Reviving the health of our democracy

March 2013 | Jess Garland

Report & Analysis

Electoral Reform Society

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Introduction

Constitutional reform over the last 15 years has been more profound and far reaching than in previous decades but reforms have largely failed to meet the rhetoric that accompanied them.

Reforms hoping to 'change politics for good' have tinkered at the edges and, compounded by a failure to consider weaknesses in the political system, have created imbalances in the constitution. Aimed at restoring trust, reforms have fallen short of this goal by misunderstanding the nature of waning confidence in our political system and the fundamental shifts in our political culture and relationship with politics. Failing faith in our democracy is linked to the marketization of our political interactions. As governments have adopted a market-based approach to delivering services and political parties the practice of year-round market campaigning, so too citizens have adopted a customer-orientated relationship to the state and politics. The collective decision-making nature of politics has been lost as our political culture has adapted to the drives of individualism and consumerism.

Restoring faith in politics and the functioning of our democracy is essential for the future of political authority. The gulf between people and politics has a high cost for decision-making. Questions over legitimacy affect governments' confidence in tackling difficult issues; anti-politics culture limits the pool of people who are willing to stand for election and ultimately may affect citizens' willingness to abide by the rules. We are already beginning to see the outcomes of these problems: a shift towards greater use of referendums, an increasingly narrow pool of representatives and incidents of civil disobedience.

Change will require reforms to both structures and institutions as well as to political culture. Reforms will need to meet the expectations of different groups of citizens whose attitude to politics and willingness to participate varies.

The growing divide between citizen and politics suggests that now is the time to embrace deliberative democratic methods in which to bring politics back to its essence: debate, compromise, collective decision-making. Bringing politics back to people will help improve citizens' relationship to representative institutions but we also need to improve representative democracy, in its form and culture. This is essential if we want an equal society and a healthier democracy.

Reform: Restoring trust or tinkering at the edges?

The health of our democracy depends primarily on the relationship between people and politics. Democracy cannot be separated from politics and whilst one is held in high regard, the other is largely viewed with disdain, disappointment and cynicism. It seems that for many, politics is the thing that gets in the way of democracy rather than fundamental to it. As Gerry Stoker puts it, "You can have politics without democracy … but you can't have democracy without politics"[1].

Over the last two decades there have been significant shifts in the way people connect to politics, an unprecedented crisis of public faith in public institutions, significant evolution in devolution arrangements and a diversification in the arenas in which decision-making occurs. And whilst the constitutional landscape has changed, in some areas dramatically, some aspects of our democracy have remained stubbornly resistant to reform. The highly centralised Westminster model, whilst increasingly at odds with the direction of democracy today, remains largely unchallenged, creating asymmetries and anomalies in our democracy. Whilst the British constitution has always been characterised by contradictions, this flawed version of the Westminster model is now straining at its seams.

1. Stoker, G., (2006) Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

The old principles don't work but politics has yet to develop new ones.

The swift and far reaching constitutional reforms implemented following the election of the Labour government in 1997 saw arguably the largest change to the British constitution since the turn of the century. The reforms, including devolved tiers of government in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, directly elected Mayors for some towns and cities, changes to representation in the House of Lords, the Human Rights Act and a series of measures to increase transparency and accountability including Freedom of Information legislation and reforms to party political funding, were wide-ranging but piecemeal; indeed these reforms are widely viewed as having lacked any overall strategy or coherence[2]. Many of the reforms were reactions to other pressures: pressure for devolution from growing nationalism, freedom of information following the BSE scandal and a more general concern for the relationship between citizens and politics following widespread allegations of sleaze under the previous administration[3]. The 1997 Labour manifesto set out its reforms as an antidote to the contention that 'people are cynical about politics and distrustful of political promises' and the reforms promised to 'rebuild this bond of trust between government and the people. That is the only way democracy can flourish'[4].

