REVITALISING POLITICS

CONFERENCE REPORT

6 November 2008

Panel Two: Communication and participation

Chair: Andy Williamson, Hansard Society

Panel: Rachel Gibson, University of Manchester

William Maloney, University of Newcastle

Paul Webb, University of Sussex

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

- Webb 'Failings of political parties'
- Maloney 'Failings of interest groups'
- Gibson 'The Role of new Media'

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

Interest groups

The conference again discussed the legitimacy of interest groups in advocating change on behalf of members. Especially with the drive for direct debit membership signups, designed to encourage ongoing payment without requiring further input or engagement. This was portrayed by some participants as a new style of campaign group where the membership provides little more than a base for the group to claim legitimacy in advocating their leadership's special interests. Especially, as one participant stated, both the leadership and membership of interest groups tend to 'sing with a middle class accent'.

There was dissent from this view by a number of participants who questioned the overly negative views of interest groups from the discussion. It was argued that interest groups champion causes that have no demographic specific benefit, such as the environment. Additionally, mass membership is necessary to remain a financially, and thus ideologically, independent organisation.

Political Parties

The presumption that political parties have gradually become relatively homogenous was challenge by the participants at the conference. The point was made by Paul Webb that although political parties have abandoned the stark ideological cleavages of the 20th Century, a Conservative government over the past 10 years would not have implemented the same legislative program that the Labour government has done. As such there is little truth in the popular sentiment that political parties do not offer voters a 'choice'.

It was suggested that this perception had potentially come about as the political parties have aimed to appeal to a wider spectrum of voters and become more professional and effective in delivering their messages. In doing so the messages of the nationally aggregated policy message dominate, and both the articulation of guiding ideology of the party in question and the scope for individual candidates to define their own positions is reduced.

The role of technology to change the way in which campaigning and governing take place, utilising examples from both the Dean and Obama campaigns in the USA, was also discussed. The immediate potential use in the UK for viral campaigning was questioned due to cultural and political considerations. However, it was agreed that all political parties have to learn to adapt what they do in light of the new use of technology. If one British political party manages to successfully connect the existing technology with the necessary impetus amongst the general public to participate they could change the political landscape of the UK in a very short time.

Patronage and increasing professionalism in the political sector

The conference discussions also focused on the considerable power of patronage to control both political parties and interest groups. When money from a small number of sources provides a significant share of an interest group's overall income they can become dependent on those sources. This relationship can then become dominated by the power of the patron in controlling the direction of the work of the party or interest group, making it a more significant factor than the interests of the membership.

The increasing professionalism of policy development in both government and interest groups means that greater expertise is required to contribute. This risks excluding citizens, who will have opinions on issues but not necessarily expertise to offer.

The impact of professionalism in the campaign work of interest groups was also discussed. The role of political experts hired to maximise the influence of interest groups can potentially lead to a change in the priorities of the organisation, focusing on issues considered 'winnable' rather than necessarily on the issues and ideals of the membership. This view was

challenged as misleading in certain circumstances as professionalism is a necessary part of campaigning and lobbying politicians.

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