

REVITALISING POLITICS

CONFERENCE REPORT

6 November 2008

Panel Three: (re)engagement

Chair: Andy Williamson, Hansard Society

Panel: Matt Flinders, University of Sheffield

Jon Tonge, University of Liverpool

Paul Whiteley, University of Essex

The panellists gave presentations to initiate the discussion. These papers are available [online](#).

The authors and papers discussed are:

- Whiteley 'Levels of participation and citizen attitudes'
- Flinders 'Bridging the gap: Revitalising politics and the politics of public expectations'
- Tonge 'Involving young people'

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

Disengagement

The panel agreed that participation is a vital element in bestowing legitimacy on the political system. However one member pointed out that with the exception of a general election, current schemes to encourage greater citizen participation involve either a minority or a tiny minority of individuals. As such, participatory schemes as a solution to disengagement are likely to struggle.

The conference also specifically discussed various issues surrounding the participation of young people in the democratic system and their disengagement from institutional politics. It was suggested that a cohort effect exists, whereby a generation of people turned off from politics at a young age simply do not participate later in life, and that it is almost impossible to re-engage them. The conference debated the validity of this theory.

The conference also discussed that contrast between the decreasing level of political participation and the rising level of more informal political participation, such as the rapid growth of 'boycotting' (conscious consumer choices, such as purchasing Fair Trade products – the opposite of 'boycotting') as a political activity, especially among younger generations.

Expectations driven disengagement

The rising level of public expectation was discussed in detail by the conference. One distinguished participant said that the public perception is that government fails to follow its promises, however on the whole the government does implement its manifesto agenda. This argument was countered with the assertion that the government's media-driven agenda focuses on issues over which it has no actual control. Promises to get to grips with issues such as school truancy and unwanted teenage pregnancy are important issues; however they are extremely difficult for central government to effectively manage

The time-scale involved in political promises was also noted. All manifesto commitments are judged to be either a success or failure after one Parliamentary term. Often the results of these commitments require many years to manifest.

Political parties are not alone in being guilty of raising expectations to help garner support. The example of the 'Make Poverty History' campaign was referenced again, where the message that was promoted was that a person could send a text message and attend a pop concert, and that these activities would be sufficient to change the world.

One demonstrable way in which the public have become more cynical about the implementation of governments promises is by the cynicism surrounding the crime statistics. In other countries such as the US, one participant stated, crime figures are generally felt to be reliable evidence. In the UK they are politicised and distrusted so much that even criminologists no longer hold faith in them. The mistrust in statistics makes it extremely difficult for the government to justify the claim to be achieving there goals. That being said, the government's high profile misuses of evidence, such as the 'sexed up dossier' and diverse and contradictory claims made by parties over the crime statistics means that the public are given ample reason for cynicism.

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