

**POWER Inquiry Witness Session – Bristol**

Witness Session  
12-5pm, 24 June 2005

Armada House, Telephone Avenue,  
Bristol, BS1 4BQ

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Democracy at the local level: Local participation and the role  
of decentralisation in reinvigorating democracy

**Digest of Bristol Session – Local democracy**

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

**Witnesses**

**Cllr Barbara Janke** – Leader of Bristol Council and Liberal Democrat Councillor

**Jesse Norman** – Co-founder of Conservative Campaign Group *Direct Democracy* and an Honorary Research Fellow in Philosophy, University College London

**Professor Gerry Stoker** – Professor of Government at Manchester and board member of the New Local Government Network

**Abbreviations**

|            |  |                     |
|------------|--|---------------------|
| <b>AM</b>  | <b>Audience Member</b><br>[individual names indicated] |                     |
| <b>BF</b>  | <b>Ben Freeman</b>                                     | <b>Commissioner</b> |
| <b>PG</b>  | <b>Pam Giddy</b>                                       | <b>Chair</b>        |
| <b>FOG</b> | <b>Frances O'Grady</b>                                 | <b>Commissioner</b> |
| <b>BM</b>  | <b>Bano Murtuja</b>                                    | <b>Commissioner</b> |
| <b>PC</b>  | <b>Phil Carey</b>                                      | <b>Commissioner</b> |
| <b>FM</b>  | <b>Ferdinand Mount</b>                                 | <b>Commissioner</b> |
| <b>BJ</b>  | <b>Barbara Janke</b>                                   | <b>Witness</b>      |
| <b>JN</b>  | <b>Jesse Norman</b>                                    | <b>Witness</b>      |
| <b>GS</b>  | <b>Gerry Stoker</b>                                    | <b>Witness</b>      |

**Commission:** The turnout in local elections in the UK has long been the lowest in Europe and in the last decade has ranged from 27% to 35%. What do you think are the main factors behind this profound disengagement at the local level in the UK?

**GS:** My main thesis as to why this has happened is because our local government is neither local or government and it's on a scale, when you compare it to virtually all of the other Western democracies, and certainly elsewhere in Europe, the average size of our authorities covers a population of over 100,000, it's at least half that on average in most European countries. Our system has been reorganised in a way which I think has taken it away from people. Secondly, and I think this probably explains the decrease in turnout more recently; it's no longer government. It's largely administration, putting together programmes that central government wants put together. There have been lots of reasons for why people don't vote in local elections but the main explanation, interestingly enough from the survey work that was done in the '70s and in the survey work that was done at the start of this new century, was that basically people thought local government was irrelevant so why would they vote? Because it's not actually addressing things that they think are important. And in many ways they actually don't even know enough about local government to make a judgement one way or the other; they don't feel that they understand what the local issues are.

**BJ:** I agree with the fact that local government doesn't have very clear powers. In fact I think it is governance rather than government which is more about delivering government targets and supervising government initiatives and so on. I would say a little bit in defence that we can see differences at different levels and I think that, certainly where seats are very heavily contested, then the voting turnout does go up and I think in some of our wards the highest is about 45%. But where it's lowest are in the areas of highest deprivation and you'd think perhaps that where people are feeling that there's injustice and they're deprived that they might feel the motivation go out in those. But they don't and I think there's a depression, a feeling that nobody is going to change anything much because, again, they don't have proper powers. My own children grew up during the Thatcher period and I was struck by the fact that in schools very, very little education was given about politics, political parties, civic rights, responsibilities and when I go into schools I think now that it's improving. But there is a feeling, certainly I get with young people, that they'd really like to know much more about it as it sounds quite exciting and interesting when you talk about it, but we just don't feel we know enough about it.

