

POWER Inquiry Witness Session – London

10am-3pm, 9 December 2004

Congress House
23-28 Great Russell Street
London, WC1B 3LS**Witness****Professor Paul Whiteley**

Professor of Politics at Essex University

Abbreviations

AM	Audience Member [individual names indicated]	
BF	Ben Freeman	Commissioner
BM	Bano Murtuja	Commissioner
EB	Emma B	Commissioner
FM	Ferdinand Mount	Commissioner
FOG	Frances O'Grady	Commissioner
HK	Helena Kennedy	Commissioner
PC	Phil Carey	Commissioner
PN	Pippa Norris	Witness
PS	Philippe Schmitter	Witness
PW	Paul Whiteley	Witness
SW	Stuart Weir	Witness
VL	Vivien Lowndes	Witness

HK: Can I now call on Professor Paul Whiteley of Essex University to come and take his place at the table? Paul, this is a bit like Mastermind, you're about to be quizzed by this group *[laughs]* but no better person to be quizzed than you!

PW: Well thank you, thanks for asking me. I mean I think this is a great idea and it is very important because I've been involved in academic research on these issues for years and I have concerns about what's happening as people here do and so it's a very good idea to vent these things. Now actually what I was going to talk about complements very much a lot of what Pippa says but I'll just give you some data, some sort of illustrative information both from... well from different surveys and just to back this up and highlight the things I think are really important and also discuss what are the things that the Commission might consider doing.

So let's start off. What Adam asked me to do was to address a couple of questions, key questions, and so we're going to start off with talking about what types of participation are taking place. Now forgive the squealing brakes *[laughs]* but how does participation vary across democracies? And we've got some evidence on that relating specifically to Europe. Pippa was talking about a wider range of countries but this is specific to Europe. How does party competition affect elections? This issue of turnout, and there's something about party competition which hasn't been mentioned yet which is quite important and I want to convince you of the importance of that. Then: why is there extra-parliamentary participation? This issue of demonstrations and the like, and how does that tie in with conventional forms. And then: what are the challenges of extra-parliamentary participation?

Okay, you can classify political participation into three kinds. There's first of all individualistic kind of participation, this is things that people can do on their own without having to be involved in an organisation. And from survey evidence collected in 2000, a big survey in 2000, and the details of this appear in the book up there, this is the kind of thing that has been going on in Britain, contemporary Britain, this asks about the things that people have done over the previous year but also whether they *would* do it, this is the potential argument. They may not have done it but would you do it? What you find out, a lot of donating money to organisations, quite a bit of signing petitions, a lot of boycotting going on. Consumer participation is really quite important now as you shall see, it's grown a lot, this is an area in which participation has grown in. Buying certain products for ethical reasons, that's the other side of the coin of boycotting, that's growing too. Raising funds for an organisation, wearing a campaign badge or sticker, so a lot of that going on.

This is collective forms of participation where you're involved in an organisation, you have to do this with other people – now the organisation may be for a party or something or it may be an informal setting but you have to work together to do this kind of thing. The first thing that strikes you is how many fewer people do this kind of thing. Attending a political meeting, now remember this is over the previous year so if you go back longer of course, the numbers would be higher. Attending a political meeting, it's only about 5% - although a quarter say they would. Taking part in a demo, we've talked about demos, it's about 5% at the time of this survey, each year got about 5%. Forming a group of like-minded people to do something, you know like a neighbourhood community group or

something, again 5%. Taking part in a strike, 2%. Taking part in an illegal protest, now I want to come back to that – it's 2% but that's a lot of people potentially and look at the 13%, there's potentially 13% of the electorate who would take part in an illegal protest... occupying things, invasion of laboratories, that kind of thing.

This is the third type, we call it contact participation. This is when you're actually directly linking to agents of the state, to MPs or to organisations or the media, this is when you write to the media and so on about some issue. This is different from the others in the sense that it involves the state officials in various headings and also it can be about private matters, people can contact their MPs because they want information about their own benefits or something or they can contact them because they're concerned about the Iraq War or something, so it can be a very broad issue or it can be a very narrow issue and quite a lot of that goes on, contacting public officials, contacting politicians and the potential for it as you can see is very high too.

Okay, so those are the three broad kinds of participation. How do we do compared with European countries on these? Taking the boycotting of goods as an example of the first kind we looked at. Okay Britain's here, GB, as you can see the Fins do about the same amount, this is from a survey in 2002 called the European Social Survey so it's pretty up-to-date. The Fins do the same amount, the Swedes do a lot of this, they're really very involved in that, Southern European countries tend to be less, there's Greece, Italy, tend to be less involved in this consumerist type of participation than Northern Europeans but you can't say that there's anything out of line in terms of Britain here. Britain's kind of above average on this kind of participation.

Demonstrating, in the light of the Iraq War demonstrations, we tend to think contemporary society does a lot of demonstrating, Britain does a lot of demonstrating but actually no, not compared with Europe. We are down here. Admittedly, this was 2002 and if you'd have asked this question after the big demonstration on Iraq, the number would have been higher but that was a one off. Actually the real demonstrators here are the Luxembourgers and it just happens to be that that was a particular year where there was a lot of controversy going on so their numbers were higher, but the Spaniards, look, they're out there demonstrating quite a lot and the Germans too. But we are down here, pretty low down along with the Greeks, so it's a bit of a myth to think that demonstrating in Britain is much more extensive than the rest of Europe, actually in some senses with this sort of action we are behind them.

