

POWER Inquiry Witness Session 7 – Bristol

Witness Session
12-5pm, 24 June 2005

Armada House, Telephone Avenue,
Bristol, BS1 4BQ

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

Witnesses

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

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

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

Abbreviations

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

PG: When I arrived here earlier today the panel was really excellent. I think it's given the commission some food for thought and now we ought to do another one on mayors and PR and all sorts of things. I'm not going to waste too much time introducing this session; I think it's quite self explanatory but I will just say that when I introduced the commission this morning I neglected to mention the invisible man on my left. This is Adam Lent who is the clerk of the Inquiry and Research Director so he takes all the notes and prompts me if I do something wrong. Welcome back. As I said this morning, I think this issue is absolutely at the heart of democratic renewal in this country at the moment. I mentioned this morning that there are millions of people who will be trying to tune in to see Live Aid and the millions have already put their power behind Make Poverty History is perhaps tantamount to where some of our democratic engagement is going.

An email that went round that probably got so many of you here today was written by one of the members of our team and the title of it was Is Jamie Oliver now the Most Powerful Man in Britain? I think there are a couple of men and one lady who might disagree with that because they're also incredible powerful in their own ways. I'll start to introduce them. Lord Mancroft here is a Conservative peer; he's also a Board Director of the Countryside Alliance. He first entered the House in 1987 as a hereditary peer and then became, which I think is rather an interesting phrase, an elected hereditary peer in 1999 when most of them were kindly asked to leave the House. The Countryside Alliance is one of the most interesting organisations around at the moment; it managed to mobilise hundreds and thousands of people to take to the streets to protest against government neglect of rural needs and the proposals to ban hunting during Labour's first time. The chair of the Countryside Alliance, Sir John Jackson, said to me only the other day that it was one of the biggest street demonstrations since the Peasants' Revolt. He's also vice-chair of the Lords All-Parties Drugs Misuse Group and president of the European Association for the Treatment of Addiction.

Hilary Wainwright, whom I've known for a long time now – I think I met her at the launch of her book on Hayek– is editor of the monthly paper, Red Pepper, a British New Left magazine; she's fellow of the International Labour Study Centre at the University of Manchester and of the Centre of Global Government at the LSE, a great institution as a graduate, I feel. Her recent books include Reclaim the State: Adventures in Popular Democracy. We were saying this morning thought that one area that we didn't really get to explore with our local government panel was the different forms of trying to get people to make decisions, either in their local community or on a national level. Maybe Hilary, during this afternoon, we could explore that with you a little bit further. Interestingly, Hilary also founded the Popular Planning Unit of the Great London Council during Mrs Thatcher's reign there before she obviously abolished it, which I think was the catalyst for some of the more deliberative and citizen engagement projects that we're seeing around the world now.

And finally we have Peter Tatchell who is probably the one who needs least introduction. Again he is a human rights campaigner who was the forefront of direct action and campaigning since the 1980s. His political activity began with opposition to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and eventually led him to coming over here. He was one of the 30 founding members of Outrage, a radical gay rights group and more recently, I think, we know Peter for his interest in human rights more generally, where he's twice attempted to place the Zimbabwe president, Robert Mugabe under citizen's arrest on charges of torture, something that he grabbed headlines with quite incredibly. I'm going to ask Frances if you'll kick off the questioning. The way these sessions work, for the panellists who weren't here this morning, is that the commissioners have a series of questions very broadly that they'll try and explore with all of you. They may ask one of you or they may ask the whole panel to respond. We'd very much like this to be a conversation so if you feel you want to come in on a point that someone else has made, please feel free to do so and commissioners will jump in when they feel it is appropriate.

FOG: Thank you very much. I think I've been asked to lead off so that I'm the only one who hasn't got in a plug. This morning we had a few plug for counsellors; my plug is that I'm here from the Trade Union movement which is biggest social movement with seven million members. And also I don't want our panel members to feel under pressure, but I was talking to some students earlier who felt that the questions from the floor were far more intellectual. I wanted to just start by saying, as a commission, we've been really interested that at the same time that we've seen this demise in formal political parties, we see many single issue social groups and community organisations, single issue campaigns like Green Peace or NGOs like the National Trust, that have memberships far bigger than any political party, and seem capable of inspiring and mobilising people in a

way that political parties aren't able to. We've had huge demonstrations of the Countryside Alliance and the AntiWar Coalition, the biggest in recent political history. Why is this, and what can political parties learn from single issue campaigns?

