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Changing Politics: Towards a New Democracy

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Changing Politics – Towards a New Democracy

Report

In partnership with

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A note on this report

St George's House is grateful to the Political Studies Association; the speakers who provided their valuable and illuminating insights; and to Professor Matthew Flinders¹ for chairing the discussions. The House is also grateful to all who took part in our discussions for their open and progressive contributions: we hope their ideas will help generate new thinking around how to reform our democratic processes and generate stronger levels of support and interest in UK democracy.

This report is structured to highlight the main themes emerging from the discussion as well as some conclusions and recommendations. As with all St George's House Reports, this document aims to reflect from an independent perspective the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions will have endorsed all the ideas included.



¹ Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics, University of Sheffield.
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BACKGROUND

"Democracy, at its best lifts us from passivity into action, from selfishness into civic concern, from corruption into virtue. It does this by not merely reflecting our current wills or interests, but by forcing us to deliberate over these, to share them with others on grounds of reasoned public debate, and to seek common ground; it helps us to be more fully human more authentically humane, and more charitably humanitarian."²

In May 2015 the UK is set to go to the polls for the nation's next General Election. Campaign posters will begin to proliferate on hoardings across the country; party political broadcasts will vie for our attention; and this being the age of the Internet, party activists will feed us their respective messages using a range of social media as well.

On the day itself, those who vote will do so in school halls and village halls, in community centres or by post. Yet the sad fact is, there will be many who do not vote, by any means. Slowly but surely, over the past six decades or more, the nature of political engagement in Britain has changed dramatically. There is substantial evidence of steadily-growing citizen disenchantment with politics, in both attitudes and behaviour.

With a few notable exceptions, party membership has declined and electoral participation has dropped: fewer than half of our 18-24 year olds³, for example, voted in the last general election. Trust in our politicians and political institutions is also in decline. Figures from the Hansard Society indicate that only 23% of people are satisfied with the way MPs are doing their job while 80% of young people do not feel represented in the political life of the nation.

We have also seen a rise in single issue politics that cuts across traditional party lines. Some argue our democracy has been travelling⁴ from 'mass public participation' or 'thick democracy' towards a 'thinner' form of governance whereby the main political parties converge in a populist style of politics favouring short-term solutions to whatever problem is seen to be grabbing the headlines, or trending on Twitter.

In the minds of many, this decline in democratic engagement is compounded by the belief that we are still running large chunks of our government in the 21st Century using 20th Century systems on top of 19th Century political structures. Reforms of our institutions – from the two Houses of Parliament, to UK devolution, party funding and the Monarchy – have been steady over the past few decades but there



² Quote from W. Elliot Bulmer Research Director at Scottish Constitutional Commission

³ 44% IPSO –MORI 2010 General Election turn-out by 18-24 year olds

⁴ See Ian Marsh and Raymond Miller 2012. *Democratic Decline and Democratic Renewal: Political Change in Britain, Australia and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

is a widespread perception that more recently, they have not kept up with transformations sweeping other parts of our society in the digital age.

Added to this is the new challenge of how, in an era of 'digital by default' government, we remain a truly inclusive democracy. How, for instance, do we strike a fair balance between the growing diversity of views and values expressed and debated online or on social media and the rights and aspirations of the 11 million⁵ of our fellow citizens who lack the basic digital tools, skills and confidence to be politically active in cyber space?

Of course, any fears must be kept in perspective. For one thing, disengagement is a problem shared with most other long-standing democracies. For another, if we look at the wider picture there is no falling away in people's allegiance to the underpinning ideas and principles of democracy such as freedom of speech, or the rule of law. But people do seem to have a lot less faith in what democratic governance is capable of doing for them⁶. It seems then that we must find ways of reinvigorating the basic values of good democratic governance, that underpin the precept that the '*end of all government, however we find it, should be that all people realise themselves, express their potential and their talents to the fullest and thus enhance themselves and the whole of society.*'⁷

Might the way forward, to re-energise democracy and improve people's engagement with it, entail a rebalancing of power away from the Westminster Parliament and even from the devolved UK parliaments, assemblies and expanded regional or city settlements, right down to local neighbourhoods and communities or even to individuals, perhaps facilitated by the Internet?

