

POWER Inquiry Witness Session – Bristol

Witness Session
12-5pm, 24 June 2005

Armada House, Telephone Avenue,
Bristol, BS1 4BQ

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

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

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
BJ	Barbara Janke	Witness
JN	Jesse Norman	Witness
GS	Gerry Stoker	Witness

FM: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to Armada House and to this Bristol session of the Power Commission. I'm Ferdy Mount and I'm the Vice Chairman of the commission and I'm a poor substitute for Helena Kennedy, Baroness Kennedy, our chairman, who's very sadly unable to be here because she's leading a memorial service somewhere else. So what we're going to do is: Pam Giddy, our director who keeps us all in order, is going to explain a little bit about the background to the inquiry, for those of you who haven't been to any of our sessions before. And then we'll start off with our first panel of the afternoon to begin the questioning. But I hand over to Pam.

PG: I would like to say on behalf of the whole commission thank you very much for coming, both to the audience and to the witnesses. I hate to call you an audience really because we very much hope that you'll interact with the panel, both with witnesses and

the commissioners later on this afternoon. So very much listen and have questions and you will have an opportunity to ask them, and also just to share your ideas on some of the things that we're looking at. As Ferdinand said, we are called the Power Inquiry and these people you see before you are a number of the commissioners who make up the Power Commission. We were set up by the Rowntree Trust to mark their centenary year and we're charged with the question which is to look at how to increase and deepen political participation. We've been taking evidence since the beginning of the year and we're doing that in a number of different ways. This session, and it's one of many, as Ferdinand said, that we've had round the country, is an opportunity for the commission to meet with experts on particular themes. So we've had one on engaging with the least engaged. We went up to Glasgow and talked to experts around the advent of the Scottish Parliament there, and this is one in a number. And we're going round the country largely for two reasons: the first is to explore what's happening in different regions and how views on some of our key questions differ but also, secondly, to give people around the country an opportunity to come along and to observe in a very transparent, open way the work that the commission's doing. But these sessions are just one way that the commission and inquiry are gathering evidence; we've got a very sophisticated research programme that's going on and people who may think why aren't you talking to X or Y, well we may be doing so because there's four people in the research team who have been going out doing interviews as well as the research projects that we've got on. We've got nearly 100 volunteers around the country who are self-organising events in order to gather evidence. So this is just one part of a number of different things that we're doing to gather the evidence. The commissioners will, over the summer, read this vast amount of evidence that we'll have gathered, evidence that will both look at the problems, but also crucially the solutions and they will sit over the autumn and come out with a series of recommendations which we hope to publish in a report early next year. I think before I get the commissioners to introduce themselves I would just like to say that we have a number of photographers in the room today; one of them is from the Power Inquiry as a way of recording some of the sessions that we're doing and there is a guy wandering round from the Evening Post here in Bristol. So I hope nobody minds. We also do, I should just say, record all of our sessions and they're then transcribed and put onto our website. So be wary of what you say – you could be up there. So I shall go around and get everyone to introduce themselves and then I'll introduce the session and the witnesses.

FOG: I am Frances O'Grady. I'm Deputy General Secretary of the TUC, the Trades Union Council.

BF: I'm Ben Freeman, Finance Director of the Prudential Property Investment Managers Ltd, the sort of corporate angle of the trust.

FM: I'm Ferdy Mount. I'm a journalist; I write for the Daily Telegraph and indeed any other newspaper that will have me.

BM: I'm Bano Murtuja. I'm a research consultant and a community activist.

PC: Hi. My name's Phil Carey and I'm a sports coach and I'm also a trustee of the UK Youth Parliament.