HW: Well I have to question this notion of single issue because I think actually what's more interesting and newer is the development of social movements that in a sense are developing a wider politics with a small p. And that what's most challenging to political parties because in a sense there have always been single issues. I'm quite old and when I was a kid I joined Amnesty because you do something immediately and have contact with these prisoners. I think that appeal of Amnesty and quite a lot of other genuine single issues has long been there, that you can do something direct. But I think what's happening now in addition to that there is, in a way, politics from below which is challenging to the idea of the political parties. In a sense single issues always left the political parties in charge of politics; they didn't actually challenge the monopoly of parties over politics and I think the new movements that we've seen really, since 1968, have been and are developing a wider view. The latest is the 'Anti-Globalisation' movement, which is about a vision of a different kind of economic and political order and I want to really distinguish between the limits of political parties as such and people's experiences of those limits - and the limits of political parties in our existing political system here in Britain. I think that, in terms of the limits of political parties as such, that's in some ways the most interesting, although we also need to address the particularities of Britain. And there I think, really across the world, concentrating on the West and here, I think what we've seen is a decline in the optimism that followed the Second World War in the idea of the state being able to resolve things. So in 1945, whether it was the problems of women, nurseries, poverty, regulation of capital and so on - go to the state. And what's been happening is that a recognition of actually the state's power is limited; it's important but it's not enough.

So the women's movement was my most direct experience where it was a matter of partly changing relationships with men in your daily life, it was partly about creating new kinds of public provision, whether it was women's centres, rape crisis centres, well women clinics and so on, which in a way only the women experiencing the problem could initiate. Now it's not to deny that political parties, political action then became necessary but we've seen the development of action around women within industry. I don't know if people will remember the Lucas Aerospace alternative plan but shop stewards in the military industry were feeling that it wasn't enough to go to Tony Blair and expect him to come up with a plan because it was them that knew the technology; they knew that their machinery and their skills could be used for socially useful purposes. It was partly to do with knowledge also, but they know things that the state doesn't know. But I think that there's that fundamental limit to political parties and I think that leads to a very different notion of what political parties can do.

Then there's the particularities of the blockages in our political system, the sort of feeling that politics is so much fought at the centre that the kind of ideas, innovations and visions coming from outside the centre are not reflected and therefore a feeling that the only thing to do is to take direct action. And again there's a sense of direct action like creating women's centres that are directly addressing the problem and direct action which is about protest and influencing the state. And the former one is the one that's new where people discovered new ways of solving problems that didn't rely entirely on the state.

FOG: Lord Mancroft, would you say that the Countryside Alliance springs from the same base as Hilary's describing and at what point does protest action, direct action actually become dangerous in terms of lack of accountability to a representative government or representative political party?

LM: I never thought of that one. I think that the Countryside Alliance and other groups like that come from a slightly different perspective, not a hugely different one. I think one of the foremost things is that there is a widely held perception that traditional democratic processes in this country simply don't deliver. People find them immensely frustrating and they see one government come and another go and they never see any change. And the issues of the single issue groups, which may not been as seen as one issue but may be seen as a range of connected issues. The Countryside Alliance is not all about hunting; it is about a range of rural issues which we may come back to. But it's very much black and white and I think one of the problems for the government, apart from the fact that it is currently perceived as not being able to deliver, is that a lot of political arguments today aren't that great. The parties argue about health and education and law and order; you need a very brave politician to stand up and say they're opposed to law and order, opposed to education and opposed to health. What they're actually arguing about is I can do it better than you and actually most of them don't do it very well at all. And one thing I did notice was that Hilary said that after the Second World War everybody looked to the state to provide answers, well I may be a very old fashioned right winger and I never thought the state could provide answers because I think that the state is, by its nature, incompetent. They can't do it and they spend our money very badly.

PG: So who are the issues of the Countryside Alliance actually aimed at?

LM: They're aimed at politicians, at political establishments.

PG: And the state?

LM: No, not the state. It's aimed at the government but the government is not the state.

PG: But it's using the state's powers.