Of course, any new settlement would have to continue to balance the rights of minorities alongside the expressed wishes of the majority. Likewise it would need to set out clearly any new rules that will bind people and political institutions together and how they will undertake actions and form intentions, the significance of which might shape the lives of future generations.

These problems are not new: reform of politics has been a matter of debate for centuries, since politics began. In recent decades, however, the issue has become increasingly urgent, as what seemed to be a general consensus after World War II on the conduct of Parliamentary government, and the concept of civic duty, has dropped away, to be replaced with a more negative atmosphere. Modern society often appears to display an 'us and them' divide between citizens and politicians,



⁵ See Tinder Foundation. 2014. *A Leading Digital Nation by 2020*, London, Tinder Foundation. https://www.tinderfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/a_leading_digital_nation_by_2020_0.pdf

⁶ See Stien Ringen, 'The Truth About Values', Lecture delivered at Richmond University on 18 October 2013.

<http://www.richmond.ac.uk/cms/pdfs/TRUTH%20ABOUT%20VALUES.pdf>

⁷ See Blake, L. 2003. *Sovereignty: Power Beyond Politics*. London: Shephard.

despite the politicians being elected by those same citizens. Most agree that some kind of further reform is needed, to help close this divide, but again there appear to be a number of problems with deciding on exactly what reform, if any, will do the trick. First, many reforms appear to be chosen by parties because they seem to give them a potential electoral advantage - understandable in a way, but unhelpful in addressing a lack of trust between citizens and politicians. Second, there is evidence of a considerable gap between the constitutional and reform ideas of the political establishment and those favoured by citizens.

The picture is not all bleak: while we have seen a steady decline in democratic participation in recent times, at the same time there has been an explosion of individual activity and energy at a grass roots level in society. A key challenge emerging from this consultation is how to channel this new, more diverse civic energy and enthusiasm, so that it can be accessed and used by existing top-down institutional structures, breathing new life and energy into our democratic process.

Clearly, to sort all this out will be an extremely difficult task, but it is a task which must be attempted with great and growing energy by all parts of our society, if we are not to witness the collapse of some of our most precious and hard-won democratic systems. All strong relationships are built on trust, and the relationship between the citizen and the politician is no different.



REPORT

Changing political landscape

There is clear evidence of citizen disenchantment with the current political system in the UK, including a decline in confidence with our political representatives, lower voter turnout at elections, protest votes at recent by-elections, a lack of interest in the election of Police and Crime Commissioners, and the rise in 'anti-politics', a tendency to bundle all parts of our democracy together and label them as corrupt, broken or outdated.

At the same time we have witnessed a strong increase in localised support for new 'challenger' political parties such as UKIP, and the recent Scottish referendum which generated the highest turnout ever recorded in a UK election at just under 85% of the electorate. Some would therefore argue that the democratic process is still in pretty good shape overall, and that the recent by-election and referendum results are evidence that citizens will engage with the democratic process if they are clear about the issue on which they are being asked to give their opinion, and if they believe that their voice will make a difference to the outcome. It was felt by some that the recent support for new 'challenger' political parties is a response by citizens to the feeling that the "mainstream" parties have drifted together at the centre of the political spectrum over the years, and hence do not represent a clearly differentiated choice or represent many strongly held views of people on all sides of many passionate debates and arguments.

Disenchantment with the mainstream political parties also appears to be correlated with age. There is evidence that between 60%-70% of older people identify with one of the main political parties, for example, but this figure drops to less than 20% for Generation Y. This disenchantment however may have less to do with the political parties themselves and more with a general attitudinal shift towards less interest in figures of authority and large institutions in general.

