

**POWER Inquiry Witness Session – Manchester**

**Witness Session  
12.20-4pm, 28 April 2005**

**Manchester United Football Stadium  
Sir Matt Busby Way, Old Trafford, Manchester, M16 0RA**

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***New Sources of Power: exploring the role of  
supranational institutions, corporations and grassroots  
activity in the democratic process***

**Witnesses****Grassroots activity panel**

Gaafer Ali – Sudanese Cultural Association

Mandy Powell – activist in East Manchester

Nasima Rahman, Community Organiser – Salford Community Empowerment Network

Anne Stewart – Community Pride Initiative

**Abbreviations**

<b>AM</b>	<b>Audience Member [individual names indicated]</b>	
<b>BF</b>	<b>Ben Freeman</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>BM</b>	<b>Bano Murtuja</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>EB</b>	<b>Emma B</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>FM</b>	<b>Ferdinand Mount</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>HK</b>	<b>Helena Kennedy</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>GA</b>	<b>Gaafer Ali</b>	<b>Witness</b>
<b>MP</b>	<b>Mandy Powell</b>	<b>Witness</b>
<b>NR</b>	<b>Nasima Rahman</b>	<b>Witness</b>
<b>AS</b>	<b>Anne Stewart</b>	<b>Witness</b>

**Grassroots Activism**

BM: Morning. I guess I should introduce the witnesses first. We have with us Mandy Powell, Gaafer Ali, Anne Stewart and Nasima Rahman and they all are involved in community engagement at a ground level and I guess their experiences will come through as we hear from them this morning.

If I could begin with the first question, why did you get involved in trying to make a change for your community, make it as general as you can?

MP: I got involved in working in my community in 1985 as a single mother and a group of other women who also survived on low incomes or basically had concerns about what activities their children wanted to do. We got together and developed something called The Moss Side One Parent Play Scheme and basically it ran up until last year and all the women there basically looked at how we could provide for young people within our communities and run our children really. It was quite successful, we did fund raising, doing car boot sales and getting the odd bits of funding and being supported through the placement schemes that were operating from social services.

It was funny, my daughter, she was 18 yesterday, looked around and said to me 'Mum, I'm really fortunate that we had play schemes because I don't know what would have happened to us'. For me that was very much about people taking responsibility, not for their own children but for everybody who lived in that community. It wasn't run very much on. The health and safety methods that we see now, and filling in wads and wads of papers, because if I tell the truth that's what's actually closed it down because what we were a family and that's what communities are, it was about trying to ensure that we had some level of family, because in around 1982/83 further to the riots that happened in Moss Side, communities and families were dispersed far and wide and that meant that a lot of the support mechanisms that were there originally had disappeared, so we had to help to start recreate some of those. When we talk about involvement, that was my first taste of involvement and some of my reasons why.

BM: Thank you.

GA: My name is Gaafer Ali, how have I involved in community affairs? I came to this country about 16 or probably 17 years ago as an asylum seeker so that's my background. I'm here as a refugee. When I first arrived, it wasn't a deliberate sort of decision on my part to get involved directly in community affairs but it just happened probably gradually and then gathered momentum afterwards.

At the beginning, probably because I knew English better than the others I was being asked by many of the community members, refugees and asylum seekers, which were not many here 15/16 years ago, asked or probably offered assistance to help with some of our community members to go round and do some sort of advocacy for them, you know help them with the solicitors, social security offices, health centres and GPs. Gradually I found himself involved in much structural sort of assistance, having to attend some meetings, having to speak to people from different agencies. Then it led to us forming some sort of an organisation to offer help in more organised and structured way. And then it just picked up momentum. You realise that you have got training in these skills that actually help you in other areas as well and it became much more easier for me say, to find a job, working within voluntary sector afterwards. And then it just went on and gradually one found himself involved in community affairs. But the main thing is it's not a deliberate decision which I took when I came here, oh I'm going to be in the community, I'm going to do this, it just happened and gradually one found himself there.

BM: Great.

AS: I think I'll just quickly show two reasons. I spent most of the early part of my life in formal education, particularly working with young people and then sort of felt I wanted to be able to offer those skills in a more informal setting in the community. I've always

worked, I suppose I made a kind of commitment somehow or other, strangely enough when I was about 16 and I was working, I was helping in a play scheme in a project in Kirby just outside Liverpool in the 1960s and somehow when I saw that situation there, I felt I'd had a very privileged education and I said: 'I'll try and use whatever education I've had in order to work within the inner city'.

And I did that and then in my early 40's when I had... I came up to Manchester to do some study at the University and I was looking for a job and I could easily have gone back into formal education and schooling but I was working in a drop-in centre for homeless people and got to know a lot of the clients there and one of them who I knew very well started looking for jobs for me and he found a job working for Church Action on Poverty in this new project called Community Pride which I work for and he said to me 'Anne, that will just suit you perfectly' *[laughs]* so on his recommendation I went for the job. But it's been great for me because I wanted to use the skills I'd had in terms of more, around education, to see if there were ways in which those skills could be used in a more informal way in helping to develop community leaders and put those skills at the service of, particularly groups of people that were not, I felt, getting their voices heard in the community.

The second reason is I'm a registered blind person, visually impaired all my life, was born visually impaired and became registered blind, live life as it were, and I have had a very strong passion about being, I have always been very active, I have always had a job and I felt that there was a perception about disabled people that they are sort of dependent, sitting there waiting for handouts and so on. That was the sort of perception, the stereotype of disabled people and I wanted to challenge that and I wanted to be involved in helping colleagues to develop their own strategies for better organisation, so I've been very involved in terms of active citizenship in pushing forward an agenda whereby disabled people are becoming more effectively organised and having a voice in many processes that I've been involved in Manchester and Salford, I particularly have a passion about disabled people and the contribution that they can make as citizens within our communities in Manchester and Salford, so that's been a tremendous kind of driving force for me.