Membership of political parties and this is particularly important. We are really behind on this. Here is Britain, party membership is higher everywhere else or at least no lower. In Spain it's about the same as us – but you can see everywhere else, the Fins, the Swedes, Luxembourg again, over here, the Austrians, party membership in these countries is almost invariably higher and that has I think quite bad consequences for Britain.

Here's the contacting dimension and as you can see from that, we're about average: here we are, about 18% contacted a politician and that's not out of line with what's going on elsewhere in Europe.

So you'd have to say what that tells us is that in terms of individualistic action and in terms of contact action, Britain is about average or in some cases above average, it's in terms of collective action that we are backward – organised collective action, as least as far as these indicators are concerned.

Well you may have seen this and Pippa was talking about it earlier, that's the actual numbers, the turnout in general elections from 1945 through to 2001. She mentioned the comment that it sort of fluctuated a bit, it actually reached an all time high in 1950. 1945 was affected by the fact that large numbers of troops were still abroad and so you couldn't really count it very effectively, so a lot of people say the real starting point for participation measures is 1950 and it's very high, 84%. And it drifted downwards, all but fluctuating and then after 1992 it fell off a cliff.

This is slightly complicated but it's very relevant so bear with me a second. What we're looking at is data from various surveys, election study surveys conducted from the 1970s onwards. Now up in the top corner it says 67.9% - that was the percentage of people who turned out in the youngest cohort that came into the electorate in 1970. That was when the minimum voting age was 21, so this is how the youngest people coming into the electorate voted. About two thirds of them voted in 1970. Now, move on four years, keep the same people in mind, the same people, move on four years and 78% of them voted. Move on another five years to 1979 and 76% voted and so on. So what you're looking at on the diagonal is the percentage of that group, it's the same people as they march across time turning-out and voting. And the basic story is that they voted in smaller numbers than the rest of the population in 1970 but four years later, having done it once, they caught up and they voted at the rate of 78% and they pretty much stayed voting at high rates thereafter and indeed reached very high rates here.

The top line, the horizontal line, that's new age cohorts, new youngest cohorts coming into the electorate for the first time and successive ones: so if you like, the diagonal people are the same, the horizontal people are different. In each case they're the new-comers. Now what's really interesting is... in the 70s the newcomers voted at a bit of a lower rate than the rest of the population but there wasn't much in it, and this continued through the 80s and then suddenly after '92 you've got a big drop in the voting turnout of that age group for the first time and then in 2001 a really big drop. Roughly speaking in 2001, 6 out of 10 of us voted and 4 out of 10, not far out, not far off 4 out of 10 of very young people, that's the 18 year olds voted.

Something happened in the 1990s to start young people seriously switching off voting and social scientists talk about cohort effects and life cycle effects and try and untangle these things. The basic story is that a life cycle effect is that as you get older your behaviour may change, a cohort effect is it doesn't change, it stays with you continuously and we've done some statistic modelling which suggests that this is a cohort effect. In other words these people that started voting at a low level in 2001 for the first time, when you do the diagram in twenty years, thirty years time as we march down the page, they'll stay voting at lower levels. It looks like a cohort effect. Why?

One of the things that makes people vote is a sense of civic duty, a sense that you've got a duty to society to vote. We asked a couple of questions in the election study and asked them if they agreed or disagreed with certain statements and one of the statements was 'It's every citizen's duty to vote' and a stronger version was 'I would seriously neglect my duty if I didn't vote' and what you're looking at is the percentage of people who say that they agree with this. So the dark column is the kind of really severe test and the other column is a slightly weaker test of people's sense of civic duty. It's divided up into political generations. Now what this means is the people coming into politics for the first time during a particular political era. If you came into the politics of the first 100 post war era which means of course you're very elderly now, you can see how they responded. They really do get very guilty if they don't vote. It's not that different for the people who came of age politically in Macmillan of the era, the 1950s, similar this is Wilson/Callahan era of the 60s and the 70s. It starts to kick in during the Thatcher period and continues into the Blair period. You see a noticeable decline, especially here in the percentage of people who say they have a duty to vote. What's happening is that young people just don't feel they have a duty to do this, and that's one of the big drivers at work – they do not feel that this is something that they should be doing.

These are some figures on changes in forms of participation between this survey in 2000 and the previous large-scale study that was conducted in 1984 by Geraint Parry and his colleagues, then, at the University of Manchester. And the idea is it gives you a picture of how some of these forms of participation change in this period between 1984 and 2000. Past data is a little scattered and it's difficult to get and so this is not easy to see but there's some very interesting trends here. You can see voters in a general election and so on, that's declined, well we knew that anyway... but you can see that the respondents in the '84 survey are much more likely to say they voted in the general election than was true in 2000. There's been a decline in petition signing; now this can be very varied, it can be about the national issue or more often it's just a community thing, you know petitions about road closures and that sort of thing, lots of petitions going on, but it's nonetheless declined somewhat.

The boycotting thing has hugely increased, people didn't used to do that, now they do. They use their market power in the supermarket to make a political statement and the private sector companies are increasingly aware of that. Contacting a public official looks like it's not changed. Contacting the media, that's changed – it was a minority text but you've got more of it now growing, that's everything from writing to the press to contacting a talk radio show and so on. Attending a political meeting has declined significantly. Attending a demonstration looks about the same. Despite the argument that there's more demonstrations, it doesn't look that different. Taking part in an illegal protest – now these are small percentages because it's a very minority activity but nonetheless it's doubled and bear in mind that if we translate these percentages into numbers, and there's thousands of people there.

