

REVITALISING POLITICS

CONFERENCE REPORT

5 November 2008

Panel two: What citizens and civil society groups can do

Chair: Sheena McDonald, Talking Politics

Panel: Liz Atkins, National Council of Voluntary Organisations

Simon Woolley, Operation Black Vote

Andy Williamson, Hansard Society

The conferences discussions were informed by the brief presentation of the panel:

Simon Woolley

Simon Woolley drew attention to the largely negative image often associated with ethnic minorities in the media. Often the villain in modern society, especially in certain newspapers, is a young man of one or other ethnic minority. The emergence of a successful, energetic, inspirational black political leader in the US was a cause of great joy in overcoming this, but also highlighted how far behind the UK system is. Woolley also warned of the danger of rhetoric of accomplishment regarding the representation of ethnic minorities now that there was a black President of America.

Ethnic minority groups tend to be disproportionately more disadvantaged and suffer from low aspirations, and one of the key reasons for this is a lack of role models achieving great success in Britain.

Increasing the number of black and ethnic minority MPs is the only short term solution to this problem, and in this regard affirmative action is both necessary and overdue. At present ethnic minority groups have to work together in marginal seats in order to get politicians to engage on their issues. More MPs coming from the community up will encourage better politicians who do more for their local communities and this is key to changing the overall engagement problem: engagement can be solved by having more “public servants, not puffed up politicians” engaging through local communities.

In the longer term there is a need to nurture a new political generation, and this must be done through inspiring community and church groups.

Liz Atkins, National Council of Voluntary Organisations

Liz Atkins pointed out that while membership of political parties is declining at a dramatic rate, it is climbing among third and voluntary sector organisations. Both in traditional voluntary activities and examples of consumer action, such as the purchase of Fair Trade goods, participation is increasing.

The virtue of voluntary sector groups is their ability to reach out to local communities who are often not represented, or to a wide cross section of society with non-geographically centred concerns, and clearly express their views to Parliament. Surveys show that they have greater public trust than politicians and government.

In order to utilise this to promote more engagement in politics Atkins suggested increasing the role of the third sector in facilitating the connection between the public and politicians. She also advocated an improvement in the government's engagement with voluntary organisations, saying that when they do engage it is almost always at a national level rather than a local one.

Atkins also argued that political parties also need to modernise, as they have been left behind by issue based groups that are better at communicating with their membership.

The conference questioned the degree of democracy especially in large voluntary and charitable organisations, in respect of how closely they listened and responded to the views of their membership. Atkins responded that they could not function if they did not carry their members with them. The argument was also put that they only represent people on a single area whereas parties can represent views across a wider breadth of issues.

Andy Williamson

Andy Williamson questioned the benefits of raising the profile of civil society as advocates of the people to government. He pointed out that there is a presumption that civil society is a good thing, but there is rarely an examination of who it involves. He suggested that bodies reflecting the membership of civil society may lead to unelected, unaccountable elites who do not represent, or fail to properly represent, the views of those they claim as members.

Williamson said that civil society is already engaged in politics, though neither they nor politicians recognise the engagement as such. On the whole members of civil society and voluntary organisations tend to be middle-class and have resources, such as time or money, to spare. The organisations themselves are run by politically educated Westminster-savvy elites who are not democratic and normally there is very little scrutiny on their actions.

He argued that the system of political engagement between government and civil society is still top down and prescribed. While the rhetoric might be outreaching and seeking discussion, the reality is informing and predetermined. In order for engagement to be more effective, government must be more willing to accept citizen-led engagement processes as well as initiating their own, and to take the risks inherent in such a process. Citizens can best be involved in politics by engaging and discussing problems, which then challenge government to find solutions. However, this is only true if government is prepared to work with citizens rather than to use engagement in order to create a perception of consultation with the public.

The example of the Welsh Assembly responding to a petition was used as an example of this working well. A petition was brought by citizens to the Assembly, despite being outside its areas of authority they arranged a meeting between the citizens, local agencies and government departments, who then worked together with the community to normalise what they were doing instead of a multitude of agencies acting without speaking to each other.

Williamson stressed that the internet, and digital communication as a whole should not be seen as engagement per se, merely as a tool that has the power to facilitate engagement.

Discussion

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

The US election

The question was asked to Andy Williamson about what lessons can be learned about the role of civil society from the US. In responding Williamson pointed out that actually the reality was mass citizen lead engagement, with people engaging directly, not through 'civil society' organisations. The campaign utilised the internet and web technology to lead a viral campaign and maintain huge levels of citizen engagement. The outcome of whether viral campaigning can lead to viral government or whether the expectations of the campaign can be translated into policy implementation will remain unanswered for a while yet.

The need to take risks in engagement

One member of the floor asked Williamson to clarify what he meant by the necessity for risk in engagement exercises. Williamson pointed to exercises conducted in New Zealand looking into stem-cell research and embryology, where the subject was controversial and inherently risky, but it was handled well, engaged the public and was transparent, leading to a productive result.

The increasing professionalism of civil society

It was noted that certain civil society groups are becoming much more effective at campaigning, fundraising and maintaining their profile than ever before, most notably national campaign groups and charities. Several questions were asked in terms of this development.

In order to increase funding and membership of these groups the work that is being done in the area is often underplayed. In addition, the groups who seek this mass membership and fundraising often raise the level of expectations, none more extreme than the 'make poverty history' campaign, which aimed to end all poverty everywhere in the world with the mass membership doing nothing more than wearing a white arm band and the most active attending a free rock concert. Another example noted was the NSPCC's full stop campaign, which could be argued to suggest that membership could be translated into the end of child abuse and violence against children. A question was raised as to whether organisations such as the NCVO has a role to play in promoting 'responsible campaigning' to ensure that expectations are not raised over and above the limit that can actually be achieved. This idea was rejected by Atkins, who argued that professionalism also meant competence, which was a good thing for the third sector. Williamson highlighted the potential problem that short-term campaign movements can become 'professional' organisations which lose the momentum for seeking a desired change, instead morphing into professional non-representative lobbying groups.

Finally the difficulties of government engaging more closely with charities were discussed. Charities working with and receiving funds from government can find it difficult to be openly critical of government for fear that their source of funding will cease.

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