NR: I started working as an interpreter first. I left school in 1985 and before I left school I was working as a volunteer helping out local people to go to visit their doctors and encouraging ladies to have a physical with their doctors and helping them with midwives, health visitors and general women's sessions. So this is where I started. When I left school I started working as interpreter, with the One Parent Association.

After a couple of years of working there I moved into Salford and I again worked as an interpreter taking women to doctors, health visits and some to citizens immigration help so I had a skill of giving out information to these people. And then since about 2 years ago I've been working with the Southern Community Network as a Community Organiser. I always felt comfortable working out in the community and helping people to have a voice in their own group or help them to go and have a say, or encourage people to visit to the doctors. Say if there was a housing issue and people feel that whatever they have to accept it, so I have encouraged them, and say that if you don't like it, you don't have to sort of stick with it, you can go for help and this is who I've been, got myself into community work.

BM: I had a follow up from there but I'm going to move on to give you a question and then I'll follow up with it. Traditionally, there's this perception that people from low income backgrounds, people from ethnic minority backgrounds don't participate and don't

vote. Do you agree that there is this lack of participation and lack of voting and if so, why? And apologies for the generalisation across communities ...

AS: Well I think straight away it's not about the people themselves, it's not that they don't want to participate or can't participate. Because of the system the way things have gone, sometimes makes it really difficult. With a disability forum that I'm involved with in Salford, because of the election coming up, we're working with a patch called The Right to Vote, trying to work with members of our community with learning disabilities; working with the deaf community. I think we always imagine that the problem is with the people. They want to be involved, they want to participate but the structures that we have and the systems that we have often exclude people and if we would address the barriers and address the issues, people will participate, people want to be involved. I think it's a myth and I think we tend to perpetuate a myth that it's somehow about the people, whereas it's actually about the structures and the discriminatory structures that we have and the fact that we don't often take certain groups of people seriously or their views.

MP I'd agree with everything that Anne said really. As she was speaking I was thinking about older people. I work with older people now and it's quite ironic with the shift in statistics. They always come and shift into the agenda and it's not about people not wanting to participate, it's almost about where are you going to come on that list of town, it's the Government and if you were talking about it on a one to one level with someone, and not use it in a political way and you and a friend were talking and you were saying, 'Well you know what, are you going to do me a favour next week?' Well at the end of the day you're not part of my crowd for this week, how long would you actually be friends for?

So it's when you bring it down to that, you know the real relationship that people are building, whether it be the political parties or whatever, we're talking about equity, equity of services, resources. Sometimes I do talk about me and you know, I don't want nobody to tolerate me, I really can't, I find it quite disrespectful, I don't want to be tolerated. We need to have a degree of respect and equity when we deal with each other and I think a lot of the political parties do not come over that way, they come over very target driven and nobody wants to be a number, nobody wants to be a statistic.

GA: When I speak to many of the people from the community I am from my people I find them ideally willing to participate, willing to take part in activities, especially those around the community and probably I would say the area where they live.

But there are practical reasons for why they can't do that. Mainly, many of my community where I come from them, many of the people there actually do very hard jobs and in very awkward hours, anti-social hours and usually the work they do is very demanding and they find it really difficult to cope in terms of time and in terms of effort, to find a suitable time to do that and make the effort to go there. Also, they lack of information. These days you get hundreds and hundreds of messages through your letter box and sometimes you have to have the right language, English skills to read them. Even if your English can cope with that, the jargon itself is very difficult to sort of decipher and also people are hesitant to go there. It takes quite a lot of time for someone coming from a different culture altogether to come and find themselves completely in tune with this particular culture. It takes time to build sort of confidence because from my own experience, people find it very frightening to go into buildings

and in institutions and speak to people. It's a very frightening experience for someone who is coming from a totally different culture.

It's going to take time and it will have to take much more effort from us as community activists and from the community, the wider community as well and media to improve the image portrayed about your community.

HK: Gaafer, thank you. Nasima, you're busy working with women and helping access services where there is a language deficit, where people don't yet speak English. Do those women, you think, want to participate?

NR: People will participate if they get more information. Like Gaafer was saying, you get a lot of stuff through your letter box, about the voting time, different parties and different people but the language, that is a barrier for many people. Sometimes it demotivates people thinking that we're not going to do any change. When it comes to making a change, it's only politically minded people who get involved and then local people who are not even politically activated, they wouldn't bother to ask me.

BM: To what extent is it an issue of belonging?

NR: I think it's about it. When it comes to a voting time, if there were more focus around information sessions, where local people could get into groups and talk more about different parties and give out more information, I think that kind of thing would make a difference.

BM: Could I maybe follow up on something that Mandy said earlier on? Do you feel like you're involved in politics? I mean is what you do political?

MP: Of course it's political. I didn't realise it was but of course it is.

BM: What made you realise it was?

MP: I think it's also one of the barriers and I think naively we can get involved with some passion about them. However the other side of the situation is when you look at Local Councils. They are one of the biggest employers in most major cities and a lot of people, especially from the community that I come from, are employed by them. Now there's almost kind of a tension there, that you know, you're working for this Council, we're employing you, however you might have some very differing views from their own agenda. Now you've got to go into that local Council office on Monday morning after standing up at a meeting and saying that this is your experience and some of the groups that have been known to statistically to have been disengaged and discriminated against, why would you then put yourself in another situation, self-inflicted situation? Yes it might raise a point, but it also might limit your further career aspirations and your ability to look after your children and family. And that is a very real concern for people. For me, it's just maybe advice you give to some people. I speak a lot, but I continue to do what I do because I feel passionate about certain things and I believe that at the end of the day I have faith in other things other than the political policy and that's what allows me to do what I do. But for a lot of people those are very, very real concerns.