As mentioned earlier, there does not appear to be any shortage of political activism and engagement when individuals identify with a particular issue. For instance, recent public engagements in debates surrounding High Speed 2, Lewisham Hospital reconfiguration, and incinerator planning at King's Lynn are just a few examples where large numbers of local citizens have turned out to take part in the public debate.

The disconnect therefore seems more complex than some commentators appear to acknowledge. The public do not appear to 'hate politics' – indeed many participants suggested that the public possesses a huge appetite for political information, expression and debate – but their relationship with politics has changed. In many ways the public – especially younger people – are simply less tribal and more issues-based in how they engage. Political parties, by contrast, remain inherently tribal and multi-issue in a way that appears to be increasingly less attractive and engaging to the public.



Are politicians the right people to lead reform?

Before addressing the central question of democratic reform and whether politicians are the right people to lead this process, it was felt important to consider some contextual issues. Many citizens perceive the current political system as rife with bickering (e.g. PM's Questions), scandal and elitism, and find it difficult to identify structures by which their views can be turned into political expression and action. There is much frustration from citizens over an apparent current lack of direct communication channels to their political representatives, but no shortage of individual expression by citizens, many of whom are voicing their opinions using social media, to highlight the issues they feel are important.

In recent years we have also witnessed a rise in the number of so called 'professional politicians'. These are individuals who have made politics their main career, and in many instances have taken a well-trodden career path of studying politics or economics at a top university, becoming a political researcher, then a special advisor before finally entering Parliament. This helps to fuel the sense of disconnection between many citizens and the politicians that represent them. Many of our current politicians have no previous career or life outside of politics, have few or no past links to their constituencies and struggle to empathise with the local population that they represent.

The reaction of the main political parties to the rise of the 'challenger' parties and anti-politics has ranged from complacency and a feeling that the current dissatisfaction will fade when economic growth returns, to a feeling that there is indeed a strong need for political reform and a completely new policy approach to democracy. There has however been no cross-party agreement on what is required, very little creative thinking demonstrated, and even a surprising lack of basic discussion on how to re-engage citizens in the debate.

These factors have created an impression among citizens that political parties have too much of a vested interest in maintaining the status quo to be allowed to manage democratic reform themselves. There is a sense that the political parties will only push for change when it is likely to deliver some form of electoral advantage for themselves. We noted that many administrations start talking about constitutional reform just as they are about to lose power, and this simply acts to reinforce the conclusion that when in power it is very difficult to act in an independent and impartial manner as far as constitutional reform is concerned.

The level of vested interest by politicians led us to conclude that they cannot be trusted to lead a process of constitutional reform alone. There is a need to make the debate independent of the political parties, and a good example of one way this can be made to work can be found in the Republic of Ireland, where a Constitutional Convention was convened in 2012 to consider a series of potential political and democratic changes for the country. This convention was independent of the political parties but did have strong political representation, consisting of 66 citizens, 33 political representatives and an independent chair. There was strong support from many of our participants for a similar model to be used in the UK to examine at least some of the many potential constitutional reforms currently under debate.



What can we expect from citizens?

The meeting acknowledged that we are certain to witness further and continued devolution of power away from Westminster both to the devolved nations and also to localities such as city regions, as we are already seeing. This continued shift of power means that we need to consider the role of the citizen at local as well as national level. Many participants felt that re-engaging citizens in the democratic process is likely to be easier at a local level in the first instance, and that this should be where we focus our efforts to re-connect disaffected citizens with our democratic institutions.

There are a number of factors which are known to reduce the ability and willingness of individuals to engage in the democratic process, including age, social demographics, educational attainment and political understanding, as well as beliefs that the democratic process can make a real difference in people's day-to-day lives. For many people, politics can seem very remote.