LM: Yes, absolutely. But it is aimed at the political establishments and the governments in power on that day. And what it is doing: it is a group of people who got together saying our issue is not being addressed or is being addressed badly or in the wrong way. And we are feeling aggrieved. And they feel they can express themselves through that way because they cannot express themselves or cannot get their grievances addressed, either rightly or wrongly. And I think a lot of people feel like that and that is one of the reasons that single issue groups have arisen. There are advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is in terms of the media; it is much easier for them to put their issues over and, let's face it, mainstream politics is really not very sexy on television. Listening to endless politicians batting the ball backwards and forwards on news and current affairs programmes is really like watching paint dry. That's a problem for them which is part of the reason, I suppose, that people don't want to vote. Does it matter whether we have Mr Smith or Mr Brown? It doesn't seem to make a lot of difference. So I think that's an issue. Your last question: does it become dangerous? Yes it probably would become dangerous; it could become dangerous. I don't think it has in this country yet. I think where you have the establishment being topped could become so. Revolutions seldom achieve what they set out to do. I think that if you live in a democratic process you try and make that process work. There are more efficient processes but we have decided in this part of the world that it's a very good way to live. As long as you do that and get things addressed, you're talking and not knocking people about and what has to be a better way of doing it, excepting the fact that occasionally tempers on the streets will boil over. And when a punch is thrown that might wake people up and that might not be a bad thing although I obviously condemn violence. And when the danger occurs is if you get a situation like Northern Ireland and in other places around the world where people feel that their grievance cannot be addressed in a democratic process or don't want it to be and they deliberately choose the path of violence. I hope nobody would ever want to go down that route.

FOG: Is there the danger that actually this could be a case of the minority bullying the majority - that your particular interest group can mobilise, can get media attention but actually the majority don't agree with you?

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

FOG: This point that was mentioned around media savviness, I think there's a lot of interest and sympathy from the commission and a lot of admiration for the ability of single issue campaigns to mobilise and so on. But we wanted to dig a bit deeper on some of the more difficult issues, for example, can the preoccupation with the association between single issue groups and stunt politics actually serve to cheapen some of our democratic dialogue and isn't it true that sometimes we could say that rural politics can be very boring, but maybe necessarily boring, requiring the building of quiet consensus that takes time, as opposed to the big bang impact of single issue campaigns? Peter, is there a danger that it can cheapen our democracy?

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

Going to your point about do stunts cheapen, the way an organisation like Outrage has operated is on the basis that when issues get ignored by mainstream politicians, sometimes it's mildly justified and practically necessary to use unorthodox extra-parliamentary methods to put those issues in the public domain. This very much follows the historical trajectory of charters and suffragettes. They were ignored so they protested and marched and petitioned outside of parliament to get their issue on the agenda. So when Outrage has a stunt like the kiss-in in Piccadilly Circus to protest against the arrest of gay and lesbian couples for kissing and holding hands in the street, we did that because no politician would listen or care. The police ignored all our pleas for a non-homophobic policy so we did the stunt, not as end in itself but as a means to an end and the means was to, first of all, get media coverage but not for its own sake, to get media coverage in order to raise public awareness, in order to provoke public debate, in order to

put pressure on the government and the police to change their policy and in order to build a momentum for a longer, more sustained process of change. So the stunt was the beginning of a process and out of that process the idea is to build an awareness that leads to momentum for change so that those in power feel under pressure to address the concern that's hitherto been ignored. So I don't see stunts as cheapening the process; I see them as enriching them.

FOG: But should you be hanging up your single issue campaign gloves and going into the parties to rejuvenate parties? Or how do parties need to change to make links with you?

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

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

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

LM: Can I just make a point? I'm in an odd position here because, apart from being part of a single issue group for quite a long time now, I've also been in parliament for 18 years, not in the House of Commons, but I observe it from down the corridor and see how it's changed. It has changed over the past 18 years, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worst. But we started talking about stunts and one stunt that I remember was eight guys who got into the House of Commons. That was very difficult for me because a lot of my colleagues at the House of Lords who are supportive of my campaigning issue, were absolutely horrified by that. They are mostly retired MPs and they thought it was the nearest thing to sacrilege.

Audience member: They ought to be ashamed of the fact that those three lads were given special permission to go and play polo for England!