HK: Ferdinand, would you like to come in?

FM: Yes, I was just wondering what could be done in your view to remove some of those barriers and to make it easier for people to participate. Do you think for example that the local media, I mean local radio or if we have, we were hearing yesterday from

some technical wizards about new ultra-local TV which apparently is going to be with us quite soon, which instead of having huge areas of television, you have television station beamed actually at your local community, would that sort of thing be a way of bringing in people who at present feel excluded?

HK: So instead of having Trisha, we'll have Mandy.

[Laughter]

FM I mean is information gap the main problem?

GA: I think the difficulty is the assumption that we're all like sort of one body. Within us we are as different as you might get. So you will still, I mean if we had a broadcaster with certain programmes and certain issues, that's not necessarily going to cover the whole set of issues. I mean look at us here - probably we have different issues within that community so, the quest for the right television or the right media is always going to be there but whether we're ever going to realise it, I don't know.

AS: I think those technical things are good, the local radio in my experience in Salford and Manchester has been quite successful in communities. Also sometimes because of the licensing issues, they're more sustainable now. Mostly in our experience in local radio they'll be people with more expertise. In Manchester and Salford, we've had short sharp inputs of local radio and they have been trying to train local people so I think those things are all very, very useful but I don't think anything matches the work that needs to be done on the ground with community people in very in-depth ways through the kind of programmes that some of us are probably involved in.

You know in the disability forum I work with, we've taken responsibility for ourselves as I say with people in Salford to, in a sense, educate ourselves around the issues that we feel strongly about and then looking for our own ways of organising effective campaigns, whatever we're going to do to address those issues. For example, through the voluntary sector organisation I work with, we've actually had somebody who is profoundly deaf, working with the deaf community. You've got to start very small, it takes time for people to come from being, for the last 100 years, a totally marginalised community, to now coming to meetings in town halls or in places like this or just as a voluntary sector organisation being on a committee or something like that. There's so much to do at the ground level and often there aren't the resources, sufficient resources, for us to be doing that. So yes we can use all these aids but what we really need is people on the ground working with people.

HK: But isn't one of the real problems about all of this is that there's so little money available for community groups and for resourcing that kind of activism, that it's always hand to mouth. I mean how do you get money for this kind of thing? I mean to get a hall to have a meeting, it's going to cost... always invariably it doesn't go without some cost.

AS: No and it's going back to what people were saying about barriers. I mean for example, if we're talking about disability issues. To make sure that the deaf community are present and are being able to share their opinions, you pay for two interpreters just for one meeting and the resources you need for that, so every time you need a meeting you have multiple layers of cost, you have to think about transport, child care, interpreters, accessible venues, a multiplicity of things, barriers like that which we still haven't achieved yet. Food, everything, you have to think of so many things and I think that takes resources and it takes a lot of imagination and

planning and thinking and those are the things that matter, they make a difference on the ground, that's what I would say.

MP: In addition to what Anne was saying, maybe it's not just about resources it's also about continuity and the kind of steep changes that are happening so rapidly. You get used to one kind of funding regime and one kind of way of working and all of a sudden you've had a one year pilot or you've had regeneration, new deal kind of thing and people adapt to those and there's only so much adapting people can do, we're human people not computers, we can't just keep going like that. Eventually people get burnt out very, very fast and in terms of just the changes to those mechanisms, those changes themselves cost an enormous amount of money, so sometimes it's nice to say okay, we've got the wheel there already, let's see how it works, let's give it a chance. You don't swap your child because it doesn't do what you want in the first 15 years, you stick with it.

[Laughter]

GA: I can't agree more.

HK: You say great things Mandy!

NR: I think building confidence and if people were there working in the ground with a small group of people and bringing information and giving out the right information, and also then if people have the confidence to take part, they will take part. They need to build that confidence so people like myself, if I was to do something like that, in a small project, I would go to these people and work very closely with them, explain to them in depth about it. If they are not going to get anything they won't participate, so they have to have that confidence that they are going to make a change.

HK: The business of confidence is a recurrent theme, everybody's saying that it really is about somehow giving enough space for people to feel that they can do it. I mean if the business of even coming and speaking in public places is often very inhibiting to people and it's about giving people, encouraging people to do that and making it more and more possible for people to give their voice.

NR: That's why I think we need to work in smaller groups with people we know, and if they had more information, then they could share that information with their own small group, so people are comfortable in taking part.

FM: I just wanted to ask whether of you had tried pursuing your agenda through political parties and if so, whether that had any result of if you've had any advice to offer political parties as to how they could connect or re-connect with the least engaged?

AS: I must confess my first response to that is: not really, not with mainstream political parties, no. I have to be honest, I've said it myself and I've said it all the time with my work, that sometimes the political agenda in our cities, in my experience, actually sometimes undermines the good things that we're trying to do. And in fact I can't think of many examples where anything of a more formal political, as it were, has actually helped. I can't think of it but I may be wrong, and that's a very personal view. That's been a bit addressed around the role of Councillors now in Manchester and Salford. I know that work is going on to try to break down barriers between participative things that are happening on the ground in the cities. I think there's been a bit of a difficulty between this participation agenda, which is supposed to be engaging more people, and the local representatives, the elected representatives. I think they are trying to get to grips with that now, we need to have much more

dialogue. But certainly in some places, that agenda, I think, has been a difficult one and hasn't necessarily helped at the local level. But that's a very personal view and I'm not a particularly party political person but I think obviously we need more dialogue and I think in some parts of Manchester and Salford that dialogue is beginning to happen now, but there's this dilemma between a sort of more participative democracy and a change of culture within representative democracy and we need to dialogue about that, that's all I can say about that really.

