

**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 Paul Whiteley [PW]**

Professor of Politics at Essex University

**The demonstration against the Iraq War was the biggest demonstration that we have ever seen and yet nothing happened as a result. Is that a significant factor in people's involvement?**

**PW:** Whether or not you succeed does have a big impact on the incentives to participate and some of the reasons why the decline in participation in parties has occurred is because of decline in incentives to be involved. But you could imagine some of those people who felt that the Iraq War demonstration was a failure, it's spurring them on to continue, to work harder just as much as you would get people saying ah well it's not worth getting involved. So I think before something like that becomes really something that will turn people off, you have to have a systematic failure, you have to have an inability to get your voice heard and a one-off demonstration, even though it was impressive, isn't enough to do that.

**I believe that young people are more interested in politics today than they have ever been before but they just feel that they're not being listened to. In another way I feel that they seem a bit disengaged and they don't feel part of the process**

**PW:** if you ask a generalised question to people and young people included about levels of interest in politics, that's not changed very much, it's quite high. It's when you come to party politics and electoral politics that you see a change

**Could you explain a little of the reasons why the fall in the turnout among young people in 2001 is a cohort affect and not the other sort of affect? How do you know that they will go on behaving like that as they go into their 30s and 40s?**

**PW:** What you have to do is statistically model it – and the modelling suggests that it's not just a matter of growing older, it's a matter that they really do look at it differently, these new groups.

We think there's pretty convincing evidence that from about the 1990s onwards, young people particularly have changed – in the way they look at society and their obligations to society.

**And is that to do with increased consumerism, individualisation, the lack of the collective?**

**PW:** Yes, because you can see in lots of areas similar processes at work, of individualisation, consumerism, loss of security, people worried about their pensions and so on, marketisation – all of which brings great benefit but one of the effects they have is undermining people's sense of civic duty. You can look at turnout as an exercise in rational action. If you apply that kind of logic - and it's an abstract logic which captures only part of the reality - but if you apply that kind of logic, nobody would vote. The only thing that makes them vote is a sense of civic duty; that's why civic duty is so important.

One of the things we've discovered is there's an awful lot more people who are not on the electoral register despite the fact that technically it's illegal not to be on it. The electoral register is not in good shape. Now, my suggestion would be and it's slightly authoritarian is that the Office of National Statistics pursues people relentlessly if they don't send in their census forms and rightly so because we really need that census data to find out what's going on, so if you don't fill your census form in, then they chase you relentlessly. The Electoral Commission that manages the electoral register does not do that, I think there's a case for not introducing compulsory voting but for making sure that people register and actually threaten them a bit.

**You talk of voting in terms of a civic duty. But why should people have a duty to participate in a system that doesn't respond their engagement in it?**

**PW:** There's a lot of voluntary activity and a lot of it very informed voluntary activity. Britain doesn't really have a deficit in that sense. So you could say that social capital and forms of participation that are not linked to elections and party membership and so on are okay in many respects, so you have a point there. But you see the problem is that voting is crucial to democracy; you can't conceive of democracy surviving if large numbers of people don't vote.

**Are parties interested in having large memberships?**

**PW:** There are incentives to weaken party democracy and make the leadership dominate, there are clear incentives in all parties to do that. The problem is if parties are weak, what you get is not democracy, you get interest group politics and the United States is a very good example where interest group politics is very, very dominant because relatively speaking American political parties are rather weak.

What does interest group politics do? It delivers benefits to those who are able to shout loudest and exert most influence and that is not the people you were talking about.

And the other thing too is that interest groups are “irresponsible” in the classical meaning of that word: that is to say they are there to try to get benefits for their members. You’re not interested in sharing costs, you want benefits but you want everybody else to share the cost. It’s a process of what the theorists call ‘concentrated benefits and distributed costs’, you concentrate the benefits on you and your supporters and distribute the costs to everyone.

Now the great thing about parties is that they are organisations that have to have a narrative, have to have an explanation for costs because the first thing that journalists ask when addressing a party leader is ‘all right, you’re going to do this, you’re going to do that, where’s the money coming from? What’s your proposals for taxation?’ And they have to defend their position on that. So parties are encompassing organisations that are good at sharing costs as well as benefits. Interest groups are very bad at sharing costs and they just want the benefits and a society dominated by interest groups will produce weak government and biased government in which powerful interests that can be heard will get benefits and nobody else will.

If you were to ask me what’s the single most important way we could turn that around and it’s a big agenda, it’s the process of revitalising parties and rebuilding them. It could be done if you took devolution down to the grass-roots and to local government seriously. That is, not necessarily devolution to regions but devolution to revitalise local government. We should decentralise and that would be a way to revive parties which are based upon local politics for the most part.