LM: That lady may well be right . That wasn't the point that I was making. It was the reaction of these people and what they're feeling about parliament – and I'm neutral on this one as I'm not a member of the House of Commons. Reading what the newspapers were saying, from the broadsheets to the tabloids, some of them were horrified and some of them were joking; it was absurd. What was interesting that when it finally came to the magistrates court, they started off with nine charges and when they got to court they were fine the equivalent of leaving chewing gum on the pavement and that is how the magistrate clearly viewed it. And if you looked at what the newspapers said afterwards, that's how they viewed it so most people viewed it as an irresponsible silly stunt, so they got the headlines. The interesting thing was not how everybody else viewed it; the interesting thing is how the MPs viewed it. They believe that their world is sacrosanct and they look only inwards which is really what Peter was saying. I went to the 1922 Committee the other day and again, we had this leadership row which was very carefully leaked to every newspaper in England, so I'm not saying anything out of turn. After having just lost an election and all the things that go in my party, all they were interested in was the right to the 22 and the rights to the House of Commons. I think that is a very serious political problem and that is why when you were saying what can parties do to change, I think they have to look in the mirror. They are so obsessed with the ivory tower of the Westminster village in which they live that they find it very difficult to get out of it.

FOG: That may be true and the political system may be flawed but at least I have the opportunity to vote and hold my MPs to account. I don't know about the issues of the Countryside Alliance people; I don't know who they are, who they're responsible to.

LM: No, you don't and if you were a member you could. And if members don't pay their annual dues single issue groups won't exist. We happen to be a membership organisation that has a democratic board of directors but you're right, single issue groups are not accountable which is a danger and the parliamentary democratic process is meant to be accountable. But, for the reasons that Peter was saying, it is not as accountable as it should be. He talked about the elections and he is right; the electoral process, the process by which people put their MPs into parliament is where it all starts and things like the turnout in the last election, the fiasco with postal votes, the West Lothian question which is sitting up there in the disparity between Scotland and England, which is not an issue on the top of MP's priorities today. And when it goes wrong, which it inevitably will because taxation is the most important political point at the end of the day, it will be too late to correct it and it will create a massive problem. And so we have to get our electoral system right and, as someone who plays absolutely no part in it at all, I think it's wrong.

PG: So I'm just trying to get a list of Conservatives who support PR. Are you in favour of PR either on a local level or on a national level?

LM: To tell you the honest truth, I don't really know what I'm in favour of but I'm sure as hell not in favour of what we have now.

FM: I just wanted to probe a little deeper into this clear growing distance, if you like, between the single issue or the social issue campaign groups and the parties. It seems as if it's a kind of divorce by mutual consent, as it were, that you don't feel there's much to be gained by associating yourselves closely with the party that would be most likely to be sympathetic to your point of view, and the party is running for cover from anything appearing too pro-hunting, too-homosexual equality, whatever it is. And my impression that this didn't used to be quite the same - that the parties would be sympathetic and active, or a large number of MPs would be, in supporting the kind of thing that they felt in sympathy with. But now they seem to be closing in on themselves, as you said.

LM: I think part of the problem with that is that there is no incentive either for the government at the top or individual MPs to change the process because they benefit from

it. Their careers, what you might call the political gravy train, require that the status quo continues. The government of this country is entirely dependent upon the majority party endlessly winning votes on the wind and very few MPs vote against their party very often because their career will go down the Swanny if they do. So they have no interest particularly in changing that. You are right in that a lot of MPs used to be involved more in campaign groups and are involved in the less controversial ones. But once they become party political controversial they withdraw from that process. My organisation, the Countryside Alliance, has historically been associated with the Conservative Party more than the others and we spent ten years distancing ourselves from the Conservative Party and trying to attract support from the Labour Party. Interestingly enough we won all the arguments when votes didn't apply. In the House of Lords 80% of the Labour peers voted against a ban; most of those were put there by Tony Blair and an awful lot of them were ex-MPs who came up from the House of Commons who consistently voted against us in the House of Commons. As soon as they were freed from that pressure, some of them within three years – they voted in the last parliament to ban hunting and as soon as they came into the House, oh God we won't do that anymore. They either abstained or voted for us. In the House of Commons we think we won every single argument and so did most other people. We did not have any impact on voting whatsoever; and that is just an example and it happens in other groups as well. It depends which way the prevailing desire of that party goes.

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

FM: Because then it would be in their interests in order to outflank the potential new parties, to be closer to you.

HW: Yes, there wouldn't be that sort of absolute pressure to win the one million votes at the centre to get into office and I think it would mean that parties that recognise the power of social movements to bring about the changes that they believed in. They would be able

to combine pragmatic concerns about actually being represented and potentially gaining power and supporting these movements.