PG: And Phil had the laudable task – he won a competition to sit on the commission. They wanted to find a young person to join the commission and Phil came out top, going through a grilling selection process. There are a number of commissioners who can't be with us today, Emma, the Radio One DJ, Barbara Gill who's the Chairman of the WI, Helena Kennedy, obviously our Chair, and Paul Boakye who's the editor of Drum magazine. I think it's rather pertinent that the themes of today's session fell as they did. In a week before millions of people tune in to watch Live Aid or try and get tickets for it, very much in the wake of a situation where a celebrity chef managed to change

government policy and the kind of sense that our trust in politicians and parliament seems to be declining, these other kind of extra parliamentary pressure politics seem to be having some significant effects on changing government policy. And later on this afternoon we're going to be looking more specifically at single issue and pressure politics. But first we're going to explore the issue of local government. It's the one strand of government that's probably closest to us - when I go round the country I think that most people have met at least one councillor during their lifetime - in the sense that it is the closest level of government and yet seems to have the greatest problems in engagement, even as opposed to the problems we face on a national level. I'll introduce our three witnesses and we're delighted they're here with us today. Nearest to the commission here is Jessie Norman who is an advisor now to George Osborne, the Shadow Chancellor. Jessie's also a research fellow at the University College, London and crucially, recently, is one of the main advocates of this book called Direct Democracy which brings together a whole range of new people and thinkers on the right to set a new agenda for the right, hopefully. So welcome Jessie. We have Barbara Janke who is the Liberal Democrat leader of your own Bristol City Council, first elected in 1995 to the council; she was formerly a teacher of politics, economics and languages. And finally we have Professor Gerry Stoker who's been immersed in the issues of local government for many, many years and his numbers of books and his organisations and activities around local government are too long to list. But I would say that he was also the founder of the new local government network and advocates city mayors and we're delighted, Gerry, that you can be here as one of the leading experts on local government. The way it will work is: I'll ask one of the commissioners to kick off and then the other commissioners will come in as and when they feel. After about 45 minutes there will be an opportunity for you guys to have a say as well. So Ferdinand, can I ask you to kick off?

FM: Thank you very much Pam. Well this is a strange, and in many ways exciting, occasion because ten years ago one couldn't really imagine getting either an audience or such a distinguished panel together with such enthusiasm for the cause of local government which seemed moribund and we now have a whole range of new organisations and new phrases. We have the new localism, the new local government network and so on. But this still hasn't yet fed into the popular response or popular interest and I'd like to ask all three of you in turn about this. 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%. So what do you think are the main factors behind this profound disengagement at the local level in the UK? Can I start with Gerry?

GS: I think it is a very significant issue. Actually turnout in local government elections in Britain has been pretty low for most of the post-war period. It's just even lower still in the last 15 years. It got as low as 32% in the 2002 elections and when some analyses was done about the number of young people that voted then only about one in ten actually voted in local elections. So I think it does support the broad argument that there is clear evidence of disengagement. Our 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, all rather putting together programmes that central government wants put together and there's more than my opinion to back this up; you can look at quite extensive evidence. There have been quite a lot of opinion and survey work; it is quite hard to explain why people do things but explaining why they don't do things is even harder in some ways. But 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. That's what the survey material shows you, that's what people tell us when we ask them why they don't vote and another way of looking at it is look at actual voting behaviour and see why there are differences. And the big thing that comes out is that turnout tends to be slightly higher where there's a genuine competition, where there's some sense that the outcome of the election isn't a forgone conclusion, and people can't predict who's going to either win control of the council or win control of their particular ward. But, for me, the main reason why people don't vote is because they don't see local government as really doing anything for them.

FM: So if I can focus on those very interesting points. The first one, which I don't think we've heard before, where the actual size of the units is much larger here than in most of Continental Europe. That is presumably partly as a result of the Keith Walker reforms of the early 1970s when they said that bigger authorities were more efficient. And would you say that disengagement had got worse since then? Is that where it started to go down?

GS: I think that didn't help. I actually think that probably the real disengagement came from the tax on local government that started under the Thatcher administration which I think took more and more powers from them and basically local governments' main defence in elections was also don't blame us for anything because we can't do anything. And lots of people picked up that message; they thought they can't do anything, in which case we won't bother to vote one way or the other. But I think in a way we sacrificed democracy for efficiency.