BF: My question is very similar, but at the local level. Mandy was talking about a clash of values between her own values and the Council and I wondered whether the success that you were having did one of three things, either they didn't care, or they saw that you were doing good work and therefore the doors opened a bit and they were sold and they provided some resource or alternatively, they saw their own way of doing things threatened and actually created resistance, so I was interested at a local level, whether your work made it easier or more difficult to have influence?

AS: I would probably say a bit of all three of those things. We're trying to change cultures and it's the same with the community. We often talk about the Councils and the Councillors and we're saying we need to change all of that culture, it needs to be more open, more transparent etc. At the same time I'm sure my colleagues here would agree, we've also got to change cultures within our own communities, we know we've got things we've got to do. So I think it's got to be some mutual dialogue about how we need to change in order to move things forward.

GA: I can't even remember right now any of the members of my community who got involved in party politics as such. And I don't know why haven't I myself got involved in that. But I think part of the reason, especially in the locality where I am, Mandy you might correct me, is that to a great extent political parties are looked at as something for people who have probably made it and who are prepared to put up with the sort of system. If I were a member of a certain political party, I think that I would feel a little bit more alienated from my own committee policies.

HK: What you're telling is that the political party system seems to work well for those who are already on the ladder and who have sort of kind of stake in it and therefore the political party, that system, that established system, works for people who are already well embedded in the established system. But for those who are either new arrivals because of being refugees or for those who have experienced disadvantage perhaps because of their personal circumstances or because of disability or because of age or whatever, that for those people who are not sort of part of that formalised group already on the ladder. That to be in there first of all it just seems pointless and excluding, but also that to go there and be on it would actually take you away from the very people that you care about.

GA: I can't agree more.

HK: And that is a shocker. I mean I think that's a very powerful message that political parties have to be hearing. That is I think a crucial message.

AS: I think it's almost like reclaiming a public political space. It almost feels like you've given away all of that power somehow and it's been funnelled in particular ways but it feels to me now that groups, people like ourselves, have to try to reclaim that public space where we have power and we should be using it but we have to work, there's a lot to do before we can reclaim that public space I think, which is a political space but maybe we let it go too easily. But I think it's a big challenge to us as well, we can't

just say well it's out there. It is our role as well to try to reclaim that space if you understand what I mean.

BM: And could I bring it back to what Mandy was saying earlier on? it seems to me that there is participation going on and that your groups are demonstrating that participation, it's just not in the formal way that we're thinking of and I want to know what are the different models of participation that your communities are actually doing, that could teach us a lesson or two or three?

[Laughter]

MP: It's not they've been participating at all. An example of, for me... I don't live in Moss Side anymore, that's where I was brought up, my sisters live nearby and basically when I look around that community it changes quite dramatically because new people coming in all the time, which is a good thing. However, there doesn't seem to be any kind of legacy from the last group of people, it's almost like a fresh start all the time and there are very few places that you could go. You know we talk about participation, the fact that you've got like the Conservative Clubs, you name the clubs, all of that going on and certain groups don't have that political side or something that may be seen as an accepted way of being, so you may have people who come together for a christening or people coming together for different social activities.

Now if you look around particular communities, especially where regeneration is happening, as good as the buildings look, there are very few places that people can actually identify that they can go into, that actually form part of their culture and who they are, whatever that culture is. Those communities change, a lot of them are virtual now because people don't live in a hub anymore, due to again to regeneration. Take me: I work, I've a property but there's very few places that I can go to in Manchester that I think would accept me. I pay Council Tax, I think I'm legal with the majority of things that I do and on a weekend when I go out, there's nothing that represents me, there's nothing that I can say, 'Come on kids, let's go together, let's go as a family' or whatever and it's quite interesting when you look around at Moss Side that's the place where people migrate back to because that's where the beginning is, that's where your root is. It's like you might move to London but you always go home at weekends to your family wherever they are.

And when I go back there, there's nothing of me, and to me we talk again about regeneration and we talk about ways of participation, you've got a lot of pubs and places that are closing down. You know the community resource centre, it looks fantastic up the road, send your message to the pub, you know if you want to find out who's taking drugs, if you want to find out where the potential single parents are going to be, if you want to target additional benefits, that's where you go. But those places keep on closing down because it's anti-social but it's also life and that real life is not good and it's not going to take place there any more, it's going to go underground and it's going to go where, again on the outskirts where you're regenerating an area, bringing all the new money in, so yes it will be nice looking and people will think, 'wow what have they done, isn't it fantastic' but then when you go to other places where you've now transported all these people, it's going to be the self same thing, and it's a good business opportunity for the Government I must say, but for those communities it's not about participation.

FM: That's very interesting indeed, so it's the lack of continuity is one of the big things which has, as it were, kind of lost a large part of the local people to the established

processes. I mean that's where the contact's lost in these sort of highly mobile places.