PT: I was going to say that in my experience I think historically politicians or parliament is often the last place to jump onboard the changes in society. A good example of that was that from the early 1990s overwhelmingly public opinion was in favour of lifting the ban on lesbian and gay people serving in the armed forces. Polls were consistently showing 60% to 70% support ending the ban but neither the then Conservative Government nor the subsequent Labour Government would act and indeed, despite promising to lift the ban, when Labour came to power it actually fought tooth and nail, spending public money, to maintain the ban by fighting a case in the European Court of Human Rights which thankfully Labour lost. And you've got to ask yourself why is it that faced with clear public support for the ending of a grave injustice, these two different governments both insisted on maintaining that discrimination. And it does seem to suggest that social movements and public opinion is often way ahead of politicians and that the political process encourages timidity, encourages caution and actually pre-empts change even when it has considerable popular support.

LM: I think that's a very important point. I've thought for sometime that fear is the governing factor in politics and that the individual politicians and parties are terrified of the way that the electorate perceive them. Another issue I've been involved in is the drug issue. I happen to think that we should legalise drugs; lots of people think that's a bad idea. But you can't even have a debate on it at Westminster because the one thing that MPs find terrifying is appearing to be weak. And I remember talking to Jack Straw about it when he was in the Home Office and he kept going on about this and I said to him that actually most people don't care whether you're strong or weak, they merely want you to be effective. And he looked amazed and said you've got to be tough on this and you've got to be tough on that and they're terrified of this perception of weakness. And that goes from the individual politician through to the party and it is preserved by this extraordinary stranglehold and this is a completely new post-war thing in this country that the executive has over the legislature. In America or France the three parts of the democratic process are defined and separated: it's judiciary, executive and legislative as we know. In this country when there is a row in parliament, between the two houses, it's not actually a row between the two houses because the House of Commons is not really now behaving like a legislature. It's entirely owned by the executive and so you've got this extraordinary situation where our constitution has evolved to such an extent that executive is entirely taken over the most important house in the legislature and therefore that house can only do what the executive wants it to do. Therefore it cannot respond to the arguments of other parties or the requirements of individual politicians either in its party or in another party.

PG: I am going to open the session up to the commissioners. Bano?

BM: I'm really interested to explore further how social movements are changing the way we define political party participation and also look at whether or not we're developing a new form of social stratification because if your issue isn't sexy, if you're not media savvy, if the means don't exist, if you're grounded political participation isn't defined as a social movement because it's too below the radar, then do you get lost? And are we defining political party participation by the media savvy ones amongst us at the expense of others? And how do we filter down your media savviness to the ones down at the ground?

HW: I do recognise what you're saying because I've been doing research with people in global communities that have been really marginalised by de-industrialisation and 30 years of government policy. I'm just giving you one example: there's all this emphasis on being tough on crime and there's an example in East Manchester where the initiative

coming out of a survey showing people's fear of crime was to massively increase police aggressiveness with a project Excalibur project which arrested every kid in sight! But there's a small group of parents who, at all the meetings about this, said hang on a minute, actually youth services have collapsed in this area, there are no facilities and we're going to take action to set up a youth club. And all the kids that were involved in all this joy riding and stuff came to this youth club. I talked to them and they were a group of people taking direct action in a way. They did get some funding but their wider argument has had no real public airing. At the moment we're talking about political parties not being responsive to a group like that; we as movement people do. And that's where you've got to look to the infrastructure of social movements. In a way this leads to the point about the nature of the movements and the absence of party democracy. I'm thinking that the Trade Union movement's really important of all the social movements. They have got a lasting rooted infrastructure but have all these problems. But in a sense I'd be arguing that it's really important that local trade union organisations link up with groups like that youth group and tenants groups and all those groups beneath the radar. So there are alliances: trade union and social movements developing really strong alliances that can strengthen the weak, as it were. And also that's where the alternative media come in. Red Pepper is only one of a whole sort of network of independent media. There's Indymedia which is a very unedited web based way of people gaining a voice that often doesn't get out beyond the movements, but it makes the movements feel mirrored in some kind of public way. Another feature of democracy is that the media too suffer from our undemocratic system. After fascism in Italy, Germany, Spain, France legislation was introduced that required every newsagent to display whatever was published. If you go to those countries then you see the voices of the Green movement, the radical movements, the social movements in magazines and publications and they're therefore able to thrive and grow in circulations of tens of thousands. Red Pepper or Outrage newspaper is competing, not just with Cosmopolitan, but also with crisps and coke for space because the newsagents are completely commercial because there's no protection of the right to alternative opinion, the right to alternative information. So I think that's another issue to deal with if we're talking about making the movements above the radar. We've got to deal with the institutionalised lack of democracy of the press or the conditions for a free press.