Trends in potential political participation – this looks at a slightly different timeframe because of the availability of data. But this is not what you do, this is what you would do if you felt like it - this is the *potential* argument. And it looks like the MPs have received, and we know this from talking to MPs, they have

bigger post bags, they have bigger caseloads and this is why you see it here. Signing a petition, there's a greater potentiality for this, even though actually we see that people are less likely to actually do it, they wouldn't mind doing it in a way that was true, not quite so true in '79. Contacting the media, they're more likely to do that. Attending a political meeting again you see has declined significantly, really declined significantly. Going on a demonstration, that's potentially increased although as we saw earlier the actual turnout doesn't look as if it has changed very much but there's a slight increase in this illegal protest thing and look at that, that's 12% of people, that's thousands of people who would get involved in an illegal protest under the right circumstances. Changes in party membership, this data is a little bit dodgy because the parties are very coy about releasing their membership so it's tricky to get this right. The basic story is that Conservative Party membership has taken a huge nosedive throughout the 80s and the 90s; Labour largely as a result of post-'94 developments has stabilised but it's now declining; and the Lib Dems are declining somewhat. But that tells you looking at the system as a whole, that party membership is in decline in a significant sense.

What about parties in the minds of the electorate? What do people do...do they identify parties? Do they think of parties as something that is important? This tracks the extent to which people think that they identify with a particular party – so this with the squares is the very strong identifiers, people who think of themselves as very strongly Conservative, very strongly Labour or whatever. And what you're seeing is that actually in the first British election study survey done in '64, you got about half the electorate saying there were very strong identifiers or at least fairly strong identifiers, I mean a huge number were very strong and that continuously declined so that it's 13% of the very strong by 2001.

Now don't get me wrong, parties are not disappearing from people's minds because you can still see the fairly strong have held up but there's a definite trend in independence of weak identification. What's happening is that the parties are decaying, their brand images if you like, put it that way, is declining in the minds of the voters continuously over this long period of time. Parties are still there but they're weakening and that means that people are willing to switch sides much more easily than was true before. Now this is the point about competition. Pippa mentioned that if the electorate think that an election is competitive, close, they're more likely to turnout.

There's another dimension to this which is, is the election close ideologically or not? Now some colleagues of ours at the University of Essex, Ian Budge, take the manifesto commitments that parties produce and they code them in a very elaborate way into scales, so you can work out the sort of average position on the left/right scale, on the left/right ideological scale, of where a party can be found in a particular year from its manifesto information. And they code all this up and put it on a chart and what you see... I mean if we take Labour here, the further down we go, the more Left wing, the further up we go, the more Right wing. So it's kind of turned on its side. What we see is Labour lurching to the left in terms of its manifesto commitments in the 70s and then thereafter recovering so it ended up in 2001 up here. For the Conservatives which is this line here, we see them actually quite leftish in the 50s, then going back to the right and then this is the Thatcher era where they swung significantly to the right and then have been

climbing back to 2001 towards a more centrist position and the Lib Dems sort of fluctuate around the centre. Now the point that's important about this is that in 2001 the parties were closest together ideologically for fifty years, they were closer together in 2001 in manifesto commitments than was true at any time since the Second World War. That reduced turnout. Because another dimension to the competitiveness is not just how close is the election, but how much choice is there on offer ideologically between the parties? If there isn't much choice because they're very close together, there's no incentive to participate and that's the story, that's the other dimension of competitiveness.

Now parties have to try and find where... pick up ideological positions that will maximise their votes, in fact there's a whole literature about this associated with the work of Anthony Downs, so you can't blame them; but on the other hand if everybody says the same or damn near the same, it bores people and puts them off.

One of the questions was: what's the relationship between conventional forms of participation and unconventional? What's the relationship between demonstrating and voting for example? One possibility is that people who demonstrate are alienated voters – they don't vote, they prefer to demonstrate, it's a substitute for conventional forms of participation. But there's another argument that says no actually it's a complement, people who are demonstrators are also more likely to vote. Well, this tells you the breakdown in terms of voting (the green column) or not voting for people who have attended a demo and then the same breakdown for people who have not attended a demo and actually there's not much difference between them. You can't say from that that the people who are on demos are the ones who don't vote and are all fed up with the system and that's why they're demonstrating - no, it's not true. Actually the demonstrators are rather similar to the non-demonstrators in terms of their tendency to vote and turnout.

Here's what I call the paradox of trust because this is about institution and the relationship they have to vote. Classical theory that those of my colleagues who are political philosophers write a lot about this, think a lot about this, classical Greek theory says that you are going to trust people you can throw out more than people you can't. That's why the elected principle should mean that we trust elected institutions more than non-elected institutions. Actually it's the other way round. What you find... this is a level of trust, average levels of trust and so the higher the column, the more trust in that institution, what you see is modest levels of trust in government, pretty modest levels of trust in the House of Commons, lowest level of trust in politicians – all of which are elected; quite high levels of trust in the courts and similarly higher levels of trust in the civil service. We trust our non-elected institutions more than the elected institutions. It's the reverse of the classical Greek, if you like, philosophy.

Here's the relationship between levels of trust in institutions by people who go on demonstrations, another argument is people are going on demonstrations because they're fed up, they're alienated from the institutions, they don't trust them and that's one of the reasons why they do that. Again the green is the people who participated in a demonstration and the blue is the people who did not and what it shows is... well you get a similar pattern of course of more

trusting of non-elected institutions but not really much difference between the two. You can't say that the people who attended demonstrations are more likely to be alienated than people who did not attend demonstrations, they're actually rather similar in many ways. So there's not much mileage in the argument that alienation develops demonstrations. But having said that, this is people who say that they have taken part in an illegal protest, not a legal demonstration, an illegal one and there is a difference here. What you find is that the blue column is invariably taller, there's more trust among people who did not do this than there is among people who did. It's pretty clear that this alienation argument, the argument of will people get involved in illegal demonstrations because they think the system is non-responsive and doesn't work, there's some mileage in that. Now remember these are small numbers in percentage terms or they're potentially, what with invasions of animal laboratories and occupations of various sites and so on, it's growing as we saw earlier, they are alienated, that group, there's significant evidence to suggest that that is a problem.