**JN:** First of all turnout itself is a very crude measure. There was very low turnout in America for their elections but no-one would say that local democracy in America wasn't thriving, bubbling and vigorous. I think the short answer is that this disengagement, this apathy, is an entirely rational reaction to loss and the loss is power within local government, accountability within parliament itself. Powers get sucked up to the centre but the centre is so distant from the everyday needs of voters that no-one really cares about it and the attraction or outcomes, both of which add up to a loss of power for voters. So this is a rational process of just response by voters to lack of power. Now one should also say that voting for fringe parties has certainly increased over the last 40 years and so there is clearly great distaste amongst people for politicians as a class, for parties themselves and for the whole business of politics as it's being conducted and contemporary areas of debate. So what is the thread of explanation? Answer: a sense of popular disempowerment, remote elites in central government, a loss of power to Brussels and a feeling that even if these guys in parliament could do anything they would be constrained by people over whom we have no real control. Also there is a lot of loss of powers to administrative voice, to quangos, and a feeling that local government itself has lacked the ability to achieve change and therefore is not worthy of a voter's engagement.

**Commission: Is greater control for Councils over their own budgets, and also greater revenue raising powers, necessary for engagement and also an efficient way of providing?**

**BJ:** I think it is certainly an important factor and I think that local government raises about 20% of our own expenditure in this country. I think in Europe that the proportions are probably reversed and people then do feel as though they are voting for something there. I don't think it's the only factor but I think local revenue raising is a very important factor in getting voters active.

**GS:** I think it's an important issue but it's actually quite a complicated issue. Both survey material recently and collected about five years ago, shows that the people think that about 75% of all funding, all local spending, actually comes from the local level. Another interesting piece of work that was done is that actually there is quite a lot of variation amongst local authorities, so some maybe have 80% of their funding provided by central government but some only have about 50% of their funding. One piece of work that was done last year was to see if there was any difference in turnout between those authorities and they didn't find any. So I don't think it's just a money question. I definitely agree that more money should be raised locally but I actually think to get people really engaged in politics we need to do two things. We need to give local government some real significant areas of policy choice, areas that a national politician can stand on national TV or radio and say, I don't want to answer that question because it's got nothing to do with me – this is a matter of local choice. We need to define what those are and we need to tell people what those are so that they can appreciate that. And secondly we need to find a way that local politicians can become more prominent and more well known so that they can actually have that conversation with their MP. We've actually got to get to that stage where we are able to have a breakthrough in terms of local democracy in this country because I think that's what happens in most other countries.

**JN:** Only Ireland has a more centralised form of government in Europe than this country and in most other countries in Europe local government raises 60% to 80% of the money that is spent itself. So finances are the key. I agree on the need to push individual decision making down. I think there's a lot to be said and we can span the policy spectrum and find lots and lots of ways to push power as well as budget down into local government. It's interesting to reflect that there are at the moment about 23,000 elected councillors in this country. There are 60,000 unelected people sitting on local administrative boards and quangos and there are another 30,000 sitting on centrally appointed quangos. So there are lots and lots of people who are involved in making decisions about your lives over whom you have no electoral input or control whatever. We're completely, as a nation, paralysed by the thought that there might be differentials in service between one local administration and another local administration. There is a very strong counterpart to the way it's been handled at the moment which is greater centralisation and the effort to ensure on consistent equality of treatment, lots of deference to central government in local government, no competition, very little innovation, very little sense of novel policy making.

**Commission: What does new localism actually mean and how would it address the fact that two-thirds of our councillors are white, middle-aged blokes?**

**GS:** Well basically it's a commitment across the board to try and devolve more decision making, whether that's devolved more decision making to the level of local government or within local government, devolved more decision making to the neighbourhood or area level or devolved decision making to users of different services because many of them can make a really important contribution to actually deciding what those services should be and the priorities within those services. Is it compatible with some element of individual choice alongside the collective choice, which obviously it's largely focusing on? I'm

relaxed about that because a lot of the individual choice I think is a very appropriate concern that people want to personalise some services to meet their own particular lifestyles, circumstances and conditions. So I actually don't see a big contradiction between the two and I don't see that new localism is inherently committed to more marketisation and more contracting out. I think it could be but that would have to be a choice that you allow local people to make.

**BJ:** I think the issue is about accessibility, about local leadership and about counsellors being able to take a strong role in their own communities. And how you provide the services, I think, is an issue for what's available and local choice and what can be afforded. Everything comes back to what can be afforded. But it's also about people taking responsibilities and, in return, having rights. Bristol is quite a centralised council and I've only been in it for a month so far so I'm allowed to say that. But you feel that it's not very responsive. I think also it is a way of getting more people to be involved and certainly in my own ward in Bristol there are only two counsellors of minority ethnic groups and they are both within my own party. And they have risen through their communities and the most important thing to them is what they can actually do for their communities. And so I think that whilst the parties do have different philosophical bases and do have different priorities, the issue for local government is to how those actually relate to local people's needs.