We also noted that for many people 'politics' is a highly personal issue. Some individuals prefer to engage in local issues rather than with central government, and for others it is simply a sense of activism and feeling passionate about a specific issue. There is a high level of scepticism within the population about the ability of elected representatives to bring about change, and this explains a rise in popularity for the concept of direct democracy. This can also help to explain the high level of engagement witnessed in Scotland's recent referendum on independence, where a single clear question and sense of self-determination led to high levels of participation in the debate and voting.

Some suggested that citizens are looking for a new relationship with our political leaders, something less directional and more facilitatory in terms of leadership style. Communication changes mean that as a society we are less deferential and want our political leaders to demonstrate more overtly that they are working for us, and not directing us.

We also know from research that individuals hold more negative perceptions of our democracy and politicians when asked for their immediate views. Recent scandals, negative press coverage and a sense that politicians are solely self-interested are regularly cited as key reasons for such beliefs. If however, individuals are asked the same questions in a more reflective and deliberative manner over a period of time then it is possible to witness a shift in opinion and a far less negative perception is reported. People are also less likely to express negative opinions about intrinsic aspects of a functioning, developed democracy which lie outside the electoral and party political processes such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the rule of law. But people may not immediately make the connections between these valued aspects of democratic societies and more overtly political elements such as free and fair elections to appoint and remove governments. This might suggest that we need to get citizens to move away from immediate and intuitive judgements on democracy towards a more considered and deliberative approach, where they have time to explore and consider issues in more depth and understand the true implications of taking various positions on reform.



We concluded that for many people our political structures and systems are a mystery, and that this reinforces the sense of remoteness. Coupled with the disconnect between citizens and our political representatives it leads to a strong perception that politics and engaging in our democratic processes is simply not worth the effort. A number of people felt that this disconnect could be bridged at least partially through the use of digital technology, making our political processes more visible and creating a more direct connection between our elected representatives at citizens both nationally and at a local level.

Education and creating a stronger national culture of 'political citizenship' was also discussed in light of the above, and seen as an essential element of encouraging citizens to play a more active role in the democratic process. This was considered particularly important among the young where we need to see a much stronger involvement in our democratic processes. A number of international examples were cited including France where there is still a strong national culture of civic duty to engage in the democratic process both at a local as well as national level. Creating stronger understanding and knowledge among younger audiences will require leadership in the education system to ensure that political literacy is included as a deeper and more integrated part of the citizenship curriculum and possibly other relevant areas including history.

The role of the media as part of the democratic process

The media has a powerful role to play in supporting democracy, both in terms of ensuring that citizens are sufficiently informed to make democratic choices, but also in ensuring this information is accurate and tested. The media plays a crucial role in ensuring that citizens are provided with a rounded and independent perspective on the issues which interest them.

The growing diversification and power of the media was noted, together with a sense that some areas of journalism have become less robust because of cost and time pressures to secure a story. This might have resulted in some issues not being as fully researched and critiqued as they used to be. At the same time we need to recognise that scandalous and shocking news is generally more attractive to publishers than a considered assessment of policy issues as it sells more effectively, and media organisations are most often trying to be profitable businesses as well. This may mean that we need to look at different media channels and options to re-engage citizens in democratic discussion and debate.

In recent years we have seen an explosion in the use of digital and social media, and with this the opportunity to access a vast repository of largely untested information. While we must not underestimate the power and use of social media, there was a sense that we are not yet properly exploiting the opportunities these channels offer in terms of re-engaging citizens in democracy. There are risks in such an approach however, as much of the content on social media is unverified, based on individual views and grouped around communities of like-minded people, which does not encourage free, fair and informed debate.



We also need to recognise that around 11m citizens remain offline, and that this digital divide cuts across all age and socio-demographic groups. The ability to access online services can also change due to personal circumstances, and not everyone can guarantee they will have online access throughout their lives. Participants were keen therefore to urge the government to continue and expand its funding for digital inclusion projects offering full training for everyone in basic digital skills, and access to low-cost or free broadband and IT equipment. Steps have been taken in this direction, but the government must ensure budget cuts do not prevent everyone who needs this support having full access to it, by reviewing progress year by year.

