

POWER Inquiry Witness Session 7 – Bristol

Witness Session
12-5pm, 24 June 2005

Armada House, Telephone Avenue,
Bristol, BS1 4BQ

Single issue and protest politics: exploring the rise of extra-parliamentary political participation and its impact on the democratic process

Digest of Bristol Witness Session – Protest and campaign politics

This paper provides a summary of the full transcript of this witness session by paraphrasing witnesses' answers to specific questions

Witnesses

Lord Mancroft – Board Director of the Countryside Alliance and Conservative Peer

Peter Tatchell – Human Rights campaigner and co-founder of Outrage!

Hilary Wainwright – Editor of *Red Pepper* and fellow at the Centre for Global Governance at the LSE and Transnational Institute in Amsterdam

Abbreviations

AM	Audience Member [individual names indicated]	
BF	Ben Freeman	Commissioner
PG	Pam Giddy	Chair
FOG	Frances O'Grady	Commissioner
BM	Bano Murtuja	Commissioner
PC	Phil Carey	Commissioner
FM	Ferdinand Mount	Commissioner
HW	Hilary Wainwright	Witness
PT	Peter Tatchell	Witness
LM	Lord Mancroft	Witness

Commission: Why have we witnessed the growth of single issue politics in contrast to a marked decline in party membership and activity?

HW: I have to question this notion of single issue because I think actually what's more interesting and newer is the development of social movements that in a sense are developing a wider politics with a small p. And that what's most challenging to political parties because there have always been single issues, which left the political parties in charge of politics. Single issue groups didn't actually challenge the monopoly of parties over politics and I think the new movements that we've seen really, since 1968, have been and are developing a wider view. I want to really distinguish between the limits of political parties as such and people's experiences of those limits - and the limits of political parties in our existing political system here in Britain.

I think that, in terms of the limits of political parties as such, that's in some ways the most interesting. And there I think, concentrating on the West and here, I think what we've seen is a decline in the optimism that followed the Second World War in the idea of the state being able to resolve things. It's partly the state not responding but it's deeper than that. It's actually all of the social relationships in which power is being exercised, in which oppression is being experienced that require action in addition to the state, beyond the state. So the women's movement was my most direct experience where it was a matter of partly changing relationships with men in your daily life, it was partly about creating new kinds of public provision, whether it was women's centres, rape crisis centres, well women clinics and so on, which in a way only the women experiencing the problem could initiate. Now it's not to deny that political parties, political action then became necessary but I think that there's that fundamental limit to political parties and I think that leads to a very different notion of what political parties can do. Then there's the particularities of the blockages in our political system, the feeling that politics is so much fought at the centre that the kind of ideas, innovations and visions coming from outside the centre are not reflected and therefore a feeling that the only thing to do is to take direct action.

LM: I think one of the foremost things is that there is a widely held perception that traditional democratic processes in this country simply don't deliver. People find them immensely frustrating and they see one government come and another go and they never see any change. And the issues of the single issue groups, which may not be seen as one issue but may be seen as a range of connected issues. The Countryside Alliance is not all about hunting; it is about a range of rural issues which we may come back to. But it's very much black and white and I think one of the problems for the government, apart from the fact that it is currently perceived as not being able to deliver, is that a lot of political arguments today aren't that great. What they're actually arguing about is I can do it better than you and actually most of them don't do it very well at all.

PT: I believe that one of the reasons for the growth of single issue politics and the disenchantment with mainstream orthodox parliamentary politics is because more and more people feel that their vote doesn't count, and the classic example of that was the last election. The last election in Britain was rigged; it was rigged by a voting system that allowed a party to get only 22% support from eligible voters and end up with 55% of the seats. That is not democracy; that is political corruption of the highest order and how dare we lecture Zimbabwe or Ukraine about the lack of democracy when we do not have a mature genuine democracy in Britain today. The British system today is as bad as the 19th century rotten boroughs. What we need today, in the absence of political resolve from the mainstream parties to put things right, is a new chartists or suffragette style movement to ensure that people's votes count, that we have a representative democracy where the views of the majority are actually reflected in the governing party or coalition. That is the only way that we're going to start the process of reinvigorating confidence in the political system and reengaging. It isn't the only solution, it isn't the only problem but it's the foundation from which everything else must flow.

Commission: When does direct action and protest become dangerous in terms of a lacking any accountability to political representatives or responsibility to the public?