HK: Paul, I'm going to have to stop you because I'm seeing the time and I want to give my commissioners time and I want the audience to have the chance of asking you some questions.

PW: Sure, I'll gallop through to the end, why don't I do that? I wanted to show you a few other things.

HK: We need to make use of you as a resource.

PW: Sure you do. Here's the last one then. These are the things I think we should consider. Decline in electoral participation among the young and it may be a cohort affect, it's serious and can't easily be... you know it's not going to be fixed by simple things like all-postal ballots, there really needs to be some addressing of that issue, it is serious, and it looks as I say like a cohort affect. Participation in demonstrations and unorthodox things looks like a complement if you mean by that conventional demonstrations. Participation in illegal protests is growing and those involved are somewhat alienated and mistrust the system and that's going to be a problem. And the last point before I shut up is there's declining participation in political parties.

Now I've written a lot about parties in the past and I think they're absolutely crucial to the political system for reasons that Pippa touched on: they're encompassing organisations, they're aggregating organisations, they're very good at sharing costs, whereas interest groups are not, interest groups want benefits but they don't want to pay for it, parties are good at aggregating. Parties are in decline and that's the biggest problem I think that the political system faces and I'll shut up there.

HK: Paul that was really, really interesting and a number of things came through from it that I immediately wanted to ask you, when you speak... you made a distinction of course between demonstrations complementing other participation and then the way illegal protests which may increase, now we may see an increase in the illegal protests for example around the fox-hunting ban – but I just wondered to what extent your research will not yet be able to take account of the development of last year's huge, enormous demonstrations in relation to the War which kind of

if you like fall beyond and aside of the normal demonstrations in that it was the biggest demonstration that we've had in this country ever, and I wondered whether many of those people might not be saying I really feel so strong about this and both of the major parties actually were in favour of this war, I will not vote as a result of what was done in our name. Have you measured that?

PW: Yeah we have. We've got monthly measures, monthly surveys of the election study and we ask about the Iraq war because we're preparing for the next general election and trying to model this and basically the Iraq War doesn't have a direct effect on turnout, willingness to participate, and actually doesn't have much of an effect on which party you go in for either. So that's easy to answer. But on the other hand, you're quite right that it was the largest demonstration that took place in British history and it's bound to be... a million and a half or whatever it was... there's bound to be a number of people who having done that and found that nothing happened, will then spill over into the illegal dimension and it might be that you get this pool of people who are prepared to do illegal things because they're alienated. We don't know whether that's true or how big it is but it would be very interesting to find out.

EB: You mentioned there that it was the biggest demonstration that we have ever seen and yet most of us think nothing happened as a result. Is that a significant factor in people's involvement?

PW: Yes, whether or not you succeed does have a big impact on the incentives to participate and some of the reasons why the decline in participation in parties has occurred is because of decline in incentives to be involved. But you could imagine some of those people who felt that the Iraq War demonstration was a failure, it's spurring them on to continue, to work harder sort of thing just as much as you would get people saying ah well it's not worth getting involved. So I think before something like that becomes really something that will turn people off, you have to have a systematic failure, you have to have an inability to get your voice heard and a one-off demonstration, even though it was impressive, isn't enough to do that.

HK: Phil?

PC: I just wanted to come back on one of your comments you made earlier... I'm just a bit sick to death really of people saying that young people aren't interested in politics anymore. But I do believe that young people are more interested in politics today than they have ever been before but they just feel that they're not being listened to. In another way I feel that they seem a bit disengaged and they don't feel part of the process and the way in which politics is presented to them isn't interesting, ways in which political parties and the way the election is taught in the citizenship classes, it needs to be a bit more interesting. I mean we had an election in our own town and 4 people out of every 5 people voted, young people in the town – that was 13 to 25 year olds so I don't believe that young people aren't interested, I just believe more young people need to come forward in an interesting way.

PW: Well actually yes there is evidence that suggests you're right in the sense that if you ask a generalised question to people and young people included about levels

of interest in politics, that's not changed very much, it's quite high. You know there are some people who are not concerned and not interested, they're interested in sports or whatever it is but there's quite high levels of interest in politics, it's when you come to party politics and electoral politics that you see a change. So it's like they're interested in politics more generically but less so in electoral politics of the kind that we are used to. That's the issue I think – and the fact that young people are almost absent from the membership of the political parties is an illustration of this – and they are: there's very few young people in political parties, the average age in the Conservative Party is 64, the average age in the Labour Party if I remember rightly from our surveys is about 57, 58, so it's smaller, it's younger but not that much... and all the parties suffer from it.

HK: Ferdy?

FM: Paul could you explain a little of the reasons why the fall in the turnout among young people in 2001 is a cohort affect and not the other sort of affect? I mean how do you know that they will go on behaving like that as they go into their 30s and 40s?

PW: What you have to do is statistically model it and actually we've got a discussion in our book *Political Choice in Britain* which does this. You have to model across a range of surveys and whether something is an age affect by cohort or by age, by the relative age of the thing, and you can untangle these to some extent. The ideal way to do it, in fact the only pure way to do it is to set up a research project that takes two generations to evolve and actually follow the same people through and compare them with their cohorts. That's the only way to purely do it and we don't do that because there isn't such data available. But you can by a statistical volume exercise approximate that and the modelling suggests that it's not just a matter of growing older, it's a matter that they really do look at it differently, these new groups.