MP if you look at English history, you look at Eton, you look at all the highly established places, you've got networks to get there, that's something that's embedded in your culture, there's certain places that people go to. Now it's not say that it has excluded everybody else. you might have that bit of exclusion going on, you know about it, but at the end of the day there are certain places that it's accepted that certain communities will strive to actually attain certain things or become part of. When you haven't got that, you haven't got no social fabric, you haven't got anything that you can then say, 'Okay this is who I am, I am aspiring to something'. I'm not saying it's about new people coming in, it's not about that, it's about valuing what is there and ensuring that those people have got the... it's not even resource because they had that, you know when people came here in the 40's and whatever, you had 3 or 4 families living in a house, it's not always about resources, it's about the ability to live and let live, it's about the ability to kind of say, 'Well you know what, what's going on there isn't just about anti-social behaviour, there are other things that may cause that, how do we then utilise that as an opportunity'. Everything that happens that is bad is the extreme of something that's good, how then can you make that connection on the night, and that's what it's about for these people here.

HK: Right, I'm going to open this up and ask you all to participate too. Mandy just said something fabulous and I just want to write it down. *[Laughs]* Anyway, I just wanted to draw any of you in who would like to ask some questions.

## **Q&A SESSION**

AM I'm known as John the Hat and I'm what George Bush and Tony Blair both commonly call a general purpose evil doer, an anarchist. So yes, we have a situation here right where a few people have a chance to explore ideas and express themselves in front of a large group of people and of course not all those in the large group will get a chance to speak and those who do will only get 2 or 3 minutes, so again with this system, the participation of the majority is mostly passive. When we are passive we don't have input, where we don't have input we have rulership to the extent that we have rulership we don't have democracy. The so-called Parliamentary democracy has to be a contradiction in term, it's a sham. And if society is going to evolve, we have to explore ways of co-operating to develop organisation, not to have organisation imposed upon us. To this end, I recommend to everybody that they investigate social forums. These are made up with people who are investigating and applying principles, what I would call horizontalism. In London a few months back we had a gathering in London and many thousands and thousands of people arrived from all across Europe, so you could have a large group, they can organise themselves and they don't need to have people kind of imposing Parliamentary democracy anyway, obviously there are facilitative people who help people to co-ordinate in things like this, but it's not the same as being dictated to or being governed right. Horizontalism is a principle by which people have an equal opportunity to provide input to what's going on, the decision making, so that we talk to each other on a level and we don't have rulership from above, dictatorship and we don't have the people down here kind of telling those at the top how to tell them how to live right you know.

HK: Okay, anybody else.

*[Applause from audience]*

AM: Both in the ward where I live now and the ward where I grew up, the same party always wins by a good enough margin. Now I really, really can't see the point in voting because doesn't make a difference in the ward who I elect, none of the people standing work for the extremes represents my views, none of the main parties represent my views. So what I want to know is, can someone convince me why I should go out and vote for the selection or does it say more to not vote and with the levels of people voting going down and down will that force the Government to take that and to make people more involved or is that just letting them get away with becoming more dictatorial? Yes, I'd like to know if anyone could convince me of a good reason to vote or not to vote.

HK: Anybody in the hall like to answer that?

[*Laughter*]

AM: [Ken Barker] Can I just say first of all that just simply by not going to vote, your action can be interpreted in many different ways. You can be assumed to be too lazy or you can have this person's opinion that nobody actually represents him. So it would be far more sensible to actually go along and spoil his ballot paper by writing out that nobody actually represents him, then he would actually come into a category.

HK: Isn't the problem with that, that there isn't a space on the ballot paper to cross, to say that and so people do go along and write those things, but it's never registered anywhere, it doesn't come up on your screen on the television when you're watching on election night, and this number of people came along and said, 'You're a whole load of rascals' [*laughter*]

AM: [Ken Barker] I agree with your comment but it's then up to the system if you like to broadcast that statistic.

FM: I agree with you to the extent that it's perfectly true that if there hadn't been this great drop in turnout at the last election, we probably wouldn't all be here at all in the first place, I mean it is the decline in voting which has sparked off this whole initiative and I agree too that it's been the same for donkey's years that in safe seats your vote is fairly easily dispensed with by both the winning and the losing party and so that does lead you, in my case willy nilly, towards a belief in some kind of proportional voting...

[*Female voice says, 'yes'*]

FM: ...which I didn't use to give any time for at all, but if you're serious about the problem you've just mentioned it's difficult to see any other way through.

HK: A convert to PR! [*Laughter*] Any more converts to PR in the room?

AM: I always thought when the parties were really different, 'first past the post' had some meaning but the parties basically are very, very similar and so that person over there who said he didn't feel represented, I feel exactly the same. I used to have a party that I thought represented me, I no longer have and I was somebody who was very involved in politics at one point, in the front quite a long time in my life and now I feel that unless there's proportional representation, the cynicism and the apathy and absenteeism will just grown.

AM: We're talking about representation here but there are lot of people here, especially on the back row here that can't actually vote because they're too young to vote and

there's some decisions that have been at our local youth group, for instance that the football used to be AstroTurf and then it got converted into tarmac and some fences were erected around it that they just were, so what advice can you give us about changing that decision and how can we get these young people to change that decision because they can't actually vote anyway so what do you recommend?

HK: Well all I would say to you is I'm sorry that Phil, who's not here because he's our great exponent of lowering the age of voting, he believes in fact the age of voting should be lowered to 16 and he feels there's a kind of bizarre thing which is they now have citizenship taught at school and yet people leave school often at 16 or whatever and then there's a big gap before you acquire the vote and maybe you've gone off the boil by then so he feels that the age of voting should be lowered. Do any other people in the hall feel that?

AM: No.

HK: A variation, some people are saying 'no', some people say 'yes'. I see some nods saying 'no' down here at the front. Sir over there, you say 'no'. Stand up and tell us why.