Great potential was identified for social media to support stronger debate, deliberation and testing of information. Two ideas emerged from our discussions: first, of looking into the feasibility of establishing a new common deliberative social media space using a model similar to Wikipedia to allow for considered debate and testing of information; and second, to use the power of the BBC and its web presence to establish a new platform where citizens could pose questions and engage in political debate.

At the same time digital technology could be harnessed to provide greater access to democratic processes both at central and local government level. Building on the emerging work from the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, and other sources such as the pioneering tools developed by non-profit mySociety, a new cross-party push is needed to continue to explore the role of digital technologies to enhance the workings of democracy at all levels. More academic research; think-tank examinations; Parliamentary input; and funding sources are all needed to make sure the huge power of the Internet and other new technologies are being fully exploited to open up democracy; help citizens learn more about it; and participate in all its workings.

Lessons from other democracies

We noted that there has been a decline in democratic engagement across the developed world, and that therefore the UK is not alone in this respect. There may also be lessons to be learned from looking at how other democracies have attempted to engage citizens. To understand the changes in trust and willingness of citizens to engage in the democratic process we tried to analyse the broader social background from all angles.

Firstly, we considered the significance of the fact that in recent decades we have witnessed changes in demography and social structure, and a shift in attitude and culture towards greater levels of individualism and consumerism. The analogy was made of a shifting ocean tide – a slow and unavoidable change is occurring as we become less deferential in terms of how we view authority and want to engage more as individual consumers, even in our civic actions. Many of us have lost much of our sense of citizenship in this change and now act as if we are in effect the 'buyers' of services and goods. Citizens dislike politicians telling them what they should do and want to be more engaged in developing a long-term strategy of change on issues which grab their interest. At the same time, citizens are becoming increasingly frustrated as they voice their opinions using new forms of media but see little impact of this voice on the decisions that are subsequently made.



If we consider the political process itself we can see a number of further changes – politics is now more marketed than ever before, and people have lost trust in the authenticity of such communication. Due to a drift to the centre by all the main parties over the years following repeated attempts to gain a majority at elections, the parties have also become less distinctive and more homogenous, resulting in many citizens feeling they have a poor range of options presented to them. We have also seen an increase in the numbers of so-called 'professional politicians' who have little life experience outside politics and are therefore perceived as remote and unconnected with ordinary citizens. All these forms of disengagement mean that, in a self-reinforcing downward spiral, citizens have less understanding and knowledge of how current political and democratic processes are designed and implemented. For instance, there is confusion over where power actually resides between local councils and Westminster, and what influence if any an individual Member of Parliament can really have on major policy decisions.

Finally, the current tough economic situation has created a perception that politics has not made a positive contribution to the lives of citizens. When we hear about global economic shocks that are outside the control of our politicians, citizens start to question what difference politicians can really make. At the same time, we have seen a rise in the perception that there is very little personal accountability from politicians when things do go wrong or are not delivered to agreed outcomes.

Two examples were offered of international initiatives designed to create stronger engagement of citizens, from which the UK might learn useful lessons. The first is found in the city of Falun in Sweden where local libraries that were being used less frequently by the population were converted to Democracy Centres. These are now used by the local population to hold events, meetings or access online information relating to civic engagement. At the same time the city launched a Democracy Passport, a small passport-style booklet and mobile app which identifies who makes decisions and at what level in the country, so that citizens can be clearer about who is responsible for what. There are plans to expand these projects nationally and across Europe.

The second example was drawn from Berlin shortly after reunification where the local council launched a public engagement programme designed to engage citizens on how the new reunified capital city should be run. This programme lasted for eight months and involved a number of innovative methods to get the local population talking and debating the issues which really mattered to them. This created a widely-shared atmosphere sense of highly productive civic debate, similar to that generated by the Scottish independence referendum.