**JN:** We're trying to give people a sense that their political decisions and their votes matter. Now they choose and if they elect a local councillor that wishes to outsource massively that's just fine because that's their democratic right. If they choose to take the writings of Chairman Mao as holy writ that's just fine; they can get elected; they can get turfed out next time round. So I personally don't have any truck with the view that localism as such has to mean contracting out. It's about the exercise of power locally. Now I don't think, actually, contrary to what you've said, there's a consensus about this. People talk about new localism but I'm afraid, especially amongst its more latter day adherents, in some respects devoid of content. So if you look at the government's present view on localism that will involve things like regional government. The main lesson of the disastrous North East Assembly referendum is that regional government is the enemy of local government where it doesn't latch onto some identity. So Scottish government is absolutely fine because there's a distinct Scottish identity and there has been for hundreds of years. Welsh: slightly more marginal case but in many ways constitutionally and certainly at the level of popular feeling and personal identity very much the same sense. I do think that's an example of the kind of apparent localism agenda which actually, a true localist would object to. The other thing that I would say is that the hard questions haven't been asked yet. What about variable provision? What about this problem I had where someone in Hull is getting one standard of service and someone in Westminster is getting another standard of service? It seems to me that that's a really big issue. It's all very well talking about new localism but if you don't find a solution to that problem you're not really engaging with the issue.

**Commission:** **How do we get from where we are to where we want to get to? Do we give Councils these powers in a big bang approach or do you start by building up the infrastructure, the governance, make people properly paid, make it attractive and, having got that, over a longer period of time trying to get to where you want to be?**

**GS:** What I have tried to do is identify issues that definitely have a strong spatial or territorial element, issues that involve quite extensive integration and issues that will engage quite a wide range of the local population. Now, that led me to an analysis which said that maybe we had to accept that education has actually become a national service within the UK. It's become a national service in part because we've actually seen it as so central to people's citizenship rights; it's actually a defining where we can't allow people in

Hull to have a different quality of service from people in Westminster because it wouldn't be fair because the one thing that we know that can actually guarantee a relatively decent and worthwhile lifestyle for people in their lives is that they get access to a decent quality of education. So maybe there are some issues where we just have to accept that they're part of national citizenship; we stop pretending that they're not part of national citizenship and we simply charge national government with finding the money to make that service work. There's still, of course, the very important local role in delivery and there's some significant governance arrangements around that. But I wouldn't try and rebuild my local government system around what I regard as an issue of national citizenship whereas the issues that I've chosen are issues where frankly the solution in Bristol is going to be very different to the solution in Cumbria.

**JN:** There's a principle we might think about which reverses the revolutionary slogan of the American Independence and say no representation without taxation. You are not going to get improvements from high quality of local council membership if you do not push power, and specifically budgetary power, down into local government because people just don't know what the point is. On the extent to which political representation is going to be representative, it seems to me that there's a chicken and egg problem in that the conservative party seems to have decided that many ethnic minorities are just not attractive people to work into it. I think that's completely mad; the Conservatives historically have never been like that – it's been a party of opportunity and a party which many immigrants could their homes very happily in and the sooner we get back to that, the better. And if we need to have all kinds of interesting things to encourage greater female participation then we should absolutely do it

**BJ:** One of the issues I think is that we have had very much failing cities in this country compared to European terms particularly. And one way forward, I think, would be to give some of the cities more powers to be much stronger vehicles for economic development because, at the moment, the stranglehold of central government is holding people back, whether it's on transport, whether it's on investment in affordable housing, whether it's on the huge amount of hoops that we all have to jump through to get a bit of road finished, or crime. Some cities would like to introduce tolerance zones for prostitution or smoke-free cities or this kind of thing but they can't because this is all central government planned. So I think a creative way forward might be to see the cities as a vanguard, to give them more powers and to see whether they could actually take this forward as part of a phased process.