*[Laughter from audience]*

AM: I was just thinking in my position if I was 16 before, I actually had an interest in politics before you kind of reach the stage where you're allowed to take an interest in politics as far as taking 'A' levels are concerned, I think I would have backed the... I wouldn't have been able to make the right choice that stands to my accountability. when you're at the age of 16, I mean I've only just past, though I'm 18 now, it was only 2 years ago but you're still kind of very impressionable in so far as that you don't really know enough about the political world at the age of 16, at least in my situation.

HK: Isn't the answer to our friend at the back of the room, about the football pitch, is that they're not listening to young people in communities about what it is they need and what is that they have preferences for. To make a decision like that with no reference to the people who use the facility is crazy.

AM: [Stephen] Hello, my name is Stephen, I'm from the Somali community in this group. For quite some time I have been thinking about why a very little number of Somali speaking vote in the elections. Only one friend of mine did at the last 2001 elections. Why do a very few number of Somali's vote now that the number of Somali's in sort of Manchester is very, very big? I have a feeling that it's because in Manchester there is very little to find out. Some people don't know whether they can vote or not. How can the ethnic minority people be engaged in politics if the City Council does very little about letting us know about the parties, about the benefits of voting, how can we turn out and vote if we don't know why to vote and who to vote for? So there is a very big information gap and I think the Local Authorities are better soon to look at this.

HK: Thank you. Gentleman down here on the left.

AM: [Michael Olesly] I didn't come to ask this question but it was something the lady in white there said in a question, she said, and I wrote it down, because I was somewhat surprised, you asked, 'traditionally' you said, 'people from low incomes and ethnic communities and ethnic community backgrounds do not get involved in politics' and I thought, wait a minute, that's not right. I just want to make this point, I think of the Trade Unions, I think of Manchester and Salford and the struggles of the working class in places like Manchester and Salford and the creation of the Trade

Unions, their struggles over centuries and the creation of the Labour Party which, as my wife next to me just said a minute ago, 'has lost it now', and we argue just, politically disenfranchised because what they once said, the people of Manchester, Salford when they created these things, and other towns, but the 'Blairites' have destroyed it and I don't know, I just want to say I disagree with you.

And I also, the best book I have ever read on English history, you made a reference to English history, if anybody wants to read a great, great book, it's E P Thompson's 'The Making of English Working Class' and there is line by line the struggle of the non-income people, ethnic communities, Irish, Jews, English, the lot, and we've got a fantastic history of struggle and let nobody, and certainly not you and your decision ever under-estimate or knock it, we've done wonders.

[Applause from audience]

BM: I think I should say that I disagree with me too! [Laughter] In the sense that, and I think that what I... my question...

AM: Have you read that book?

[Laughter]

HK: It's a wonderful book.

AM: Have you read it?

BM: Obviously quite blatantly not. [Laughter] What my question was trying to eek out, I think, is that when you look at statistics and you're looking at formal political party participation in terms of ticking a box at ballot papers, there does seem to be a decline, certainly, and historically, and I'm very scared to say this now, that people from low incomes and ethnic minorities are not necessarily, maybe proportionally speaking, voting as much as other groups.

What I'm trying to eek out is, what are the alternative forms of participation that we're exercising today and have been exercising in the past and the Trade Union movement is a classic example of alternative forms of participation.

HK: I think that where I would probably err with you is that I think that your use of the two words, both traditionally and historically are the words that are wrong. What I would say actually the Inquiry as shown is that looking at, if you like 'contemporary' voting patterns and by that I'm talking about, we've been looking at in more recent times, over the last I would say, 20-30 years, we've been seeing, increasingly, that those sections of the community that seem to be most alienated from the processes of voting are those who are the poorest in our communities, those who are more recent immigrants into our country and the young and so that's what patterns are showing.

Now that may in turn reflect the very thing that your wife spoke of, which is the absence of a party any longer that actually with real activism takes up and gives voice to the aspirations and the yearnings and the concerns of those parts of our society. And so that's the interesting thing, is that in some ways there has been the abandonment of the discussion that Mandy spoke of, where she said, I loved the description of saying, you know we as people in a relationship if we say, 'Can you do something, can you do me a favour next week?' that instead of saying, 'Of course because we are in a relationship and of course I'd do that for you' is that somebody says, 'Well I'm sorry you're not on my list of priorities, you're not on my targets of you know whatever I consider to be the voting priority in terms of marginals' and so on

and so that party, the movement that was very much, the movement of many of those groups of which you speak, part of that history is that E P Thompson who wrote that book, probably before the 30 years that we're talking about, the new chapter at the end of that book would be saying, 'What happened to that great history is that it's actually, instead of there being movement reflected in political parties, now it's fractured into many different groupings within communities, but who would not look to political parties because there are no political parties, none of the big ones, that are actually taking and embracing those yearnings'.

*[Laughter and applause from the audience]*

HK: But there must be, yes our friend there, the horizontalism man, I can only give you 2 seconds to do it, but he wanted to come back in, yes?

AM [John the Hat] Traditions change, you're quite right, but we have developed a tradition over years amongst the working class that underclass of passivity, being more interested in the latest episode of 'Coronation Street' than doing something to change our situation, make an improvement in the world, but this of course includes a large faction of this, of the underclass etc who are out on the streets, you know too often of course we were ignored but we're told by other people we meet on the bus, 'Oh there ought to be more people like you' but of course people go back to 'Coronation Street' again...

HK: I'd like somebody to think about it and come back to it in a minute, why is it then that people are deciding to watch 'Coronation Street' and 'Big Brother' rather than getting out there to make a difference.

