliament because that was seen as the core of representative democracy and what's shifted is that power has moved from the core nation state, it's moved upwards and downwards, upwards towards the European Union, towards NATO, towards the United Nations.

Activists are making a rational decision: "how do I affect public policy on the issues I care about"? Lobbying parliament is not unimportant, it's not that they've become irrelevant by any means, I wouldn't want to claim that, but that parliament, the British

parliament alone, the nation state alone can't take many of these decisions and so these other forms of activism if you like might be seen as more effective than simply trying to change elections.

Some observers might feel that actually national level politicians are hiding behind the skirts of globalisation and actually there's a lot more that they could be doing,

PN: Many politicians now play the game whereby they say "well we are defending your interests" in public but then they go to Brussels and of course behind closed doors because the process isn't transparent or in other venues such as the Security Council of the United Nations or in other closed door negotiations, they might well actually agree and bargain and compromise and have a different set of decisions which are going on there. It's partly the European Union which has created this complexity of decision-making and the lack of transparency, but it's also partly just the nature of global politics.

A simple way to remedy this could be something like the procedures used in Denmark, where proposals are first discussed within the legislature, before Ministers and decision-makers will go to Brussels. And therefore there's much more of a binding form in their decision-making processes and much more opportunity for the legislature to have a real impact on what goes on in Brussels.

Do you regard non-competitive elections as an important factor or just a factor on top of other factors?

PN: I do think it's really important and in fact it's critical in Britain. if one looks for example at the winner's bonus, which is to say the proportion of seats which the first party gets in Britain, then you can see systematically that that's increased. So, the system becomes less responsive; a small shift in public opinion which in the 1950s could easily kick one party out and bring the other party in, has broken down. And that's to do with complex factors including the work of the Boundary Commission, how frequently it actually redistributes seats, the nature of population change in Britain – and how far the boundaries actually reflect that the disproportionality of constituencies which have emerged.

When the Boundary Commission meets, it meets fairly infrequently but when it does meet to reorganise, essentially it's based itself on out of date census information. People have been leaving many of these inner city urban seats which are very much Labour strongholds and that means that their numbers of votes have been piling up – so you have enormous Labour majorities in Glasgow, in Liverpool, in Manchester, in many of the urban areas. Whereas in the older days it was much more competitive, particularly the pattern of party competition has really broken down, I think, in many regards – the pendulum has broken down.

As you mentioned, power has gone upwards, downwards and outwards. And my question then is: does that leave a vacuum in the middle and if it leaves a vacuum in the middle, does the Commission really need to consider the middle? Or is it that the middle is now exercising a different type of power

PN: What's changed I think is that the nation state – so what the government can do through parliament has really shifted in dramatic ways and with multiple veto points, it just makes it far more difficult for any government, no matter what its majority is, to implement its policies in a way in which we used to have through parliamentary

sovereignty. Multiple veto points and the lack of transparency are issues which I think the Power Commission could address and we could also think much more about what role parliament has in British politics. Are there ways in which it could open itself more to members of the public so they're not simply confined increasingly to the viewers gallery or watching it on television, but could play more of a role, for example by having more open commissions, by having more open hearings,?

I think that parliament needs to think much harder about what it's doing and about what citizens want of parliament and not to simply blame the public, which is very common, or to think of other things to change. For example civic education is often seen as a panacea; if we just educate for example school kids in how parliament works, somehow we'll change the nature of their relationship to parliament. Well no, parliament needs to change how it conducts its business, how it opens itself to the public. Because the citizens have changed and you're never going to, as it were, put the genie back into the bottle and make citizens continue to be deferential, loyal and interested in parliament if parliament doesn't alter the way it does its business.

You mentioned that compulsory voting put turnout up by about 8%. Could you say a little more about how that works and does it create resentment as an obligation in those countries where it takes place?