Our discussions concluded that there is an urgent need to make the entire democratic process more transparent and better understood by citizens, and that by having a stronger understanding of how decision making and accountability is structured we can encourage people to re-engage. It was noted that this outcome is probably easier to achieve at a local rather than national level and that we should therefore start by seeking greater engagement locally.



Recommendations

In this final section of our report we consider the practical recommendations that were identified to help re-invigorate citizen engagement in our democracy. The recommendations fall into five broad categories.

1. Changes to our national institutions

It was felt that a number of our national institutions need to reform to encourage greater understanding of the democratic process and provide stronger accountability to the people. Through these reforms we felt that a greater sense of involvement and participation could be achieved:

- Bring forward measures to accelerate the correction of a gender imbalance in UK politics, and an under-representation of disabled people and minority ethnic groups and other minority groups in our institutions. All parties must address these fundamental issues of representation, difficult though they may be to solve in the short term.
- Bring forward further reform of the House of Lords, and move towards a different system of selection which reduces the influence of party politics on the membership of the Upper House. Consider random selection of some citizen representatives.
- Reduce the voting age to 16 or 17 based on the successful experience of lowering the voting age in Scotland for the independence referendum.
- Consider the introduction of a system allowing for 5-10% of local councillors to be selected or invited to stand at random to increase diversity.
- Consider hosting regular "People's Debates" in the House of Lords. These would be monthly public debates where a group of citizens, chosen at random from lists ensuring geographical, gender and other forms of social balance, are invited to participate in a day of discussion and debate on specific policy issues. Citizens would debate together with members of the House of Lords and receive appropriate preparation and be paid expenses. The outcome of the debates would or could become the subject of further consideration by Parliament.

Consider holding monthly 'open evenings' in the House of Commons where members of the public are able to question and debate political issues with MPs – this could be a virtual event enabled by technology. Again, the outcome of these debates would or could become the subject of further consideration by Parliament.

- Establish a national academy for citizen engagement to help train elected representatives and civic officials in engagement, consultation and deliberation techniques such as participatory budgeting and policy crowdsourcing.
- Urge the BBC to regularly and openly review its process for selecting the panel on Question Time. This programme was considered one of the most important opportunities to encourage public discussion and debate on political issues, but there is a need for broader representation on the panel.



2. Engage young people to create a sense of civic duty

There is a need to create a stronger sense of citizenship and civic duty within younger age groups of society, and to convey the importance of participation in the democratic process. Starting this process with younger people should help to introduce a culture shift across the whole of society, as the next generation grows up. Recommendations included:

- Establish a cross-party group to review the current citizenship curriculum and recommend ways of including the democratic process more strongly and more frequently within existing citizenship classes.
- Include politics more widely across the whole school curriculum. At present there is a sense that we cannot discuss political issues within the school setting, but there is no reason why issues relating to how our political and democratic system works as a whole cannot be taught in an impartial and balanced way across a range of subjects such as history, geography and languages.
- Establish debating groups from primary school age as a means of enabling younger people to understand the mechanics of free and fair democratic debate and become used to hearing and valuing different perspectives as part of democratic decision-making.
- Encourage young people to engage in politics on their terms and at their point of interest - for example, signing a petition and sharing this action with their social media networks.
- Promote more visits to local, national and international democratic institutions so that young people have a greater understanding of how the democratic process operates at all levels, and have opportunities to meet and talk to practising politicians and civic officials.
- Alongside moves to lower the voting age, provide greater support for young people who are voting for the first time to help them understand the history of universal suffrage; the importance of free and fair elections within a free democracy; and the specifics of current UK voting systems. Provide further educational support to ensure there is a sound understanding of key issues which such groups and the electorate as a whole are being asked to vote on.
- Use 'nudges' to encourage voter registration among younger people, such as using student university registration as the moment to confirm if someone is registered locally to vote.



3. Make digital democracy a reality

There was a recognition that digital media are not a panacea for the re-engagement of citizens with democracy, but that they do have the potential to play an important role alongside offline engagement.