Despite aiming specifically at restoring trust in politics, this period witnessed a further decline in public trust. The NatCen British Social Attitudes survey[5] shows the percentage of people who claim to 'almost never' trust the government rose from 12 per cent after the election in 1997 to 33 per cent in 2010. Indeed reforms focused on transparency and openness had the very opposite effect - It was ironically the Freedom of Information Act which brought widespread misuse of Parliamentary expenses to light in 2009. But reforms are not themselves wholly to blame for the decline in trust over this period.

Instead, wider changes in society, globalisation, marketization and consumerist culture, have affected the way people engage with politics and the way politics engages with people. Globalisation has put (or created the perception that) many decisions are beyond the scope of those in power; that those that we elect are not in a position to solve the complex and globally interlinked problems that the country faces. Over the same period of time, consumerist culture has merged with political participation and acts of political engagement have become increasingly individualistic and consumerist. The political world has correspondingly made politics a consumer process whereby policies and messages are tailored for consumer citizens to buy into. Our adversarial political culture, year-round party campaigning, and the rise of single-issue pressure groups, have all contributed to set expectations that cannot be fulfilled and fuel the idea that politics can only disappoint. Our political culture repeatedly fails to represent politics as a collective endeavour requiring negotiation and compromise.

So in 2010, presented with another set of reforms aiming to create 'a Britain where our political system is looked at with admiration, not anger'[6], it is unsurprising that on current indicators, the reforms that have made it to fruition, have done little to restore trust, build bonds or address cynicism and anger. Last year's Audit of Political Engagement[7] shows a decline in most indices of engagement. With some of the proposed reforms, such as election to the House of Lords, not making it to the statute book at all, the government's promise of and subsequent failure to secure reform may have damaged public faith even further.

The reforms set out in the Coalition programme bear a striking similarity to those proposed in the 1997 Labour manifesto: reforms to the House of Lords, a referendum on the voting system and more directly elected representatives,

2. See Flinders, M., (2010) Democratic Drift: Majoritarian Modification and Democratic Anomie in the United Kingdom, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit.

3. Curtice, J., (2011), 'rebuilding the Bonds of Trust and Confidence? Labour's Constitutional Reform Programme', The Political Quarterly, Vol. 81, p65-77.

4. Labour Party (1997)

5. NatCen (2012), British Social Attitudes 29th Report. www.natcen.ac.uk/study/british-social-attitudes-29th-report

6. Cabinet Office, The Coalition: Our Programme for Government, May 2010.

7. Hansard Society (2012), Audit of Political Engagement 9, The 2012 Report: Part One

both mayors and police commissioners. They also shared the same goal of restoring trust in the system following periods that had shaken public faith ('sleaze' in 1997, expenses crisis in 2010). In both cases, this reactive approach to constitutional change, driven by underlying pressures and political trade-offs, meant reform was inconsistent and lacked a clear constitutional direction. Successive governments have not attempted to view the structure of the British constitution as a whole or set out any singular set of values or philosophy to underpin reforms. This ad hoc approach has led to a situation described by Matthew Flinders as 'democratic drift'[8]; too little understanding of the changing nature of the British constitution or willingness to look at it as a whole creating a situation in which, 'The old rules do not appear to suit the new game, and yet the government continues to insist that the old rules still apply'.

Reforms to date have been hindered by the lack of a singular and shared view of the future shape of British democracy. Flinders describes the New Labour approach as one of bi-constitutionalism: applying different constitutional orientations at different levels of governance; introducing elements of a consensual model of democracy away from Westminster whilst maintaining the centralising, power hoarding grip of the Westminster model at the core. Thus new more proportional electoral systems were introduced for Scottish, Welsh and European elections whilst the promised referendum on the electoral system for Westminster was abandoned. Similarly in the package of reforms offered up by the Coalition, elements of a more participative and power-sharing model of democracy contend with centralising and power-hoarding tendencies. Whilst the Coalition government has introduced elements of direct citizen power through greater use of referendums (local and national) and (forthcoming) recall of MPs, these have been dominated by central control, the latter arguably giving greater power to the whips than citizens.