FM: But that's based on the behaviour of past cohorts is it?

PW: Yes.

FM: So this could be a new breed who did change?

PW: Yes, but we don't know. We think there's pretty convincing evidence that from about the 90s onwards, young people particularly have changed – in the way they look at society and their obligations to society.

HK: And is that to do with increased consumerism, individualisation, the lack of the collective and all that?

PW: Yes, because you can see in lots of areas similar processes at work, of individualisation, consumerism, loss of security, you know people worried about their pensions and so on, marketisation – all of which brings great benefit but one of the effects they have is undermining people's sense of civic duty. There's a sort of arcane debate which probably interests nobody else but academics, that in a certain kind of model of turnout, you can look at turnout as an exercise in rational action, people making the choices between do they turnout, what are the

costs and benefits, if the benefits outweigh the costs you turnout, if it's the other way round, you don't. If you apply that kind of logic and it's an abstract knowledge which captures only part of the reality, but if you apply that kind of logic, nobody would vote. The only thing that makes them vote is a sense of civic duty; that's why this civic duty thing is so important. It might be that what's happening with young people is they're becoming more rational and deciding that since they can't affect anything, why should they vote – which is a pretty disturbing implication if it's true.

HK: Ben, please?

BF: You've segmented the electorate into age, what about other segments of people who aren't voting: ethnic minorities, impoverished, people who are disempowered in other areas. Have you looked at any other segments, looked at any other growing areas?

PW: In the election study, our survey is based on a very broad sampling frame. That is to say it's not just people on the electoral register, it's people everywhere. And one of the interesting things that I think you picked up Helena, when Pippa was talking about the Electoral Commission... one of the things we've discovered is there's an awful lot more people who are not on the electoral register despite the fact that technically it's illegal not to be on it. There's a lot of people... the electoral register is not in good shape.

HK: But is a lot of that partly because at the time of the old poll tax sort of crisis, in people's minds there was a sort of thing which was that you could avoid having to pay tax if you weren't on public records and that also involved being on the voting register and all of that, so you started an erosion of the voting register because people were assuming these things were automatically linked, and in fact in the first instance they were but then they were disentangled.

PW: Yes, but if you ask people about the poll tax now, especially young people, they don't know what you're talking about. Now, my suggestion would be and it's slightly authoritarianist...the Office of National Statistics pursues people relentlessly if they don't send in their census forms and rightly so because we really need that census data to find out what's going on, so if you don't fill your census form in, then they chase you relentlessly. The Electoral Commission that manages the electoral register does not do that, it asks you to fill a form in and basically forgets it. I think there's a case for not introducing compulsory voting but for making sure that people register and actually threaten them a bit, you know – you will pay a fine if you don't register, register and try to overcome that problem which you're right, started in the period of the poll tax and has gone on.

HK: Because you see that is just a small piece of the jigsaw that can actually end up being the sort of thing that makes a difference and it's so important that we get hold of that, it's like the business that Pippa came up with on the boundaries. Bano, you wanted to come in and then we'll get the audience to come in.

BM: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about this notion of civic duty, which concerns me greatly. Particularly given that in this morning's discussion we heard about there's perception of ideological shifts... so questions of right and wrong don't

necessarily come back right and left anymore, single issues or whatever. And in that sense what I want to ask is your opinion on whether or not then there is a civic duty. You can talk of things in terms of a civic duty when the system isn't reflecting the way in which people engage in politics anymore anyway so how then do they have a duty to participate in that system when it doesn't reflect their engagement in it, if that makes sense?

HK: Well it's true isn't it, we've got to disentangle two things there because there's the state and the government and you might feel disconnected from... I mean people might be disconnected from political parties but they're made to feel that they like Britain and they want Britain to survive, they believe in it and then they would do that even if they're not very engaged with political parties for example.

BM: But I think when Paul talks of civic duty it's very much in that form of political sense, it's not civic duty and social capital, let's-help-your-neighbour-out sense, which I've no problems with, it's civic duty in the formal participatory sense that then kind of raises my hairs on the back of my neck...

PW: Yes, that's actually a good point because our questions all focus on voting, the frame is in terms of voting, would you feel guilty if you didn't vote and some wider research shows that in terms of voluntary activity which is the basis of social capital, Britain's about average in Europe, it's not behind. There's a lot of voluntary activity and a lot of it very informed voluntary activity and we don't really have a democratic deficit in terms of Europe at any rate in terms of that... so you could say that social capital and forms of participation that are not linked to elections and party membership and so on are okay in many respects, so you have a point there. The thing we're worried about there are things like voting. Now you see the problem is that voting is crucial to democracy; you can't conceive of democracy surviving if large numbers of people don't vote. If people just do not show up to the polls, it's not going to survive and so it's such a crucial dimension, that in other respects there is no crisis of civic duty if you want to define that in a very broad sense as voluntary activity.

HK: I just want to ask you something that's particularly interesting to me, which was... in this morning's session came through, the idea of political parties being important to the process and you yourself articulated that very powerfully, that you felt that parties were crucial to this, that parties were the mechanism, the vector in which we have access to governments. And yet, what came through was this idea that actually the parties now have become managerial, that they no longer have any power themselves, for example in policy making and therefore actually when we talk about our alarm about parties, that membership of parties is declining, actually maybe that's how parties like it, that they are very keen... that they're no longer interested really in having large membership parties because there's nothing to do with all those folk, and actually they'd rather access the public in other ways and there is a sort of way in which the parties are now more than a branding mechanism but not about the kind of parties that you were describing to us earlier.

