

# REVITALISING POLITICS

## CONFERENCE REPORT

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5 November 2008

### Panel one: What Parliament and Government can do

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**Chair:** Phil Cowley, University of Nottingham  
**Panel:** Lord Norton of Louth, University of Hull  
Mike Kenny, Institute for Public Policy Research  
Austin Mitchell MP

The panellists gave presentations to initiate the discussion:

#### Lord Norton of Louth, University of Hull

Lord Norton challenged the use of constitutional changes as the solution to political disengagement and declining participation. He referred to studies, such as the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement*, which showed that the public are generally satisfied with the UK's political structure and institutions, and argued that structural changes are a (comparatively) simple fix for a more complex problem. He said that while there is a lack of trust in politicians, most people report being satisfied with their own MPs and are therefore not entirely turned off by politics.

He also raised the link between the party of opposition and the support for constitutional reform, arguing that when in government those voices insisting on the need for political reform and increasing the scrutiny of the executive soon claim that effective governance is the heart of the British political system.

Lord Norton argued that the current problems and dissatisfaction felt tend to centre on issues such as political party funding, sleaze and other issue-based problems, and that the dissatisfaction is "not with structures but with human agency". He said that efforts are needed to solve these issues, that politicians must lead this change, and that if politicians take the lead the media will follow.

#### Mike Kenny, Institute for Public Policy Research

Mike Kenny's central theme was that in seeking one central problem to political disengagement is unhelpful and in invoking a golden age of participatory democracy is fallacious. Kenny argues that there are three broad themes that need be to considered when

discussing what politics can do. Firstly that there is a link between social inequality and disengagement and that this should inform the debate and the solutions.

Secondly, Kenny argued that the current political culture contributes to the problem. The de-politicisation of decision making through the utilisation of arms-length decision making has decreased that value of politicians, and ministers are, he believed, more constrained now than they were in 1997. He asks how politics outside Westminster can have legitimacy, credibility and power given the surrounding culture, and drew on the examples of the Scottish Parliament and London Mayor, to suggest that where engagement and participation can change outcomes it increases.

Political culture and discourse needs to be aligned with the realities and constraints of the system to be honest and effective. If there is increased emphasis placed on discursive and compromising politics where people work together, a more meaningful engagement process that people are willing to engage in can be achieved.

Thirdly Kenny said that the current disenchantment with politics may be a temporary one, related to any or all of a number of factors including economic contentment, the lack of a stark divide in the politics of the main parties, and a lack of confidence among politicians in engaging with the public.

## **Austin Mitchell MP**

Austin Mitchell challenged the views on disengagement as a problem that needed to be solved. He said that people should feel that politics is boring as on the whole it is, and therefore there should be little surprise or concern that people fail to turn out and vote. If a reinvigoration is desired, genuine political tension is required.

He argued that the US election featured a genuine political tension between the advocates of the same and those calling for reform and that by having that tension people were more inclined to engage in politics. Regarding the low level of satisfaction with MPs Mitchell challenged the perception that politicians were ever loved by people and as such this was not a new development or something to be overly concerned with. He pointed out that political coverage and perceptions remain focused on 'yah-boo, custard-pie throwing politics'. However, despite this people do still respect their own MP, even if they don't like or respect politicians.

Mitchell also talked about the conceptualisation of youth politics as issue-based. While many concerns of young people were issue based their knowledge and interest rarely penetrates beyond the initial ideals. For the majority of young people these beliefs do not get translated into a more tangible understanding of the complexities of the issue which is the work of politicians.

Despite being sceptical about the problem, Mitchell suggested a series of reforms to the political system to make it more engaging. He argued that life for the executive needed to be made more difficult as currently it has too much control, especially in its domination of Parliament and MPs who are 'whipped like sheep'. In order to achieve this, he outlined options such as greater use of referendums, a move to proportional representation, and 3-year Parliaments. Mitchell also suggested that the Parliament Channel should attempt to improve its output to be more like C-Span in the USA. Another suggested potential solution was to actually allow local councils to wield real power and that if they did that would give local elections more importance and people might see value in them.

And you could also elect more young, handsome, intelligent MPs like myself.

Mitchell also pointed out that political parties have lost their place in society, they move with modern political trends in order to become the governing Party; leaving behind the ideological background that once defined the political parties into a neo-liberal economic middle ground.

## **Questions from the floor**

Following the contributions of the three speakers the conference discussed themes raised and in particular focused on the following:

### **The need for reform**

A leading academic dissented from the opinion of Austin Mitchell that there was no reason to be concerned with our poor levels of participation. This dissent was shared by several participants at the conference speaking later.

The academic cited recent European survey work which said that the UK Parliament was one of the least trusted parliaments in Europe. It was noted that this sentiment was attached specifically to the House of Commons and not to Parliament as a bi-cameral institution.

### **The move to greater localisation**

There was widespread consensus among speakers and delegates that transferring more powers to a local level would help reinvigorate engagement with political processes, and that the system is heavily over-centralised at present.

One member of the conference welcomed the language in the CLG's Communities white paper introduced by Hazel Blears, but said that while the ideas being name-checked were the right way to go, the proposed implementations were markedly watered down and would not realise their potential.

Lord Norton suggested that the London Mayor was a bad example of localisation as it is a high profile example of success, whereas overall this is not a constant finding in research into the developments of elected Mayors. Part of the reason for this success was the high profile nature of the role and the image of power that the Office of the Mayor has cultivated. In contrast local elections tend to receive low levels of turnout in response to a perception of a lack of capability in local government.

### **Socio-economics**

Members of the conference made special note of the lack of focus on socio-economics to the debate of public participation and said there is much statistical evidence linking political participation, knowledge and engagement with social class. Broadly speaking to participate one must have the resources, education, understanding and the will in order to actually engage in politics.

This connection tends to result in a concentration of political engagement with those who have more income often leaving the poorest in society often overlooked and unconnected to politicians, even those who wish to represent them. Mitchell suggested that compulsory registration was one method of reaching these individuals. Lord Norton said that he often challenges his students to go and talk to the people of Hull about the models of reform they propose to deepen social inclusion, to emphasise that these kind of structural reform will not appeal to the general public and therefore increase engagement.

### **Party Membership**

A quote was cited from the floor that membership is often a “non-lucrative distraction” for political parties and that the change in function of political parties has amounted to a death-knell for the mass membership political party. The decline of the Conservative Party, from 3 million members to 0.3 members was cited as one example of this trend. Mitchell suggested that the decline in party membership is connected to the increasing top-down approach of political parties, and that parties had become a place for salesmen and for the old social club rather than genuine grassroots movements. The conference discussed whether political parties still acted as ‘aggregators’ of ideas and policy at a time of engagement increasingly in the form single-issue politics.

Despite this trend Mitchell believes that political parties still want membership but that MPs can easily lose touch with the interest of grass routes due to living in the Westminster bubble. He pointed to his difficulty in raising the importance of council housing on the political agenda when MPs have such good housing provision, which causes a dissociation of MPs from those they represent. He suggested that to utilise mass membership requires an engaging use of the internet and a reduction in the costs of membership to bring down the financial requirement of membership.

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