**At some point devolution has to start and decisions have to be made. Who, what and where are we going to making people accountable for that?**

**GS:** We need some mix of electoral accountability and other forms of accountability. Electoral accountability is the most equal form of participation and the trouble with local elections is people don't vote on local issues a lot of the time. They vote on national issues. So we need local elections that are about local issues that hold people to account. So I think elections are very important but, beyond that we need a whole range of what I suppose I call stakeholder forms of democracy to engage people, to get people actively involved in decisions, to involve people in making budget decisions. Citizens' juries are great because they enable people to actually learn and gain knowledge about an issue and I think that there's fantastic scope for extending the forms of involvement we have as well. So you have dual systems of accountability; you have elections and then you have these stakeholder systems of accountability to run alongside. And there's always going to be a bit of a tension between the two because their logics are rather different, but I would hope that you could actually have a discussion of people so that they recognise the virtues and values of both and I think that would be plausible.

**Do you see any ways of reviving parties at the local level? What can be done to thicken the political base of local government?**

**JN:** I think that the essence of this is accountability. I think the political accountability is crucial but these other things are definitely worth experimenting with. Those are the things that we should come to once we've cracked the main issue which has to do with getting people moving and excited and interested about local government. I personally think that parties are a necessary evil for traditional reasons which have to do with coordination and recruitment and framing a certain debate in certain ways which, while we may dislike it, at least has the merit that lots of different views are actually put on the table and coherently argued. I think that the problem with political power is too much central government. This massive decline in party membership does correlate very strongly with removal of powers to Westminster. So in other words the disengagement that we've seen at the voting booth is not just there; it's also in party membership.

**GS:** The best political parties are those that actually can adapt. I share your research which shows just how depleted they are as institutions and how pathetic they are and we're going to try and build our democracy around them? On the other hand it's difficult to think of any other branding institution that could work, but it needs to work in a different way. The best political leaders are those that, like the leaders in Manchester, my city, present themselves as Mancunians first and party people second. That's the engagement we need at the local level.

**BJ:** I think that the proportional representation argument is a good one because I think that systems like that favour minorities and favour competition and, in my opinion, the most active political parties are the ones who feel they're in with a chance of winning something. I think that it's the system that favours the two parties, first past the post, that is moribund, rather than the specific parties. But if you've got competition then I think you'll get party membership levels up.

### **Audience Questions**

**AM: How does the political system in the UK make itself more responsive when we are a unitary state?**

**JN:** We are a unitary state and these devolutionary mechanisms are ambiguous as between a genuine movement of power and buying off sources of political dissent and many of you are aware of that. In the unitary state the real issue is in a common law society with no entrenched statute, how do you, once you've made these changes, genuinely push power and keep it down at the local level? And there is a real constitutional issue here which, if we don't solve by our present fad for disentrenching established constitutional precedent, and I think we really want to think about how that should be addressed. That's a really interesting topic for the Inquiry generally.

**AM: Should England be given it's own parliament with power equal to Scotland?**

**BJ:** I think, addressing the issue of institutions, it really is about which decision should be taken where and if you're talking about an English parliament parallel to the Welsh and Scottish parliaments, I would say that we need much, much less power in Westminster and we need a much smaller national decision making authority to relate to the very limited number of issues that affect the nation. And it's actually about giving the power to the appropriate level, so that if we're talking about roads and we're talking about crime, we're talking about social housing, affordable housing, those decisions are best taken at a strategic level, locally. So I'm basically advancing the subsidiarity argument that the institution needs to take the decisions at the appropriate level and the danger in creating, whether it's regions, city regions, national parliaments, etc is that you end up with a whole

plethora of different bodies that aren't actually clear about where a decision begins and ends.

**AM: What Impact do directly elected mayors have on turnout?**

**GS:** The evidence on their impact on turnout is fairly modest at the moment because there haven't been many chances for elections. But the impact has not been so much on turnout but on the decision factors that went into people's votes and their votes became much more focused on local performance, local issues and their judgements of mayoral candidates in terms of what they would deliver locally.

**AM: How can new localism become less tokenistic?**

**GS:** I think it's a fair criticism of some of the rhetoric and language. The narrative has changed. The narrative about what it is they think they can do centrally, what it is that they believe will require more effective local action. We're trying to overcome 50 years probably of centre knows best within a culture. We know that France has decentralised; we know that Spain decentralised and we know that Italy decentralised. If I'd been writing a book 30 years ago we'd all have been cast as incredibly centralised countries.