LM: Campaign groups are not part of the democratic process; they are in response to a part of democratic process falling apart. They are a reaction to that. If they're not media savvy, if they can't make their issues sexy, they don't get heard and that is their real problem. There used to be a process for doing it; you used to write to your MP and he would raise it with a minister and in the old days members of both houses had immediate access to ministers. They don't have it anymore; that's denied so you can't bring issues that are raised. They're not raised to peers; they're raised to constituent MPs; they don't get through. And I'll give you a classic example: do you remember when the Red Cross produced a report on the prisoners being abused in Iraq? Why did that not get to Geoff Hoon's desk? Because the process which existed for years whereby junior ministers committees went to middle ranking ministers and all these issues got filtered out, the really serious ones found their way to the Private Secretary or the Secretary of State's desk. Everything was dealt with; nothing fell off the table. They dismantled that process completely because it interferes with their focus in government. Therefore where you've got awkward issues like that, or less awkward issues, domestic issues arise and they fall through the gaps. That's the problem.

The Commission: Does the pre-occupation with and association between single issue groups and stunt politics to gain instant media attention serve to cheapen or even undermine the compromise and dialogue that is so central to the democratic process?

PT: The way an organisation like Outrage has operated is on the basis that when issues get ignored by mainstream politicians, sometimes it's mildly justified and practically necessary to use unorthodox extra-parliamentary methods to put those issues in the public domain. This very much follows the historical trajectory of chartist and suffragettes. They were ignored so they protested and marched and petitioned outside of parliament to get their issue on the agenda. So when Outrage has a stunt like the kiss-in in Piccadilly Circus to protest against the arrest of gay and lesbian couples for kissing and holding hands in the street, we did that because no politician would listen or care. The police ignored all our pleas for a non-homophobic policy so we did the stunt, not as end in itself but as a means to an end and the means was to, first of all, get media coverage but not for its own sake, to get media coverage in order to raise public awareness, in order to provoke public debate, in order to put pressure on the government and the police to change their policy and in order to build a momentum for a longer, more sustained process of change. So the stunt was the beginning of a process and out of that process the idea is to build an awareness that leads to momentum for change so that those in power feel under pressure to address the concern that's hitherto been ignored. So I don't see stunts as cheapening the process; I see them as enriching it.

LM: One of the things that the single issues groups can do is grab headlines and that's fine. But having grabbed headlines and therefore grabbed the attention of the general public and the political establishment, those two groups have got to decide whether that issue is worthy or not and everybody has to exercise their judgement on these matters which you do every time you read an article in the new papers on a particular issue. You read the article and decide whether or not it's rubbish. That's what we do and, ultimately, when we go to the ballot box, that's what we do again. We cast our judgement on one person or another; we've been listening to the arguments. What a single issue group can do is take a single issue or a group of issues and throw it into the public's attention, to the political establishment's attention. What those two groups choose to do with it then is different matter.

Commission: Should single issue campaigns make more effort to work through parties or alternatively how do parties need to change to make links with campaigners?

PT: If the injustice is great enough and if we can, through our stunts, mobilise awareness and public opinion on our side, then those in power will also be obliged to address the issue and that will be the process of change. And of course as much as we do these so called stunts, we also sit down and negotiate with government ministers, the police and so on and so the stunt is just the beginning of the process. And we marshal a whole reservoir of research and case histories to substantiate what we're arguing for so that we come to sit down, and people in power who often think perhaps we're rather lunatic, dangerous people, are often surprised that we actually have very practical, tangible, concrete proposals that make a lot of sense.

HW: I think what's really a crucial lesson from these movements is the importance of political parties recognising that they're one actor for change amongst many and that even if we had a political party that was really supporting the kind of campaigns that that Outrage initiates, it would still be really important that a party actually supported the autonomy of Outrage to take those initiatives because, in a sense, they're able to take the initiative which changes the culture, changes public opinion. But then the party in parliament can help to represent and help to, as it were, harvest the results but the party isn't going to have the imagination, the knowledge, the feeling, the passion to take those initiatives so I think, in a way, it's plea for the commitment of parties to these movements but also the modesty of parties about their particular role.

PT: One of the reasons why the parties are not tuned to these issues is because of the corruption of the political system where only about a million votes actually count in a general election, the million votes in the most marginal constituencies. So the parties are constantly scrambling for those votes; they go to the middle ground of consensus and don't want to raise any uncomfortable issues which may alienate those voters. So that's part of the reason why so many issues are always kept on the margins and if we change the political system so votes really count and so that the minority parties have a place in our parliament, then perhaps we will get much better representation of these single issues and minority campaigns. The current political process encourages timidity, encourages caution and actually prevents change even when it has considerable popular support.