BJ: I certainly would 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. The thing that I was made very much aware of and Gerry was talking about, the Thatcher era, my own children grew up during that 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. And I suppose that the new curriculum on civic education, I suppose you would call it, is going to do something about that but I think it will be in the longer term. And what also strikes me is that in this country it's somehow not considered the right thing to discuss politics in polite society. If you go to France or Germany or other European countries they will talk about politics over the dinner table and it seems a good thing and people have opinions. Whereas somehow here politics is thought to be not really a very legitimate subject and politicians are thought to be rather disreputable people. And I suppose there is a lack of understanding of how difficult it is sometimes to make political decisions and feeling that politicians are in it for their own good which, at local level, they're certainly aren't because they don't get paid anything very much at all for what they do. This adds to this disengagement. I have a hope that the new localism – and it's not new in all places – in diverse communities such as Bristol that we will get much more interest and get higher turnouts where we can make the issues much more relevant to people's lives and

encourage much more participation in decision making at local level. But I think that comes into a later question.

FM: On the question of political education in schools, the quote which has come up in sessions in Glasgow is: we asked the schoolchildren who had been brought along by their teacher whether they got any political education and they all said no, none at all. So that was very embarrassing for their teacher. I don't know if it's the same today but we won't ask that question again. Jessie?

JN: Why all this apathy? Well, 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. But 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. If you look at recent polling, the two poles this year, 79% in a UGov poll believe that most or all politicians have literally lied, 84% believe the politicians will say anything to get elected. Even if you think that that's the poll leading a person on they are nevertheless big numbers and they do pick on something in people's minds. And this something has been heavily built up by recent history; we've got this fairly selective view of the 1980s as Maggie Thatcher milk snatcher and certainly she clobbered local councils, no question about that, rate capping which has been continued ever since. It should be abolished; it's been completely scandalous how local government was undermined and business rates knocked out as a matter of local spend in 1990. And of course we get all this worry about dishonesty and lying and politicians calling each other names and I think all that's gone out to the general sense of disease. 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.

FM: So if I can then ask you each the same question and then we'll throw it open to other commissioners. And this question naturally follows on from what you've all sung in tune really, which is that power is the question and power follows money. And there is evidence to show within Europe that local authorities with greater financial authority and autonomy get higher turnouts and so the logical question is: is greater control over their own budgets, and also greater revenue raising powers, necessary 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. If you actually ask people now how much they think of the spending of local authorities is raised locally, 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. So we don't need to ask for funding because people already think that it's there. It hasn't impacted voting turnout though. 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.

FM: Those would be the rich ones?

GS: Yes. They have better tax bases, etc. And 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 think that what this suggests is that it's not simply an issue of how much money you raise locally; I think it is an issue of the powers and the profile that local government has. 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.

FM: What sort of areas would you be thinking of that should be local government only?

GS: I think that almost everyone would agree that transport is an incredibly big issue and it's a space issue. You can't organise transport except in spaces. What's local government? It's a territorial form of government. It's about the management of the space. So I think transport for people. I think that there's a huge amount of evidence that if you really want to get economic competitiveness right you need really effective local government to bring all the different partners together, but also to bring in the human capital elements so you get the right employment, the right trading and so on. I think there are a lot of issues around the environment and about people's willingness to engage in sustainable approaches to their environment which can only really be addressed at the local level. Yes, we need local action but we need our local action on that and I think there are also issues around crime prevention that really need that co-ordinated, integrated approach. There are several other issues that you could add but I think that we could put together a package of really significant and chunky issues that we said, this is what you should be expecting your local government to do for you – hold them to account in the delivery of those services and programmes. And we should then have national politicians saying we've got other things to do, you talk to local politicians about those issues. 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: Yes, well I agree with all that. The thing to remember is that 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 entirely echo and agree with the things that Gerry and Barbara were saying on this and the need to push individual decision making down. A classic example that I would choose would be crime. I live in London; I never ever see any policemen walking the streets, I only ever see them in cars. Furthermore there seems to be a complete disconnect; you say all the parties promised more policemen on the streets but there never seems to be a sense of local engagement by the police. And there may be good reasons for that but I personally think that there's a lot to be said for having – and I believe this view is gaining currency – locally elected police chiefs who you can hold to account. You can get them in a room like this and you can say why is it that all these local