Digital democracy and social media both suffer from concerns regarding the accuracy of views expressed and (ironically) a lack of transparency and accountability that can sometimes be even greater than the offline world. There are also concerns over how representative the online world is of the wider world; and that not everyone has access to digital tools or the skills or confidence to use them.

Used as an additional complementary channel to other engagement channels however, digital tools can be a uniquely powerful way of opening up democratic processes and allowing people to engage individually and in communities of all sizes. However there was an observation that digital and offline discussions currently often take place in unconnected spheres, and the challenge is to work out how they can support each other.

We concluded that:

- More research is required into how digital democracy techniques could support greater levels of democratic awareness and engagement. The next government must take this opportunity seriously and provide adequate funding for such research.

4. Harness the positive potential of individuals and communities

While there has been a general disengagement with formal political processes, many citizens have demonstrated a strong willingness to engage on specific democratic issues, when such issues create a high level of personal interest and passion. There are also many strong community action groups at local or interest level.

The issue we face is that of how we can harness these interests and passions to support our democratic processes more generally. To harness this power a number of changes are required:

- We need to provide more information on where and how decisions are made, so individuals are better informed over where power lies and the decision making process;
- We must encourage decentralisation and devolution of power to a local level;
- We must create or encourage the creation of new mechanisms or 'spaces' whereby geographical or subject community interest groups can be started, mobilised, and work collectively on specific issues.



5. Take control of the conversation over constitutional reform

Our final recommendation is:

- To hold an independent constitutional convention and deliberative debate across the country on the future of our democracy, with the government and all party leaders committing to consider the results.

This year (2015) will see the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, and it was felt that this could form a fitting backdrop to holding an independent constitutional convention and deliberative debate across the country on the future of our democracy.

This convention could be known as The People's Commission or Citizen's Assembly. It could be structured along the lines of the one held in the Republic of Ireland as previously discussed in this report, with a mixture of citizen and political representatives, and allow citizens rather than politicians to take control of the debate. More importantly it could act as the foundation for a much wider deliberative debate across the nation on devolution and how we want our democracy to operate in the future.

To be effective however any constitutional convention may need to be financially independent of the current political process. We identified a number of potential funding routes including crowd sourcing the funding or using syndicated or partnership/matched funding.



Conclusion

Our consultation concluded that while there is clear evidence of citizen disenchantment with current political structures in the UK, and while this is an extremely serious problem that needs to be urgently addressed, democratic engagement overall is far from broken in our country. We have seen recent examples of significant democratic engagement both at local and national level, with the Scottish Independence referendum for example, which generated widespread debate and high levels of voter turnout; or the groundswell of public support behind the idea for a national Citizens Convention on Constitutional Reform with a petition signed by tens of thousands of people being delivered to No.10. It is also clear that fundamentally, most UK citizens are aware that we enjoy levels of freedom such as freedom of speech and the rule of law that, while always imperfect, outshine the reality in most undemocratic parts of the world and are inherently connected to our developed democracy.

However it is just as clear that whatever the global perspective, there are real issues of political trust, reputation and relevance which need to be addressed. There is a perception that current political institutions are remote, difficult to engage with, and that any citizen engagement is unlikely to lead to much change. At the same time many citizens do not appear to have a strong grasp of how our existing democratic structures work, and where decision-making power lies. This lack of knowledge and understanding is particularly acute among younger age groups where a culture of single issue activism is most strong and we are witnessing frustration over the perceived gap between citizens holding their own discussions and party political debate. These combined issues of perception and reality form a complex knot to unpick, but there is a clear need for greater education of both young people and adults of the workings of democracy, and how our democratic institutions operate, so that debates on reform can be constructed on more positive and informed foundations.