LM: We started talking about stunts and one stunt that I remember was eight guys who got into the House of Commons. That was very difficult for me because a lot of my colleagues at the House of Lords who are supportive of my campaigning issue, were absolutely horrified by that. They are mostly retired MPs and they thought it was the nearest thing to sacrilege. Reading what the newspapers were saying, from the broadsheets to the tabloids, some of them were horrified and some of them were joking; it was absurd. The interesting thing was not how everybody else viewed it; the interesting thing is how the MPs viewed it. They believe that their world is sacrosanct and they look only inwards which is really what Peter was saying. I went to the 1922 Committee the other day and again, we had this leadership row which was very carefully leaked to every newspaper in England, so I'm not saying anything out of turn. After having just lost an election and all the things that go in my party, all they were interested in was the right to the 22 and the rights to the House of Commons. I think that is a very serious political problem and that is why when you were saying what can parties do to change, I think they have to look in the mirror. They are so obsessed with the ivory tower of the Westminster village in which they live that they find it very difficult to get out of it.

Commission: In the past there seemed to be much closer links between issue groups and parties, there seems now to a kind of divorce by mutual consent. Why do parties seem to be closing in on themselves?

HW: I don't think many of the people involved in single issues or what I would view as a broader underview politics— are anti-party per se. I would love to be in a party that was supporting the movement and I'd like a really constructive relationship. It's interesting that at the same time that the parties are declining there are also new parties being created, both internationally and here in Britain. There's the Scottish Socialist Party which, because of PR, there's a possibility of a party closely related to the social movements, having a real voice and having a real impact. The Green Party is a part that's growing even though it's faced with the appalling consequences of the electoral system. But I think the other thing that's important in what you said highlights the sense in which this gap has grown and there used to be MPs and so on saying let's save the Labour Party, that were supportive of social movements. And I think there again we've got to go back to the electoral system. I would say that actually Tony Blair and New Labour are a product of the electoral system and that's a very strong argument for changing it. I don't know how to describe what he's done to the Labour Party. I was never a member but I and many other people had really positive relationships with the GLC for example. The Popular Planning Unit which I was involved with was about unlocking the resources of both the money , political legitimacy and clout of the state to support social movements that shared the electoral mandate of the party. It's a really good example of where a social process isn't about overthrowing representative democracy; it's actually about reinvigorating the franchise, potentially giving power to the vote and I think if we had a proper, fair, democratic electoral system then we could see a completely different relationship between parties and movements.

LM: I think part of the problem with that is that there is no incentive either for the government at the top or individual MPs to change the process because they benefit from it. You are right in that a lot of MPs used to be involved more in campaign groups and are involved in the less controversial ones. But once they become party political controversial they withdraw from that process. I've thought for sometime that fear is the governing factor in politics and that the individual politicians and parties are terrified of the way that the electorate perceive them. Another issue I've been involved in is the drug issue. I happen to think that we should legalise drugs; lots of people think that's a bad idea. But you can't even have a debate on it at Westminster because the one thing that MPs find terrifying is appearing to be weak. And I remember talking to Jack Straw about it when he was in the Home Office and he kept going on about this and I said to him that actually most people don't care whether you're strong or weak, they merely want you to be effective. And he looked amazed and said you've got to be tough on this and you've got to be tough on that and they're terrified of this perception of weakness. And that goes from the individual politician through to the party and it is preserved by this extraordinary stranglehold and this is a completely new post-war thing in this country that the executive has over the legislature. In America or France the three parts of the democratic process are defined and separated: it's judiciary, executive and legislative as we know. In this country when there is a row in parliament, between the two houses, it's not actually a row between the two houses because the House of Commons is not really now behaving like a legislature. It's entirely owned by the executive and so you've got this extraordinary situation where our constitution has evolved to such an extent that executive is entirely taken over the most important house in the legislature and therefore that house can only do what the executive wants it to do. Therefore it cannot respond to the arguments of other parties or the requirements of individual politicians either in its party or in another party.

Commission: Are we defining political participation by the media savvy ones amongst us at the expense of others? How do we filter your media saviness to those beneath radar?

HW: I do recognise what you're saying because I've been doing research with people in global communities that have been really marginalised by de-industrialisation and 30 years of government policy. At the moment we're talking about political parties not being responsive to local community groups; we as movement people often are much more so. And that's where you've got to look to the infrastructure of social movements. In a way this leads to the point about the nature of the movements and the absence of party democracy. The TUC have a number of problems but they have got a lasting rooted infrastructure. I think it's really important that local trade union organisations link up with local youth group and tenants groups and all those groups beneath the radar.