needs that we are articulating to you, you are ignoring? Why are you doing that? And if the person doesn't give you that sort of response you can vote him out. So 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. We do need to remember that it's all very well having to worry about the public services but public has not been central. There's been no part of the discussion on public service in which any senior member of the government has said, oh by the way, we're the wrong people to handle this. When are you going to hear someone say that to you? It never happens. And one of the reasons why is because of this sense of alienation.

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. Some of them may be outstanding; some of them may be poor but that really isn't the point; it's a question of why there isn't more local control. And what do we get from this? Well, we have a one sized fits all government model, right. So 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. And for all the best reasons we do not want people suffering; we believe in equality. Why should the toffs in Westminster Council live half the hog when people in the North-East may be suffering? That's absolutely right but 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. It's not bubbling up in the way that we would like it to be and it's not being adopted nationally in the way that we would like it to be. So there are lots of things which local government could do to develop itself and we seem to be missing that opportunity at the moment.

PG: And it's an incredible sense of agreement amongst the three of you, which makes me wonder why it hasn't all been solved. I think that there are a couple of issues there, like how do you make local politicians more prominent and that might be about powers. And this idea of new localism, I thought, Frances that you might like to take that forward.

FOG: I would, thank you, because I'd like to understand exactly what you mean by localism and how that will generally improve participation at a local level because I hear at least two different versions of new localism. One is about inspiring people as citizens and giving them more direct power over local government services and so on; one is about empowerment. But then there's another version I hear which is about local people as consumers and local authorities almost becoming consigned to the role of contract managers, the [unclear] to go hand in hand with more outsourcing of direct service provision in local government. So I'd like to understand where you are with the spectrum of what new localism means to you. And secondly, there is this phrase going around that new localism is just 'old bloke-ism'. Two-thirds of our councillors are white, middle-aged blokes. How are these proposals going to change that?

BJ: There are lots of different ways of doing it, depending on what your local circumstances are. I personally think the issue is about accessibility, about local leadership and about councillors 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 met somebody in the main hall of the Council House who said you're a leader of the council – I'm trying to get an

abandoned car removed; I've spoken to 15 different people and I've just gone up to this man on the door and he said, sorry it's not my job. And there's this kind of bureaucratic inability to respond because those people in that great building are not actually dealing with the people for whom they're providing the service. So there is an issue about customer focus. 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. And we haven't got any neighbourhood governments in Bristol and we are hoping to introduce it here and I hope that we will be able to really get more people involved. And I do find with my own colleagues that we have very few sort of professional type politicians in our ranks. Most of our people are people who have come up through local communities who have got involved in one way or another so I am hopeful that we can get something here that will be much more responsive and much more accountable and allow real leadership at local level.

GS: I think it's a good question because I'm one of those people who claims authorship of the idea and I think I can honestly say that it's the first time I've been involved in a concept which seems to have developed a life, in fact several lives, which don't seem to have anything to do with what I originally thought I was talking about. Probably we talked about new localism because we were trying to persuade a new Labour Government to commit itself to a more devolved political strategy so if we thought if we stuck new...

PG: So what is it?

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. So it's really, for me, an expression of commitment to devolving power. Is it compatible with some element of individual choice alongside the collective choice, which obviously it's largely focusing on? Well, I think I'm feeling 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 and why would I be opposed to that? That sounds like a reasonably straightforward and clear demand. 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. But I think many of them wouldn't make that choice; many of them would choose the providers that they know and that they feel that they can hold to account. But fundamentally the idea was really let's devolve power to get more people actually in to make decisions under their own control.