PW: Yes, that's quite right. There are incentives to weaken party democracy and make the leadership dominate, there are clear incentives in all parties to do that. The problem is if parties are weak, what you get is not democracy, you get

interest group parties and the United States is a very good example where interest group politics is very, very dominant because relatively speaking American political parties are rather weak.

What does interest group politics do? It delivers benefits to those who are able to shout loudest and exert most influence and that is not the people you were talking about. And the other thing too is that interest groups are “irresponsible” in the classical meaning of that word: that is to say they are there to try to get benefits for their members and that’s what they do, that’s what they should do if you’re an interest group, whatever it is, whatever group you’re representing in society, whether it’s the farmers, retired people or whatever, that’s what you do. You’re not interested in sharing costs, you want benefits but you want everybody else to share the cost. It’s a process of what the theorists call ‘concentrated benefits and distributed costs’, you concentrate the benefits on you and your supporters and distribute the costs to everyone. If all society is like that and all interest groups are like that, government becomes impossible because everyone wants to avoid costs and wants to achieve benefits. So what you tend to get is policy gridlock in the those circumstances – literally democratic politics doesn’t work, because democratic politics involves balancing costs and benefits.

Now the great thing about parties is that they are organisations that have to have a narrative, have to have an explanation for costs because the first thing that journalists ask when addressing a party leader is ‘all right, you’re going to do this, you’re going to do that, where’s the money coming from? What’s your proposals for taxation?’ And they have to defend their position on that. So parties are encompassing organisations that are good at sharing costs as well as benefits. Interest groups are very bad at sharing costs and they just want the benefits and a society dominated by interest groups will produce weak government and biased government in which powerful interests that can be heard will get benefits and nobody else will.

HK: Right, are we seeing that now?

PW: I think that’s what’s happening.

HK: Give us an example, show us how we’re seeing that manifest currently?

PW: Well I think there’s influence... one of the things that’s feeding mistrust of the elected, to come back to this argument about mistrust of the elected politicians and the elected institutions, is the feeling that they’re feathering their nests, that there is influence pedalling going on.

Now in historical terms interest groups have always done this, there’s always been that, so it’s not like we’re in a new age of indecent influence. But the parties, the political parties as a counter weight to this, are so much weaker. Party conferences are now no longer interesting, they used to be. I remember when I was young and I used to sit in on party conferences and listen to them, they were usually interesting and exciting and unexpected things would happen, not now, it’s completely scripted and boring and predictable and controlled – and for very good reasons because if you have a row you’re going to be damaged in the polls so it’s all so tightly controlled so that it’s not spontaneous and it’s not authentic and the public see this.

So the continuous election campaign we've evolved into, plus the weakening of party membership in the voluntary area and the domination by parties from the top has really caused problems. If you were to ask me what's the single most important way we could turn that around and it's a big agenda, is... I think parties could be... the process of revitalising parties and rebuilding them, could be done if you took devolution down to the grass-roots and to local government seriously. That is, not necessarily devolution to regions but devolution to revitalise local government – make it have more powers. We've seen thirty years of local government being weakened, powers taken away, capped, centralised, ordered around, many good reasons are given for this, but I think the whole exercise has been misguided. We should decentralise and that would be a way to revive parties which are based upon local politics for the most part. And it is interesting that two countries in Europe, that is to say Italy and Spain, have both over the last 20-25 years decentralised significantly in comparison with earlier, and they think, for the most part, if you talk to the Spanish and Italian legal scientists, they think this has worked well. It's actually been quite good, the decentralisation of these what were high in centralised states. And the French are talking about it now as well. So I think there's a real... if you want to revitalise parties and I think they're crucial to this, that's what you've got to do.

HK: Now, a lot of hands here. The gentleman mean at the back?

AM: [Simon Thompson] Simon Thompson, I work for the School of Public Policy at UCL. Yes, I just wanted to know whether you think that the complexity of the messages put across by political parties has something to do with their relatively low status in public favour at the moment compared to single-issue groups or to interest groups? I mean like the pro-hunting campaigns or the anti-Iraq War campaigns – they've got a very simple message.

HK: I want to gather up some questions before I come back to you Paul.

AM: [Paul Hilder] Paul Hilder, The Young Foundation. I wonder Paul if you have any evidence on the importance of local government as a breeding ground for party politics. It seems intuitively correct... but is there any evidence or any point in that? Secondly, civic duty, my mind has been ticking on overtime about this and my immediate response to it is: civic duty feels like the wrong way to talk about this to these generations. I have a feeling there has to be a new frame of words, a new way of thinking about it, the commons, the common good, gift society, something like that, we have to think about this because civic duty doesn't anymore.

HK: The gentleman at the back over there please?

AM: [Tim Davies] Tim Davies, I'm not associated with anybody. Just a couple of points and then two questions. The point would be that you suggested that the actual registration officers don't really make any great effort, but maybe that's your experience of urban areas which I guess is probably the focus, the natural focus of political scientists, but my experience in rural Hampshire is that we get chased up at least twice with our electoral registration. So if you don't submit a form, they will use the previous year's return which given that rural society remains relatively

static is quite accurate.