And also that's where the alternative media come in. Red Pepper is only one of a whole network of independent media. Another feature in the UK is that the media too suffer from our undemocratic system. After fascism in Italy, Germany, Spain and France legislation was introduced that required every newsagent to display whatever was published. If you go to those countries then you see the voices of the Green movement, the radical movements, the social movements in magazines and publications and they're therefore able to thrive and grow in circulations of tens of thousands. Red Pepper or Outrage's newspaper is competing, not just with Cosmopolitan, but also with crisps and coke for space because the newsagents are completely commercial because there's no protection of the right to alternative opinion, the right to alternative information. So I think that's another issue to deal with if we're talking about making the movements above the radar. We've got to deal with the institutionalised lack of democracy of the press or the conditions for a free press.

Audience questions

Should there be more use of Private Members Bills?

PT: I think the idea of a fixed allocation of time for private members bills would be a very healthy invigoration of the political process. There's already some time, but it should be massively expanded so that back bencher MPs can bring forward issues that don't necessarily fit with the political agenda of the government or opposition parties. So I think it's a very good move.

HW: Private members bill: yes. But also I think that we should open up the process by which their chosen and increase the number but also actually make it a process to which the public can have access and support. So I'd like to see a private members bill on this legislation about news agents I'd like to be able to go to an institution in parliament and say this is my proposal, how can I get some support to propose, to draw up a bill and put it before MPs?. This would be more than a petition. It would be legal support like neutral legal support for drawing up a bill that can then be taken up by MPs.

LM: I loath them. I spent 18 years looking at private members bill left, right and centre...they are a nightmare. The role of parliament is to allow the executive to legislate. The only reason you need private members bills, which is a very modern invention, is to allow the blithering idiots down the other end to make their ridiculous views known to all of us. It's because the executive legislates so badly. We shouldn't need to have single issue groups or people who need to legislate in that way because government should do it.

Which form of PR would more effectively promote the concerns of single issues?

PT: In terms of forms of PR, I broadly support the system in Scotland and London which retains the constituency member so there is some direct local accountability but has an additional member system from a list whereby the number of seats can be upped to ensure proper parity for minority parties. It's not perfect but it's a better system, a much fairer system than we've got.

HW : Let's take the single transferable vote or some modification of it because you get bigger constituencies and then a number of MPs for each constituency. I think that leads to a genuine form of accountability and diversity. I think the present ideas that constituencies really provide a real relationship with MPs is pretty meaningless. What you're trying to do out of multi member system would be that you'd have a variety of MPs in one constituency. You'd have the Left Labour or Green Labour or Green Left, the full range of a much bigger spectrum and movements what have more choice in terms of MPs to relate to. So I think it would actually lead to a more direct relationship between movements in that area and their representatives.

Would votes at 16 increase the number of young people voting later on in life?

PT: In terms of involving young people, I wouldn't say that voting at 16 is a panacea but I would say that it's probably part of the process. I think in terms of a basic principle of no taxation without representation, if you can work and earn and pay tax at 16, you should be able to vote as well.

HW: I agree with Peter but again it won't lead to people voting in much bigger numbers unless we have a change in the electoral system because young people will quickly realise that their vote isn't counting.

Doesn't the assertion that we can't criticise Zimbabwe undermine the fact that we have working democracy that we should value?

PT: Is it insulting to the Ukraine or elsewhere to say that we haven't got a fair democratic system, yes and no. We don't live under a dictatorship; we don't have the secret police knocking on people's doors but there's no doubt we do not have a genuinely representative democratic system. The government today does not enjoy anywhere near the majority support of the people who voted, let alone eligible voters. It's absolutely extraordinary and unbelievable that anybody can say or suggest that we have anything near a democracy when only a fifth of eligible voters supported Labour at the last election and only 36% of those who voted did. If we have to have coalitions, fine. If it has to be based on the fourth party, fine; it's all preferable to the current system. We have to make sure that the governing power has the broad support of at least a minimal majority of the population.

HW: I just think it's so clear that the system is not working well and that this is no model for the democratic movements for democracy in Ukraine and elsewhere. In a sense we can look to countries that are new democracies like the democracies that have emerged out of the struggle against the dictatorships in Latin America that have surpassed our democracies and actually produced models of democracy like the participatory kinds of democracy that exists in cities in Brazil far deeper than ours. So I think we shouldn't be complacent but we should look to the movements emerging against dictatorships as some of the sources of new ideas for us.