PG: Michael Howard came and gave evidence to the commission in March and was asked questions about devolving power. And part of his view about new localism or devolution of power to the local authorities was about giving the individual more choice over services, where they went. It was kind of vouchers and very much empowering the individual in that way. Jessie, is your view of new localism akin to Michael Howard's or more akin to Gerry Stoker's, would you say?

JN: My view is that the Tories got themselves into a twist on these issues. What he's trying to do, we're trying to push power down to local government. 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 and people will know. So I'm personally – and I'm not speaking for the Tories as such – 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 and it's a tremendous triumph for the term and Gerry, I take my hat off to you, you've managed to get everyone across the spectrum talking about this. It is also, 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 – and I'm going to make a small party political point so I hope you will excuse me on this – that will involve things like regional government. So the North-East referendum which was a catastrophe because the yes vote was massively funded; it had something like 30 times the funds of the no campaign, lots of local media support, highly Labour part of England, supported by the government and it got thumpingly rejected by a marvellous exercise of local democracy. Now, what is the lesson of that? Well I think there are several lessons. One is: 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. The North-East: well, what's that?

PG: I think if you were a Geordie you might disagree. I think in the North-East there is a very strong sense of regional identity, is there not?

JN: Well, I think what's interesting is that that sense of regional identity was able to be expressed and was not compatible with the regional government. In other words people felt that if they wanted to express it they could express it in other ways. The existing structures did not need another layer of bureaucracy, another layer of management. In fact I think what they need is de-layering of management but we'll get back to that. 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. Let me leave it there.

PG: There are questions around mayors which we'll try and get to but I'm quite interested in how we get to where we are, to where we want to be. Ben, do you want to take that forward?

BF: Well that was an area which I'm very interested in. Our role is trying to get engaged with politics and it seems to me that locally is a really big part of that. When I talk about this there's such a feeling now of lack of confidence in the local government because they seem to be people who execute and make things happen and therefore that can't be the solution. You can't make people give it to that lot before all these big decisions so that's no good. And yet I come back to it being absolutely fundamental to get engagement in politics. So how do we get from where we are to where we want to get to? And do we think, right, well let's just get on with it? We'll give them these powers and big bang, we just do it? 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? And I was interested, Gerry, by your list of things that you wanted to put into the domain of local politics, which is quite a cautious list. 20 years ago I came up for a previous presentation that the comprehensive system came

out of local government and there isn't that power, that energy, that ability to do that with education. Now education is a massive part of the local community and we're listening to Tony Blair just before the elections and he gets mainly harangued about health issues when really he's off to G8 Summits, etc. So how bold are we? How gradually do we get from A to B?

GS: I suppose I definitely agree with Ben that governance has got to be part of the answer because surely every other Western democracy can't have got it completely and absolutely wrong. And it could be that we in local governments are a complete waste of space. But obviously everyone else thinks not and actually gives it real powers and has some real respect for it. So I think a safest bet would be to say let's give local democracy a go and how cautious or otherwise? Well, I suppose where I try to develop my argument – and I have brought my pamphlet with me under the title of What is Local Government For? What I 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. If you think transport issues in Cumbria are the same as transport issues in Bristol you're barking mad.

PG: So would you go for this big bang sudden change of power from central to the different localities?

GS: Absolutely. I think we need to simply say it's obvious. Why don't we do it? Actually I think a lot of the quality is already there; the only thing I'd want to do is to have probably more emphasis on directly elected executive mayors simply because I think they provide the most prominent focus for people to have a public discussion with somebody about what the priorities in their area should be. And I think there's some evidence that mayors so far in England have actually delivered.

PG: Did you just say that you thought the quality of our local representatives was still quite high?

GS: Yes.