PN: It does have a number of consequences I think, one is that, in terms of the actual number of votes cast, the numbers go up and that's true in all established democracies with effective implementation.

However, there are other things to bear in mind which is for example mobilising agencies like parties often don't do as much work in Australia because they know that most people are going to have to turnout to the polls,

You also get more spoilt ballots, people turn up to the polls but they don't actually cast a vote, it's 'none of the above'. And there is a little bit of evidence which is it might also benefit some extreme parties and particularly in Belgium there's some work which says that partly because of compulsory voting where people have to turn up by law, but when they get there they don't like any of the above and they might cast their vote in the case of Belgium for Vlaams Blok, a very extreme radical right party.

So I think compulsory voting if it was introduced in Britain with modest fines or modest compulsion, shall we say, would indeed push up turnout but I do think in a way it's a mechanical device and it's a plastering over of the real problems and it comes back to the problems mentioned earlier – if you had party competition in Britain which is something which can be achieved through appropriate legal institutional reforms, if we had better party competition, a closer election result, then you'd get the incentive. And on balance if you had to think about compulsory voting as the stick and party competition as the carrot, then clearly the carrot is much more effective because it actually means that people are voting and turning-out to the ballot box because they think they're going to make a difference.

Candidates are coming from a smaller and smaller pool, does that affect the quality of the people that we get in public office. Is there another way of nominating candidates or should we try to only nominate through parties?

PN: Some countries have gone down the primary route which really does open it up but it would have tremendous consequences by weakening political parties in Britain. In particular, members and activists would no longer have much incentive to take part because one of their main rewards in a way is that they can at least pick their own standard bearer and their own candidate who will then run through for the campaign.

You're much more likely to get a middle of the road candidate with primaries, one who is less perhaps committed to the party principles and who stands on the basis of their own reputation, you're more likely to get for example celebrities or people who already have name recognition, you might get people who have more personal funds because they'd be able to campaign in a primary, they would be the ones who actually could get their name out by any form of advertising that's available or could do direct mail – and you'd be much more likely therefore to get a greater social bias of the people who are actually selected because we know that the name recognition and everything else is amongst certain groups. You might have fewer women, you might have fewer ethnic minorities, you might have fewer working-class candidates.

But measures which could really encourage more groups to come forward might be an important innovation and here I think we can think of two types of measures which are very practical: one is essentially equal opportunity policies. Many do say that there are financial barriers in standing; that they have to travel a lot, they have to go and campaign a lot and parties have very limited resources, they have to go round to different meetings to get selected. So public funding for example which could be there to try and encourage people to come forward into the pool of eligibles, into those who might consider a parliamentary career or a career in local government might be good.

And the other thing that can be done is affirmative and positive action within parties which can engage and encourage a broader pool of applicants to consider political life. What we haven't done however is do this for all parties, which some other countries have done. Increasingly more and more European parties and more and more parties in Latin America and elsewhere have used positive action, not just on a voluntary basis within parties, but on a statutory basis; for example by saying that there should be a certain proportion of a particular under-represented group in the total pool of candidates that's selected and again most of this work has been done for women, where it's argued for example there should be a minimum, say a 20% or a 30% pool of women in the candidates which a party puts forward.

If we actually initiate greater diversity in the candidates, if we use public action in order to try and really both improve equal opportunities and also improve positive, affirmative action, then I think we're actually likely to make parliament more relevant and people who tune in for example to watch the activities will no longer see quite such a male, middle-class and middle-aged, and broadly middle-income sort of assembly

Should we be having live TV debates here to encourage political interest?

PN: Those sorts of debates add an element of uncertainty which bring more viewers in, which bring attention to the campaign and which do expose candidates, depending on the format. The ways in which the debates are conducted is really important. The one which really works best I think is where the public are invited into the studio and question senior candidates. I think in a sense what we need to do is make sure that the politicians' their feet are held to the fire and that means that they have an opportunity for a live debate with the public asking them questions about the campaign.

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