We have also identified cultural and attitudinal shifts in society which need to be more accurately reflected in our approach to democratic engagement if our democracy is to thrive. Our leaders need to recognise that citizens are looking for a different model of leadership, less directional and more facilitational in nature. At the same time we need to harness the power of new digital media in an attempt to bridge the two worlds of online and offline democracy, and to make political representatives more accessible to citizens.

Our national institutions need reform to ensure that they are more representative of ordinary citizens, to help address the currently widely-held perception that they are remote and self-serving. Constitutional reform must not be left solely to our politicians to lead, but needs to be citizen-led or cross-sectoral to allow different and new perspectives to emerge.

Our discussions have identified several areas where we feel changes are urgently needed to reinvigorate democracy. These include changes to our national institutions, stronger engagement of younger people to create a sense of political citizenship, the introduction of a national training academy for the use of deliberative engagement, making the most of the opportunities posed by digital



democracy, and finally the opportunity we now have to establish a constitutional convention in 2015, the year of the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta.

Politics may well be facing many challenges – from global warming to water scarcity, from an ageing population to chronic obesity, from population growth to resource depletion – but by far the biggest problem with democracy is the growth of apathy and disengagement. 'A world-weary shrug will no longer do' Peter Riddell (2011, p.140) argued in his *In Defence of Politicians* 'The challenges...are not only serious in themselves but they are cumulatively worse than in the past. Crucially, the current low standing of politicians means that representative democracy does not – and cannot – work as it should'. Without a civic culture that reflects an engaged and active citizenry we will not be able to address the challenges that undoubtedly exist on the horizon. The recommendations and suggestions are designed to nurture a more active and engaged citizenry. They are offered to provoke both debate and discussion and on the basis that no simple panacea exists for the problems of democracy. The problems we face as a society are serious, and real damage is being inflicted on our society by democratic disengagement. We can breathe new life into politics. We can re-connect with those sections of society that have become disillusioned with politics and we can re-imagine a new way of 'doing' politics.

The political parties and our leaders have, sporadically, appeared to realise the seriousness of the problem but to date they have generally sought to address it individually, as part of the party process. To fully succeed however, they must forget their differences and join citizens, academics, charities and others to address this problem with all available energy and resources.



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ST GEORGE'S HOUSE

The House was founded in 1966 by H.R.H The Duke of Edinburgh and the then Dean, Robin Woods, as a place where people of influence and responsibility in every area of society can come together to explore and communicate their views and analysis of contemporary issues.

The House is located within Windsor Castle and forms part of the fourteenth century foundations of the College of St George. The heart of the College is St George's Chapel, where three times a day, every day, prayer is offered for the nation. That tradition of prayer, established in 1348 by King Edward III, has extended for more than six hundred years. It is precisely this tradition that gives the House its impetus and its wider theological context. The offering of prayer in the Chapel finds a practical expression in Consultations, where the House offers space for nurturing Wisdom.

Today our Consultation programme focuses on three distinct areas: contemporary issues, service to the Church, and hospitality for groups who, understanding the ethos and core objectives of the House, bring to us their own Consultations. Taken together our annual programme is varied, rich, and intellectually challenging.

The Duke of Edinburgh believes that, as the College is hidden away within the Castle walls, it is particularly attractive to people in positions of leadership within government, industry, commerce and the churches as a venue for discreet discussions of mutual and national interest.

Our aim is to effect change for the better in our society by nurturing Wisdom through dialogue.

The values of the House are openness, honesty, trust and respect. People from all areas of society, holding diverse views, opinions and beliefs come here to debate freely. The art of Consultation seeks to nurture Wisdom and open up the possibility of a different and better world.

The Wisdom we seek to nurture affirms and encourages, questions and surprises. It searches out new possibilities and desires the best for all our people and our planet. It is forward-looking and free from contemporary idols. It fosters personal and community transformation. The practical result of such Wisdom is trust, justice, equality and peace.

It is Wisdom based on knowledge, understanding, good judgement and far-sighted decision-making. It is Wisdom for our time.



ST GEORGE'S HOUSE



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