PG: Because I think, as we've been going around talking to people on and off the record, even people who are local practitioners either as officials or as elected counsellors, it's not a story that we're hearing. That's often an excuse from within the different parties as to why they almost don't want more power because actually they're afraid that they aren't attracting the people of high quality. So just very briefly, where's the basis of that evidence because we'd like to see it?

GS: What kind of objective evidence do you want? In terms of educational background, experience, qualities, counsellors are as good now as they ever have been, if

not better. Yes, I agree that in every single group of counsellors probably 30% of them are idiots but they're a reflection of the population! The biggest argument against democracy is always seen as members of the public and you think, oh we can't give them power. I think that there is always enough talent there and I think if there was more power we would attract even more talent. I think that that's true on the political side; I think on the managerial side there are really some top quality public servants that are working against the odds in many places to deliver fantastic things. So I think we should just believe that. If every other Western democracy believes that they can construct something effective at that level, well why can't we?

PG: I want to bring Jessie in on this new localism and how we go from where we are to where we want to be in response to Ben's question. And then Bano wants to ask supplementary.

JN: I think 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 – and I'm sure you're right about that – 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. And so I very much think that's a principle we should just commend to ourselves. The second thing I would say is that, just to pick up on something which was raised earlier which had to do with the kind of representation amongst the political parties and the extent to which that representation is going to be representative, it seems to me that there's a chicken and egg problem in that the 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. And I do think that does raise issues of equity; these are local organisations and they have local political rules and they have local ideas and that does create a genuine tension between democratic exercise of voting and accountability - and the desire to become more open to the outside world.

PG: I want to come onto the issue of political parties at a local level in a second. Bano, was your point on this?

BM: Yes. It's really just wanting to tease out things that you've all touched upon but in the vision of how we get to where we want to be I've heard very little on accountability at this point in time. 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?

BJ: Can I say something on this? I think what's been said I fully agree with and the accountability principle I think is throughout the democratic process and basically, if you have authorities, you give them more revenue raising powers particularly and then they are accountable aren't they? It's no good them saying, well actually it's the government's fault, it's not us. But can I just say on how we get from here to there that 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. But I'm sorry, on your question on accountability, perhaps I misunderstood you.

BM: No. What I was also trying to get at is this idea of, for example, the notion of citizens panels that we've got going on, if a certain panel doesn't work it almost leads to further disengagement because people aren't getting heard. So when you're talking of new localism and you're talking of this vision for the future I'm wondering how mechanisms for accountability are going to be put into it so that you're not getting to a stage where you're further disengaging even though you are devolving power.

GS: I think that's right. We need some mix of electoral accountability and electoral accountability, to my mind, is still incredibly attractive because it's one person, one vote. It's 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 how much they think of Tony Blair at that particular time and people get voted out of office even though they might be doing a wonderful job because people aren't engaged. 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, absolutely. Do 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? I think that would be fantastic. 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.

FM: Gerry brought us onto elections and also the question of parties, in many cases these very moribund organisations locally. Do you see any ways of reviving them? Would PR, more proportional voting, bring the voters to the polls or members to parties? What can be done to sort of thicken the political base of local government?

JN: I think that the essence of this is accountability. I absolutely share your view. I think the political accountability is crucial but these other things are definitely worth experimenting with. There's a marvellous pamphlet that the Power Inquiry has put out with 57 different ideas for increasing accountability. It's on the website. 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.

PG: So you're saying that even on a local level parties are absolutely crucial?

JN: What I'm saying is that you can't avoid them so you should be focusing on making them work and I'm just giving you a one second recipe on why, just to point out that 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 totally 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. You've got the old two party and people look and say, well, which is the least worst, or maybe I won't vote. Where you've got people up there and really campaigning and really wanting to change things and do something, then you find that the membership increases and particularly if you start to make some gains if you've been a small party, or an interest group that's growing in support. That is really what gives the enthusiasm. I think that it's the system that favours the two parties, first past the post, that is moribund, rather than the specific parties. I think people just get dispirited when they feel that it doesn't matter how they vote, nothing much will change. But if you've got competition then I think you'll get party membership levels up.

