

REVITALISING POLITICS

CONFERENCE REPORT

6 November 2008

Panel One: Process

Chair: Andy Williamson, Hansard Society

Panel: Ben Kisby, University of Sheffield

James Sloam, Royal Holloway, University of London

Graham Smith, University of Southampton

Tony Travers, London School of Economics

The panellists gave presentations to initiate the discussion. These papers are available online. The authors and papers discussed are:

- Smith 'New Methods of Engagement'
- Kisby and Sloam 'Teaching Democracy'
- Travers 'Challenges of multi-level governance'

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

The importance of effective participation

The conference noted that increasing levels of discourse surrounding disengagement has a potential downside, that it may almost be self-fulfilling, and that the more one looks for examples of disengagement the more than can be found. Again it was noted that the past cannot be eulogised as a time of vastly better engagement.

Effective and genuine engagement might encourage more participation, however flawed models which fail to engage risk further discouraging members of the public from participating. The contrast between the UK model of engagement and models in use elsewhere are stark. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, the concept of participatory budgeting has been whole-heartedly embraced, and the city's entire construction budget, some 200 million dollars, is allocated subject to views of citizens. In the process of consultation some 50,000 of the city's 1.5 million citizens are involved in the process of splitting the prioritising areas of the budget. In comparison the UK models are restricted by targets, ring-fencing and other budgetary constraints imposed on local councils by central government, rendering them largely ineffective in responding the interests' of local communities.

The damaging effects of centralisation

The connection between the decline of grass roots activism and political parties losing constituency seats was discussed. The policy of rejuvenating local parties in an attempt to win the Parliamentary seat was mentioned as an example that there is some recognition of the problem and occasional active attempts to reinvigorate local politics. Specifically the Conservative Party have tried to reconstruct inner-city branches of the party to make help challenge for city seats.

One difficulty in the UK system is that only approximately one in five parliamentary seats can be considered genuinely competitive at a general election and thus get the financial and political capital is focused in only a small number of areas. This potentially reduces the interest and engagement levels elsewhere.

The recent US election saw money being spent seriously in more states than in the past, as it appeared that the strength of the political campaign had brought more states into play and that sub-sections of states populations, such as young people and ethnic minorities, turned out in record numbers. A counter-argument suggested that these states were not winnable because of an improvement in the political discourse, but the result of demographic changes in some of these states.

It was noted that a significant part of the damage done to local involvement in politics came from the actions of central government; from both political movements such as the Fabian Society advocating centralisation as a means to promote equality and Margaret Thatcher who undermined local authorities' abilities to oppose her reforms. It was questioned why those policies had succeeded in the UK whereas any movement to disempower local authorities in France would be resisted more strongly. The extent to which local politics was compliant in its further subordination to central government was a theme of this discussion.

The role of citizenship education

The important role of Citizenship education was highlighted in the paper presented by Kisby and Sloam. One member of the conference questioned the legitimacy of using Germany as a case example due to the recent history of political conflict in Germany, such as Nazism and the Red Army Faction. While Germany is a flawed comparative example due to that history, the importance attached to this subject and the practices involved can be utilised to seek ways to improve citizenship education.

Citizenship education in the UK has increased the numbers of young people who vote and participate in democracy. However there are a number of flaws in the current model, notably the centralised top-down approach which has led in some areas to the compartmentalisation of citizenship education within schools, disengaging it from the local community.

Supply-demand models of politics

This principle was mentioned on a number of occasions in relation to different examples cited by conference panellists and discussants. There seemed to be a consensus that increasing the value of the engagement goods on offer could lead to an increase in the demand for political activity generally. This approach was particularly linked to local elections and the necessity of increasing the value output of local government in order to encourage political engagement.

For more information on Revitalising Politics and to join the discussion, visit www.revitalisingpolitics.org.