AM: Well I was going to remind you that about 2 years ago I attended a gathering in the Conference Centre initiated by the Manchester Council on local networks and there must have been about a thousand people there and the whole idea was to try and bring local groups together. Now what has happened since then, I don't know. I've come from Stockport but I would like to know if there's been any further development there with local communities coming together, working together and having a voice.

AM: Hello. It seems obvious so far that there's a lot of disillusionment with the party political system and there being so extremes and one of my main issues is more locally based, local representation, as in the Councils. The area I live in none of the Councillors is actually local so who it is has no idea about the area that they're supposed to be representing. With the Council set up as it is now with the Cabinet and the Chair system, they seem to be more interested in furthering their own way, careers, and lining their own pockets as opposed to representing the people who elected them. What I'd say the party political system, some group of people somewhere in central Government deciding policies for the whole country, I realise that there is a necessity for national issues and even international ones but the local issues and I suppose people are going to be voting for the things that really affect them, should be down to local people and there should be some accountability for those that are elected to make sure that that is what they're doing, representing the local people rather than feathering their own and lining their own pockets.

AM: I'd I am one of the few that seems to agree with proportional representation here because I do think it's ridiculous that in some areas and individual can get 10,000 votes and still not get in, where in other areas people are getting in with a few thousand votes, so I also have an 18 year old son who's actually voting for the first time this year and I have spent months and months [laughs] and months trying to

persuade him to vote in the first place. The gentleman there has said, 'Why should I vote?' I've been at it for nine months mate, I mean you know I mean my argument is it's historical, social, and by the way, the political system is totally wrong and I'm well aware that my son's totally disenfranchised but I also feel historically, socially, you know people have died over the years for the right to vote, even though we might really disagree with what's going on it's very important to vote and also I think there's a lot of lack of education about the voting system. My son was saying, 'Well you know, what can't I set up my own party' and I basically said 'Well actually you could' you know, I tried to explain how he could go about it and even if there was enough people he could actually, locally or even he could set up his own party and vote for his own people in Salford's party and as I say, there seems to be a lot of strings and I think for young people in particular, education is the key to be able to try and get them to vote and try and get them to participate.

HK: But should that education be in schools or should it be in communities?

AM: Both.

AM: Hello, I'd just like to say that I think people and the political system is moving more and more to the right and basically we're seen as consumers rather than participants in Government now, it's all about spending power of individuals so that has done a lot to break up people's willingness to vote really because if we're moving more and more to the right, so I think if we're going to revitalise communities and get people involved with it then you've got to have more and more community sort of involvement going on in a grass roots level and it isn't the fault of local people, I don't like this term about people being seen as apathetic because they're not voting. Why should they if two million people went on a march against the war and the Government didn't listen to that....

*[Applause from audience]*

AM ...then why should we listen to him when it's in their interest to get out on the 5<sup>th</sup> May, come and vote for us. People stood up and said that they didn't want a war and the Government didn't listen to that so I think bringing back to the point where the young people have got tarmac where they used to have an Astroturf, their community should get out there and sit down, direct action to stop the Council because they're moving more to you know the Council seeing a privatisation agenda is the only way forward, it doesn't believe in public services, public services that people have fought for all their lives, all the working class people who have fought for those, and once they have those things taken away, we won't get them back.

*[Applause from audience]*

HK: Can we while the thing's going round, raise your hands people who have decided not to vote. Raise your hands people who have decided that they will vote. Can I have a hand show of those who are undecided. Okay, person over there on the right, yes.

AM: I'm a youth worker over the last 30 years and I've been privileged enough to work with Muslim young people, predominantly young women, but today I'm with a group of amazing young men. I think one issue that's been excluded from this conversation is prejudice. I think participation and empowerment can only go so far but the level of participation will be disrupted because of prejudice and particularly misconceptions about Islam and prejudice towards Muslims.

HK: Well it was very interesting, because Mandy you spoke about the fact, and it was a really important little moment where you said, 'I don't want to be tolerated' and I thought it was the language of your views about tolerance being about suggesting that somehow it's an offer rather than a real embrace and I just want to come back to the panel with some of the things that have been said as we wind this session up. A number of people have raised, ... well there you've got the issue of discrimination, but also issues about, how do community networks that have felt that they've not been listened to, how do they get themselves heard? How do we make this bit of the political world impact on that other bit of the political world that people are so alienated from?

MP: That's the conversation isn't it, I think it's an ongoing one and I think the fact that if we were to look at having a meaningful, long term dialogue, I mean you've got the Power Inquiry now and the conversations we had earlier on it's a year long process, for me what needs to happen is, a meaningful process, a meaningful conversation that is long term, not something that happens today and gone tomorrow, to me there's no quick fix solution, there's a lot of things that have happened and I can live with those now, stoically that have impacted on people, making them sceptics about the processes that are already there and for me, when I do anything, it's not for me, it's not even for my daughter I don't think, a lot of them are for my grandchildren, because processes take so long and you can go in with one suggestion and in my working life I know that a lot of things I'm talking about now won't be implemented for another 5/10 years, that are going to have a long term effect on people's lives, meaningful effect, so it's about the ability to embrace, like you said, but have a long term conversation that doesn't just start and stop with the change of Government, or the ability to resource it because we've got you know, what it is a kind of regeneration we're going to have now, where is the money coming from, is it Europe?