PG: Jessie, I can see you nodding. Are you going to come out in favour of PR for local government?

JN: The answer to that is no. But the reason I'm not is not for the cap doffing reasons of party allegiance; it's because it's incompatible in some respect with the new localism agenda. What happens in PR is that you get changes of government without popular votes because you get switches at the margin in governing coalitions. You get coalition building as between summits. So if you do think that the popular vote should determine the characterisation of the government you do have a reason to be worried about PR; that's all I would say about it.

PG: I'd say that under first past the post in lots of local authorities this happens anyway. Different parties have to share power and counsellors resign or leave or we have to have bi-elections and the same thing does happen under first past the post. I'll now take a number of questions and if you've got specific questions for specific witnesses please say and if not I'll just offer it to whoever wants to answer.

AM: This is an inquiry for democracy and I do believe that democracy requires a respect for an audience, especially of ordinary people and a lot of respect for voters. And I think that if you put down the questions for 2.15, and it's quite a short session today, then we should start at 2.15.

PG: I apologise. That was me. We had a lot to get through and I thought that we could all do with maybe a bit less coffee time. So I'm not going to cut the audience question time; I'll cut the coffee break.

AM: As far as voting is concerned do you agree that even as voting one, two, three instead of X in existing constituencies is a way of stopping the wasted vote and enabling people to vote for their first preference without sacrificing the ability to choose between the eventual front runners where they're going to be transferred afterwards? People go for the single transferable vote in multiple member constituencies because they want complete proportional representation; that is unnecessary. The first steps should be just letting us all, out of respect for us, not just to go and put X, but to vote one, two, three instead of X.

PG: At local and national level?

AM: Yes.

AM: If we look at the reforms that the Labour Government have introduced since 1997 and the piecemeal reforms of devolution and of course the failed attempts in the North-East to set up a regional government, I think we need to remember that we are a unitary state and I want to ask the panel how we can make the central government more responsive to these local governments and to empower local government, especially when one takes into account that the wrangling between Ken Livingstone and central government on PFI and the reform of the London Underground, because I think that that typifies the disengagement of local people to local issues when you see what's happening at that level certainly. So how do we make ourselves more responsive when we are a unitary state? If we do give more budgetary power to local government then perhaps we need to actually look at the way that political culture, in the meantime, in the United Kingdom itself.

AM: Devolving power to local communities is, on the face of it, a good thing. However this does not even begin to address the West Lothian question or the fact that, unlike Scotland and Wales, England's as a nation has not been given any devolution at all. This gross injustice must be addressed and England given its own parliament with devolved power equal to those in Scotland. Having their own parliament, surely increases and deepens English people's participation and involvement in politics as they currently have no voice within the UK.

AM: You mentioned direct election mayors. What do you think would be the effect of direct election mayors on turnout

PG: We've got maybe 10 or 11 to look at so Gerry might be able to tell us something about that already.

AM: Louse Alexander. I'm a counsellor from Tower Hamlets. In my experience the new localism is something of a sham. It's been played out in a very tokenistic way and it seems to me that the Labour Government that we have at the moment is very committed to addressing targets and it's putting all its targets out to us at the moment as well and telling us what we need to do with our localism. That's not my version of localism and what I would like to ask, particularly Gerry Stoker, is how are you going to suggest to the government that they make it work better? What are your recommendations?

AM: I'm from Dorset and I'm quite appalled by all this discussion. Nobody has defined democracy and you would think it needed defining because of the state of affairs in this country and I'm also concerned about your iconic title Power. In my view, in my experience, the electorate don't want power; what they want is a benign council who will do what is best for their community and I think this word power puts a lot of people off. For example, I asked one of the research assistants why the WE was in bold letters and they said it was for we, the people. I suggested it should be for workers education.

PG: Do you have a question for the panel specifically?