That wasn't really a question, that was a point. I have two questions, the first one is you showed a precipitous decline in membership of the Conservative Party but from a very high starting point, whereas there was a continued decline in the membership of the Labour Party and I seem to recall there was a small decline in the membership of the Liberal Democrat Party. Have you got that broken down by youth because it is my feeling... it's just a feeling and I have no evidence for it whatsoever other than casual observation, that the youth members of the political parties in this country are now completely moribund, whereas twenty years ago lots of people were very active in the Young Liberals, the YC might not have been very political but it was a great way to meet your wife, the Young Socialists seemed to be in constant trouble with the National Executive Committee... these seemed very vibrant organisations and of course subsequently the NCS which came into serious disrepute with the Conservative Central Office and I wonder if part of that has been your distinction of virtual extinction within the youth political parties.

The second question I have is we see a very high level of, well by current standards, a very high level of participation in general elections in the 50s, 60s, 70s and the 80s. And then you see in '97 and 2002 a complete falling off the cliff. Now it has been suggested a number of times today that that's due to a lack of competitiveness at the top level. It's obvious that Labour will win the next election therefore lots of people will not be voting, but that must have been very obvious to people in the 80s that there wasn't a cat in hell's chance of Labour winning but they still turned out so I don't really think this competitive argument actually holds water in the vital experience of the 80s.

HK: Yes, but what Paul is saying is that the combination of competitiveness... one, competitiveness just in terms of is there anything different, the other thing is that there's no competition in ideas either, that because the parties have come so close together that that also makes people feel that they're all pretty much of a muchness whereas some people don't feel...

AM: [Tim Davies] Well in that case you really need to look at nineteenth century data when there wasn't a huge difference between the Liberals and the Conservative Party in terms of actual policy and I suspect that actually turnout was quite high then as well.

HK: Yes, the back row, the gentleman there in the suit?

AM: [Tom Wakeford] I'm Tom Wakeford, a community researcher based at Newcastle University. I think one of the answers to the previous gentleman's question may be that in the 1980s the union movement and, relating to what Paul Whiteley said, organised collective action and that feeling of solidarity was stronger so they'd go to vote as a religious act and solidarity.

But anyway I want to make a separate point related to what Paul said about the decline of organised collective action being vital, because I think it links to a concern many of us have about this concept of social capital, which I think is much more complicated than just something that's good. I mean it actually came

in as I understand it as a sort of statisticians... something you could count, particularly with stronger communities but really people haven't found a good way of measuring it and I think it is a problematic concept and even this idea of bridging social capital where you have communities linking to each other, that can exclude a further community by two communities getting together. So it's very complicated.

And I think the second point to do with unaccountable power... I think the whole problem with the rise of the BNP in the north of England is because they saw power that they could have no control over and all sorts of other influences as well but one institution that has not been mentioned today which I'm quite surprised about is, especially given that it's under threat at the moment, is the jury system. Many of us often talk about the institution of democracy that embodies the principle that people make their own best governance and governance can make a law, so that juries have to find people guilty by those laws and yet, and you can correct me if I'm wrong but I believe it's correct now on the statute book. I just want to make a final point that actually allowing research into the jury system could be a recommendation of Commissioners. Because something that you're not allowed to research is quite hard to defend if you don't know what goes on, and I think just because there's been now practice in using the principle of the jury system for some citizens juries, that has also never been used, either by naively or cynically by people. There are morals of using a jury that are useful.

HK: Gentleman at the back?

AM: [Peter Kenyon] I'm Peter Kenyon from Save the Labour Party. Paul said that you thought the most important thing in revitalising political parties was the idea of devolution. And as a former councillor I would have had a lot of sympathy with that point of view maybe ten years ago, but recent research suggests to me that a critical issue which is actually being addressed institutionally which the parties are resisting very vigorously: and that is the idea that they should be subject to the same sort of corporate governance rules that companies are subject to, to enable their members to play an active part, not just in the process of feeding in ideas for the purposes of formulating policy that will affect values that the members of the political party might have, but that political parties are corporate entities and what we have seen is the take-over of the corporate organisation by the professional politician to the extent to which they are no longer accountable really to anybody. And I'll characterise this by the fact that the Electoral Commission initiated a consultation around something highly technical called the statement of accounts. Under the new divisions of the Political Parties Elections and Referendums Act, parties are expected to submit their accounts and the larger parties are actually expected to submit something beyond that because the commission said we'd like to know what the membership is and we'd like to know what your corporate governance arrangements are and how you account yourself to your members. And I had a conversation with the head of the Constitutional Unit of the Labour Party very recently who said 'We think the Electoral Commission is going off down the wrong track' and I said 'Who's we?' and he said 'All of us who work for the political parties, the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and us –and we all think they're going down the wrong track'. I think what's happening is that there is in effect a cabal being formed within the

professional classes of political parties to help protect the politician which we as the lay members need to be aware of and need actually to help the Electoral Commission to expose what's going on because they are seeking to provide us with the tools to hold the parties to account as an organisation which to my mind is essential if we're going to actually address these underlying issues about participation or perhaps it's the overt issue of participation because if the political parties themselves cannot act in a manner which is democratically accountable to their own members, arguably are they fit to govern?

AM: [Linda Morris] I'm Linda Morris, I work for Cheshire Country Council, so I was very heartened by your last point about strengthening local government. But I'd like to go back to some of the points that were made this morning, certainly as Stuart Weir was saying that local authorities to some extent are too remote from some of the communities that they serve and also Helena was saying that in terms of increasing voter turnout, the larger the constituency are more difficult to get people to feel that they belong. And fairly frequently we see it quoted that in England, if not in Britain, we have a far lower ratio of electors to elected members and people compare it with other European countries. However, in Cheshire we've been taking very seriously looking at institutional reform and trying to widen the opportunities for citizen engagement and citizen participation and one of the groups that we've been working with very closely which hasn't been mentioned at all during the course of today are town and parish councils. And clearly they do represent much smaller communities than any of the principal authorities, and one of the questions I'd like to ask is in terms of reviving local democracy, in terms of reviving citizen engagement, whether or not you're going to be looking at the role that town and parish councils play? And certainly the experience that I've had over the last two years talking to lots and lots of residents' groups, community associations, Women's Institutes and the parish councils, and so on, is one of the groups who have been most involved and most willing to be involved are the Women's Institutes, and I was actually very sorry that the Women's Institute representative wasn't here today. And talking to them and saying why are you so willing to get involved in these types of exercises, the people I spoke to say 'Well we're always willing to be involved because we know we can influence and we know we can make a difference' and that seems to me the holy grail that we're all trying to... Whether it's national voter turnout that we're looking at or local politics, that's the holy grail that we're actually trying to find the answer to.