PT: I think there is a problem in that there are some social movements which are not very media aware and not well organised. The issues they're raising are fundamentally important but they don't get a voice because they don't present well. A classic example I'm working with is whole question of Zimbabwean exiles and asylum seekers. They've got an incredible moral case for justice yet, despite all the help and advice, they will persist in calling demonstrations outside of media hours, in the middle of the night when no-one's going to be around to cover them. And sometimes I want to scream but that is a real issue and a real problem. But it's just about really a learning curve. All I can say is that Outrage hasn't got an office, we haven't got any staff, none of us get paid, we haven't got any organised funding, we do everything on about £3,000 or £4,000 a year yet we've got global media coverage about our issues and campaigns. So there ways that even small, under funded organisations can do things, providing they learn the basic tricks of the book, so to speak. And I think it is a really important question of empowering people and making the democratic process accountable and to make sure that those people have those skills so that they can get the media coverage, get the access to politicians that Outrage and other social movements have over time learnt how to do.

PG: I find that quite interesting but that feels to me that you're bringing a huge onus on an individual group of people. You've not only got to feel very strongly about your issue, you've got to have the time or the creative energy, etc, etc, which in a way parties or the parliamentary system helps to equalise because there are a broad range of agenda that were brought together. Hilary, I don't know in what you've particularly done around the world there are other forums that could be created where different agendas can be brought together in order to influence political decision makers?

HW: There is the emergence of quite an interesting forum around the idea of social forums which the most dramatic is the World Social Forum which is completely extraordinary really. It's emerged out of the global social justice movement protests around Seattle and Washington and so on and people say it's not enough to protest and stalk the elite, we've got to develop an alternative. And the way this really resonated to the extent that every year there have been these events in Brazil and in India where literally there were 200,000 people at the last one from different movements, small movements, movements of Indonesian fishing people, movements of forest people defending forests. In a way it has more roots in the south than the north. And this kind of model, this social forum, brought together people across a city, so there's a local social forum that brings people together across a region representing all sorts of different quite beneath the radar issues. And in a way this is happening in Britain; in Tyneside I know that people have come together in this way, particularly using resources and supporting local Trade Union movement. And so that's really a case of where, in a way, the onus hasn't been on one particular group to develop the media savvy but there's been a sense of a mutual coming together amongst whom there are people who have got the media savvy. So it's about the kind of solidaristic form of organisation through which people can get a hearing. But it's not developed and those are discussions that need to be had.

FM: But it would be easier if there were shop windows to which such forums could be displayed in, like the newsagent example or the town hall.

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

PG: Thank you. I'm now going to open it up. I particularly want to say that we have lots of young people in this room and everyone tells me that single issue campaigns are something young people feel more involved with; I wouldn't mind hearing from some of those young people as we go forward.

AM: What I'd like to say about this individual minority groups protesting, this shows up really how weak the main MP system is. You've pointed it out. Personally I've found our local MP, Valerie Davey, very, very good. Every time I had complaints about anything she went to the Minister and I got the letter back from the Minister. So there are some MPs who do their job properly and what I think this does throw up is the fact that there should be a wider range of the Private Members Bill so that MPs who have been elected for a specific subject because their particular area has a major problem like unemployment, ethnic minorities, racist and all sorts of things can get a better sounding and they can be able to put it in and have it properly discussed. It sounds to me as if instead of asking why

young people are not voting you should be looking at how we can reform the Houses of Parliament and make the system better

AM: The issue of PR came up at the previous session. Seeing that two of the panellists are pretty much in favour of PR, and certainly I got the impression that the earlier three panellists were, the problem I have is in Scotland the party that came fourth in the Scottish Assembly of Elections are sharing government, so effectively if I was a member of the second party or the third party I would be a bit upset about that. There was no difference in terms of the turnout; I think there was a very slight increase. We do have a system of PR in the European elections and again, there's been no difference in the turnout. So I'd like to ask the panellists to think about what form of PR that they would propose to effectively promote a better system of raising the single issues. Thank you.