AM: In the opinion of this panel where do you consider local government starts? And I give you an example of why I ask the question. Are you aware that amongst parish and town councils they can exclude members of the public and the press from their discussions without giving any reasons why they do so and without publishing any minutes on the discussion or any decision which takes place at those meetings? Where does democracy lie in that situation?

PG: Right, I'm going to put this out to the panel.

GS: The ones I can remember, directly elected mayors, the evidence on their impact on turnout is fairly modest at the moment because there haven't been many chances for elections. But the argument is that they probably haven't had a massive boost in terms of turnout. What the survey evidence shows is that they have had a massive impact on the way in which people voted because people were voting much more on local issues. So 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. The second issue, perhaps, I should pick up on since I was asked directly about it is how can we persuade New Labour to make their new localism other than a tokenistic form of new localism. I think it's a fair criticism of some of the rhetoric and language. I believe that somebody counted in a recent speech by Gordon Brown that he managed to mention localism and local 73 times in 15 minutes. Now I suppose it's a triumph of optimism over experience for me to say that actually I do think that, thanks to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for using that phrase so often in a speech, is significant. 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. I really agree with Barbara that one of the key parts of those narratives is that people now see cities as an important driver of change, cultural, economic and social, in our society and I think the cities will often provide a new key lever. It is, to an extent. 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. So I actually do think that the force is with localism and that eventually it will triumph because it's the only way we'll get answers to some of the questions that people most care about.

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, if you like, 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. But if you're talking about localism, the issues within that strategic framework, about what choices local people have, should be taken as near to those people as possible. 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.

Secrecy and democracy, my view is that as much as possible should be discussed in public and I agree with that, certainly here in Bristol. I think also that public access, again, to any kind of formal decision making process is actually a right but whether that works well in the strength of taking decisions and making progress depends on the communication powers, if you like, of the authority involved so that people are informed and they come to participate, rather than to protest against something that's just being delivered down upon them. And that breeds suspicion and then about people meeting behind closed doors and operating without the consent of the people.

PG: Yes, I think we didn't really have time to explore the issues about the different forms of engagement that you can have on a local level to set budgets. We've seen some great examples in the States and maybe this afternoon we might pick up with that panel. If you are here please contribute on the role that that can play because I think Jessie was our PR agent here. We have published a report looking specifically at different forms of

innovation around the world, many of which have been practiced on a local level and that's available for everybody if you would like a copy. Jessie, just finally.

JN: Thank you. One other thing which is excellent is a work on policy exchange in detail. They've really gone into these issues and they've really looked at the policy issues in some detail and in a very persuasive in an interesting way. I think one reason why people talk about new localism is so that they don't have to do it, in the case of the Chancellor. And anyone who's looked at the change in the tax and benefit system recently will be sure to agree with that. The Chancellor's view seems to be a cross between a kind of company town in the Soviet Union circa 1950 and a Scottish kirk so everyone has their role to play. So the point that the gentleman at the back was raising is absolutely on target. There's a real case for constitutional change here. 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.

PG: So constitutional protection for local government?

Given we have a constitution which does not privilege any part of the law over any other - and that's a gigantic source of strength for our country by the way-we do have a common law, we have law of the land. People could if they wish repeal the Act of Union in Westminster, and that in itself raises the issue of whether all constitutional change is a good thing and whether some aspects of the constitution should be privileged.

One of the reasons why local democracy is alive and kicking in America for example and Germany is because you have this constitutionally mandated contrast. In America the Madisonian settlement sets these things up in opposition to each other and requires public debate to reconcile these conflicting political interests and something similar is true with the basic law in Germany. There is a really interesting question here for the Inquiry and for our general reflections as a polity on this topic. And it does go in to the question of the nature our civil society. I think we can't duck it. More power to the centre and an executive that is starting to get out of control raises a fundamental issue of the status of civil society because it is not our rights as citizens that are in play, it is the degree of contribution to some overarching project...the state as an enterprise. That is my concluding thought.