HK: I'm sorry, I'm going to have to take that as the last question and Paul if you could do a little quick summary because we're half an hour over our time now.

PW: Yes, certainly. Lots of questions about local authorities and their innovation, actually considering local authorities in many ways are being increasingly marginalised and dictated to from the centre, there's actually a lot of innovation going on there. I noticed that Birmingham are currently rethinking their whole organisational structure and devolving some powers down to this local level. There's a very interesting experiment going on there, as indeed in other areas about the way you incorporate citizens into the political process. So in answer to the first question which was about - are local authorities a source of laboratory for experiment, the answer is yes I think they are, even though they're weakened.

This issue of whether civic duty is outdated, especially for young people, I mean I think yes if you put it in terms of civic duty, maybe, but the principle that people feel they want to contribute and... altruism has not declined... there's a pool of altruism out there and young people are part of this and want to help, but are often not sure how they can do it and certainly parties are not a vehicle for it. I mean the question about how the parties... is the youth wing of the parties moribund? And the answer is yes, they are. And if they weren't and could mobilise more young people and bring them in, the parties could renew themselves in a way that is impossible for existing institutions. It's like an institution can re-invent itself, it can pull itself up by its own boot straps and one of the ways in which the parties need to do that is to bring young people in. So I don't think young people are not idealistic... and if we could work it out, we could appeal to their sense of civic duty and get them involved. But certainly right now there is a real problem for doing that and we need to really address that issue.

Electoral competitiveness... well for reasons to do with sound election strategies, parties try to capture the middle ground and there's a whole body of literature about how we should do that. In some ways it's a bit misguided I think because our research on electoral behaviour shows what really matters is not where you are positioned but whether you can deliver. Electoral politics is about 'valance' politics to use a sort of terminology that the psephologists use, it's about performance, delivery – it's not really so much about where you're positioned in yourself. So I think there's an obsessive desire among party leaders to capture the middle ground, not to be seen to be outflanked and so on, whereas what they ought to be doing is spending more time thinking about actually how do we deliver these things and in particular do we deliver improvements in public services when the institutional frameworks for doing that, especially in local government aren't there. That's a real issue that's not really been addressed, the institutional opportunity structures that are available at local level are not there in a way that they used to be and that's in the longer run I think is a more serious issue for issues of electoral competitiveness than precisely where do you position yourself on taxation or on the war or anything like that.

Now there was a point about the juries and I entirely agree, I've often wondered why, there's a thriving profession in the US of political scientists who research the judicial process and do it quite well. And in Britain we've not been able to get that going very much, simply because the judicial authorities are so closed and so frightened of letting researchers in as far as I can see and I don't see why they do that. I mean we should be researching this stuff and it should be acceptable and the lawyers need to rethink their position on this – the legal system needs to rethink its position on this kind of research. Actually to be fair there's some interesting research going on in the Home Office but there needs to be more on the way that whole process works. So I think that sort of wraps up and I don't think I've missed out anything, if I have, remind me.

HK: No, you've covered everything, one tiny wee question: the word 'valance' did come up earlier on this morning, it was not a word that I was familiar with and I made a note of it. And it was Philippe who referred to it and he refer to valance issues as being about lifestyle and morality and so on, it was really with reference to the recent American election where it was all some of those issues, where you really did see a parting... you didn't see much difference between the political

parties on some of the other major issues but when it came to those issues of homosexuality, on lifestyle, and... so on, there the Republicans seized a certain area of ground. So I misunderstood what valance meant, you're saying that it means delivery?

PW: That's right, the key valance issue is the economy and the reason is that there's a strong, almost unanimous view that a good economic performance is better than a bad one – we don't like inflation, we don't like high unemployment, therefore nobody's going to advocate high inflation and high unemployment, they're going to want better, more jobs, lower inflation, more growth, everybody's agreed about it, the parties are agreed and the problem is who delivers it. That's a valance, that's a classic valance issue. Actually I don't agree with Philippe if he's arguing that these cultural issues are valance, often they're not, they're quite positional. The Democrats took a position on gay rights that the Republicans took a very different position on and so that's very much a position issue, that parties can disagree with themselves. What drives electorate politics is valance, is performance and delivery; although issues play a role, but it's secondary. What counts is can you deliver on the economy, can you deliver on the public services and it's who is the most competent to do that. That's what wins elections or loses them much more than do you take a position here on the issues of social morality or there? So valance is important.

HK: Paul it was so wonderful having you here today, it was really, really illumating. I want to thank you very much, it was fantastic.

I want also to thank all the members of the public who came along, it's been terrific that you came and took part and this was the first of our evidence gathering sessions, I hope you found them as riveting as we did and it was great having your participation and I really do hope that you will follow up on the website what's going on and you will come to the other sessions because it's invaluable having your participation and it really will make a difference to the outcome I'm sure so thank you all and thank you the commission and thank you very much Paul.