AM: My name is Dave Trusom [?]. I've come out from Oxford today because I run a single issue campaigns concerned with the power that is derived from inherited wealth. One, is the campaign for universal inheritance. The other is Opportunity, the campaign for a British universal inheritance? I would like to ask the Inquiry if it will consider helping to break that great taboo on the discussion of the inequalities of inherited wealth in each new generation and, in order to do that, I would like to ask the Inquiry if it will take evidence from me and from others at a special meeting to be convened to discuss the power that derives from vast inequalities from inherited wealth is often received tax free.

PG: I think that's not a question for the panel but it's a question for the commissioners.

AM: We've been talking about single issue politics which is something that young people get really passionate about. But we're still hearing all the time that young people just aren't voting. So surely we need to find ways of turning that passion for single issues back into voting. I just wondered whether the panel thinks people being given the right to vote at 16 would increase the number of young people voting later on in life.

PG: Well we have one advocate for votes at 16 from our commissioners, Phil at the end there.

AM: It was mentioned a bit earlier about whether or not single issues campaigns are potentially a threat to democracy in terms of the way in which they operate and the fact that they can be very media savvy and very good in putting their point across but that didn't necessarily represent a large group of people. It's quite interesting in Bristol: if you look, for example, at the Fathers for Justice campaign before they showered Tony Blair in condoms, they're actually getting a fair amount of support among MPs in parliament and I don't want to comment on their particular issue but equally there's quite a lot of academic evidence that the view point they're putting across about family law is actually completely wrong. And so I just wondered how you achieve that balancing act of when they put forward an issue the government suddenly says, oh this is on the front of the paper and therefore we have to act in response to it when, in actual fact, that doesn't represent an accurate picture of what's going on.

AM: I just wanted to pick up on another fact on whether single issues are dangerous in the sense that before the single issues were getting all the media attention, are they not undermining the actual democratic process as it stands, as well at the same time? So, for example, there was the comment that we couldn't possibly criticise Zimbabwe or Ukraine and effectively saying we're as bad as Ukraine, doesn't the actual suggestion completely undermine the fact that actually we have got a working democracy which we should be valuing?

PM: Just to remind you panel, there was a question about the use of private members bills, a question about what form of PR could actually encourage single issues to come to the fore; there was a question about inheritance tax which is probably a question that you and I should have a conversation about afterwards. There was the question on how to turn the passion that young people have for single issues into encouraging them to vote and possibly voting at 16, and two questions broadly around threats to democracy. The lady at the back, you get the headlines but maybe what you're saying may not be right and the undermining of the democratic process.

PT: I think the idea of a fixed allocation of time for private members bills would be a very healthy invigoration of the political process. There's already some time, but it should be massively expended so that back bencher MPs can bring forward issues that don't necessarily fit with the political agenda of the government or opposition parties. So I think it's a very good move. In terms of forms of PR, I broadly support the system in Scotland and London which retains the constituency member so there is some direct local accountability but has an additional member system from a list whereby the number of seats can be upped to ensure proper parity for minority parties. It's not perfect but it's a better system, a much fairer system than we've got. In terms of involving young people, I wouldn't say that voting at 16 is a panacea but I would say that it's probably part of the process. I think in terms of a basic principle of no taxation without representation, if you can work and earn and pay tax at 16, you should be able to vote as well. Do stunts like Outrage or Fathers for Justice undermine democracy? I don't think so because at the end of the day, like I said, they are mechanisms or means to an end and the end is to raise public awareness, provoke debate, mobilise opinion and if your cause doesn't have sufficient public support, if you can't through your stunt raise awareness and motivate a sense of public support for what you're doing, then of course no government is going to feel any responsibility to act on what you say, and quite rightly. Just because a minority shouts doesn't mean to say it should be heard and acted upon. There has to be a balance between raising the issue and the morality, the practicality and the public support of that issue. And so when you look at some of the early gay rights campaigns and stunts in the 1970s they got nowhere. They were very imaginative and very fantastic but they got nowhere because they got dreadful publicity because the media didn't regard gay and lesbian issues as genuine human rights issues and the public didn't regard them as human rights issues either. It was only much later, through a great deal of persistence that the continuing process of repeated stunts and so on and civil disobedience campaigns, they began to be taken seriously and in the process began to win the hearts and minds of the public and that's what prompted the governments to start to act. The final point about is it insulting to the Ukraine or elsewhere to say that they haven't got a fair democratic system, yes and no. We don't live under a dictatorship; we don't have the secret police knocking on people's doors but there's no doubt we do not have a genuinely representative democratic system. The government today does not enjoy anywhere near the majority support of the people who voted, let alone eligible voters. It's absolutely extraordinary and unbelievable that anybody can say or suggest that we have anything near a democracy when only a fifth of eligible voters supported Labour at the last election and only 36% of those who voted did. If we have to have coalitions, fine. If it has to be based on the fourth party, fine; it's all preferable to the current system. We have to make sure that the governing power has the broad support of at least a minimal majority of the population.