It's about the ability to have that long term conversation and respect those people that are in that conversation with you and coming back to what somebody said about discrimination as well, you mentioned discrimination about non-Muslim community, I'd like to say for me that there's long term discrimination for a whole range of people, a lot of it has been, how can I say, subtly dealt with now, because you do have things on paper that appear to deal with that but until we have conversations that people, people who are working on the ground, young people in schools, children everywhere whether it be at a nursery, until we have those conversations and show our children we're having those conversations, it doesn't matter how many policies our community write, because those kind of values are transmitted from person to person, family to family and the fact that somebody's suited up and in work every day doesn't make them politically correct, it just makes them do what is seen to be done but not necessarily embracing and delivering because it's not what you say, because I could tell you I love you but by the time I've told you I love you I can tell you 10 million ways, I can make you feel good and I can make you feel terrible, so just because somebody said something it doesn't necessarily mean that they're doing it in your favour.

GA: Yes it just occurred to me that sometimes because it happens also in other aspects of life, when you have a few things which you would take for granted here, sometimes you just don't value or appreciate the value of that certain virtue. Voting is something I feel very special about because it's come from a community or why I'm here so part of it is that because in my own community where I come from I didn't get the chance to do it, it's a value in itself and I think all other forms of participation will be just run dry if you take that value of what it is out of it. People take it for granted as they do take for granted things which they get from supermarket, and it shouldn't be

like that. It's a high human value. They are now saying it's obviously because of my own background, it is dehumanising not to have that vote, it's a power which people sometimes forget how valuable it is.

AS: Somebody asked at the back about the community networks and what happened to all those networks that have been established, there are community networks in Salford and Manchester and whatever the flaws and the weaknesses in any of those organisations, the resources given to try to establish those more effective cross-city organisations, there has been an attempt to really put a lot in the community. A lot of the communities have been involved in that and now we've had big cuts to those community networks and the possibility that come 2006 there will be no more resources or that resources will be only available through the Save a Stronger Communities budget, all of that.

So what I'm saying about the community networks here was an opportunity and people have worked very, very hard, whether you agree with them or whatever, people in Manchester and Salford certainly worked very hard around those networks and maybe they weren't entirely the way we wanted to go, but now that all the resources are... it's feels like and even in the latest documents on local vibe and local leadership and the new Government documents have just come out, there's barely any mention of community networks, so you do have to ask the question, we get resources to develop things and then suddenly they pull the plug on them and they're... at least people were trying to create spaces in the city where people could get together in their networks and talk and so on, so I'm asking, I don't know what the answer to that is.

But the other thing is that I do think that what we can continue to do is to find places where people can work together. I think learning should be organised around the issues that we're passionate about, we have to try to build on where people are passionate about issues and just create spaces where people can start to organise more effectively again. And people like me can do that and we should. And my last thing is, my organisation, Community Pride, well after 6 years of doing what we've been doing and supporting the participation agenda, we ended up thinking, has the levels of participation which we have supported and encouraged made any decision and we were left with a question mark about that.

So I'm wondering whether the participation agenda has merely signed us all up to a sort of collusion and co-option and not genuinely making a difference so I think we have to really question that. I took it out of a report I read, it's the incompatible differences over issues and maybe we've got to face into the fact that a sort of consensus thing in the middle will not work and it will have to get back again with some real conflict and I'm not a conflictual person but sometimes there comes a point where you say, 'I'm sorry but we're not doing that and we want to stand together and fight it'.

*[Applause from audience]*

NR We're talking about community network, I've been working as a Community Organiser for Community Network for the past 12½ years and I'm one of the organisers who started from the beginning and I've seen changes. I've started working with Asian women in the Salford area and in this area it was a very white area, there were visible Asian people living, but you see they weren't participating in any local issues or anything to do with local issues. So when I started working as Organiser one of my aims was to get BME people involved into activities and I've

tried organising events and activities, like a learning school for some Asian women, where I have to go to door knocking and getting to these women on a one to one and get them out to come and take part in activities.

In my last place I've organised a health event, a special health event, with a health worker in my area where in some women there are barriers about going to doctors and doing health screening and different health topics because they were no awareness of issues behind these topics so I had to break it down into smaller sessions and explain to them in more depth about health issues. This is how I got them out to take part into these activities and now by 2006 the Community Network sort of where is the funding, I know there are now some new other fundings coming but it took 2½ years to come to that stage, you see soon as a new project just starts, local people don't have the faith, they don't know anything about that new project but now I've been an Organiser for 12½ years, people in my area know me, they know what I'm doing so if something new happens, say somebody new come into post, that person will take another 2 years to get them to that place where I am at the moment. And if the resources are stopped, it's a shame, it will be really sad to see something that we all worked so hard to come to that stage and you know when they, in the back of our mind, we start working on a project that we know is going to end, so we are demotivated as well, it's not motivating us to do a piece of project and put so much effort in that project.

We need people, now women who come to power talk about power, nowadays not just a BME and aged people but even white people, actually people don't have the faith in their authority, local service providers, they don't have that faith because in one of my last Committee meetings I've heard people saying things about the Local Justice Centre being put in this winter, there are a lot of people who are not in favour of the Justice Centre being put in there, they think that their local Council is only doing this to bring money and economic side of things in their area which is not going to be good for people.

They also feel that the Council is only concentrating where the Civic Centre is in Salford and not in the deprived area of Salford so we're not just talking about BME and ethnic people, it's about when the people who feel in voting that if there is somebody who's got the power, what is the local community people going to change, are they going to make any differences to these service providers because people feel that when they are needed, if I want to vote, I want to feel how important is it to me to go and vote, is my vote going to make any changes, this is what people are looking for. People want to feel that they are voting for the right changes and like somebody was on about the war, saying that so many people were against the war, still the Government went for it, so you see it's demotivating our community.

HK: Well listen, I hope you all join us in thanking four fantastic community activists.

HK: That's what all of you are going to be! Although certainly all this new cohort of young political activists, you are going to be doing this, I hope, before long.