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

PG: Like a petition or something?

HW: Yes, even more than a petition. It would be legal support like neutral legal support for drawing up a bill that can then be taken up by MPs. What form of PR - let's take the single transferable vote or some modification of it because you get bigger constituencies and then a number of MPs for each constituency. I think that leads to a genuine form of accountability and diversity. I think the present ideas that constituencies really provide a real relationship with MPs is pretty meaningless. What you're trying to do out of multi member system would be that you'd have a variety of MPs like in Bristol as maybe one constituency. You'd have the Left Labour or Green Labour or Green Left, the full spectrum of a much bigger spectrum because the minorities might not get in there and movements where you could choose which MP to relate to. So I think it would actually lead to a more direct relationship between movements in that area and their representatives. Inherited wealth: yes I think the commission should take this up. I don't know enough about the commission's people; I think it should also take up other sources of economic power that undermine democracy. We should look also at the power of corporations, the way they become embedded in most of the departments of government and also the power of the financial institutions internationally, the IMF and way that those have eroded of democracy should actually be a real focus.

Votes at 16: I agree with Peter but again, it won't solve the problem; it won't lead to people voting in much bigger numbers unless we have a change in the electoral system because young people will quickly realise that their vote isn't counting. What happens if the campaigning issue is based on false evidence or whatever? The crucial thing here is debate; it's opening up real debate. There's never ever any research which has a one to one relationship with policy so research would be fed into that debate. The policy implications of research was never self-evident so it's a question of the actions opening up the debate and then there being real, adequate forums of debate in which many different sources of research and knowledge would be drawn on.

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

LM: I am deeply in favour of inherited wealth as long as it comes my way... seriously I absolutely loath inheritance tax it turns people's savings and capital into income tax it is a most destructive thing that should be got rid of.

Parliament does need to reform; I don't actually think it's broken, I think it's cracked. There's quite a lot you can do to make it better. Politicians respond in the way they want to respond and not in the way you want them to; it's up to people to make them respond where they want to – not very easy, I accept. What forms of PR? I don't know. There are lots of different forms of PR; I think it's a big issue like the reform of Parliament. Like the issue of private members bills; it needs to be changed. Part of the ideal process should evolve and not have revolutions – those are messy. So I would like evolutionary change but currently we have a government which believes that it owns the constitution and uses it's electoral majority to change it at will and to suit itself, which has never ever happened before. No previous government in this country has ever done that; this government does and I think it's extremely dangerous and they're going to make an awful mess of it.

How do you turn young people into campaigners, into voters? I don't know; I suspect that's one of the things this commission is going to look at very carefully. And when we talk about people voting at 16, I don't know the answer to that either but I do know that currently we have legislation in front of parliament which is going to make it illegal to buy either an airgun or a knife until you are 18. I think it's a bit odd to be able to vote for who's going to rule the country in which you can't buy a knife. Imagine if you're a 17 year old couple who got married; you could have a baby, have a mortgage, vote on who rules the country but you can't stock your kitchen with knives. Welcome to Mr Blair's Britain. So things do need to improve.

On Private Members Bills, Peter and Hilary love them, I loath them. I spent 18 years looking at private members bill left, right and centre...they are a nightmare. The role of parliament is to allow the executive to legislate. The only reason you need private members, which is a very modern invention, is to allow the blithering idiots down the other end to make their ridiculous views known to all of us. It's because the executive legislates so badly. We shouldn't need to have single issue groups or people who need to legislate in that way because government should do it. What we've got to make sure is that we can reform the system so that the government does do it so that we don't have to go down the private members route which means I have to sit down every Friday morning and listen to ludicrous speeches on something on which I have no interest at all in, block up the parliamentary process, only to kill the private members bill afterwards.

PG: I seem to remember that the hunting ban was first mooted through a private members bill! Thank you.