A future democratic direction

So what shape should our democracy take? Views on the future direction of democracy depend in large part on how democracy is conceived and corresponding ideas about the appropriate role and spheres of democratic engagement. Reforms to improve representational party-based politics (such as reforming the electoral system, reforming the House of Lords, increased transparency and restrictions on party political activity) can be seen as based in what Gerry Stoker[9] refers to as the protective paradigm – that what matters for effective democracy is the presence of accountable and trusted elites. This framework of democracy, where mass participation is a part but not the centrepiece of democracy, requiring just enough engagement to give legitimacy, underpins the majority of post '97 reforms and indeed the majority of Coalition reforms. Renewed faith in representation is critical and reflected in the oft stated desire to 'restore trust'. A successful democracy under the protective democratic perspective requires that, 'politicians are perceived to be of high calibre, that there is a bureaucracy that is viewed to be effective and of good standing, and that there is a political competition that is limited within the bounds of reasonable conflict'[10]. Reforms to prevent bad behaviour, open governing processes up to public scrutiny, restructure representative processes and the institutions of representation can create the sort of environment where good representative democracy thrives. Participation and engagement is important for this model but not central and is limited to expression of preference at election time and 'policing' political behaviour through transparency mechanisms.

Other democratic perspectives, those which Stoker describes as within the developmental

8. Flinders, M., (2010) Democratic Drift: Majoritarian Modification and Democratic Anomie in the United Kingdom, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

9. Stoker, G., (2011), Building a New Politics, British Academy Policy Centre.

10. Ibid, pg.34

paradigm, see citizen participation in politics and decision-making as not only central, but essential to a thriving democracy. The process of deliberation is key; it is when citizens are engaged in and practising politics that collective decision making wins out over narrow self-interest and solutions to collective problems are found. The developmental perspective sees powerlessness and voicelessness as the roots of political alienation and therefore puts active citizen participation at its core. Elements of the developmental picture of democracy have found their way into reform packages. Reforms set out in the Governance of Britain green paper in 2007[11] took steps towards a more participatory framework and the Coalition has extended citizen involvement to some extent with more use of referendums and the (forthcoming) power of recall. However, these powers are both one off and limited. They are direct but not deliberative and crucially see no place for the citizen in shaping policy. Most importantly these reforms have not attempted to address inequalities of participation and access which, from a developmental perspective, undermine democracy.

The dominance of reforms that seek to improve representative democracy without directly addressing inequalities in participation or creating new opportunities for greater citizen participation have been criticised as producing a passive and apathetic citizenry. Colin Crouch[12] argues that this definition of democracy, in which mass participation happens only occasionally through the ballot box, coupled with extensive freedoms for lobbying activities (dominated by business not citizens) has led to our transition towards 'post democracy'; a democracy where public electoral debate is managed by professionals in a 'tightly controlled spectacle' whilst politics is shaped behind the scenes by business elites, leaving citizens largely passive in the political game. Whilst this is an extreme conception of how democracy functions, elements of this picture are evident in advanced democracies. In Italy, in a response to the economic crisis, politicians were replaced by technocrats; the voice of the markets, of investors, becoming more important than those of citizens (the public reaction to this can be seen in the recent electoral success of the populist and anti-establishment Five Star Movement). In Britain, a similar view has developed. A recent report by the LSE Growth Commission blames politics for delay to growth and investment in infrastructure[13]. The answer: less politics, more independent (and therefore unaccountable) experts. There are elements of our political culture which conspire against compromise and coalition working, but to remove decision making from politicians also removes it from citizens. Technocrats may make quick and efficient decisions but such decisions have no need to be in the public interest.

It is a vision of democracy shared by Donatella Della Porta who sees deliberative participation as central to a well-functioning democracy[14]. It is through the creation of public arenas where 'ideas, identities and preferences are created'[15] that citizens are socialised into a commitment to public good and find solutions to collective problems. Participation is both central to legitimacy but also to restoring trust. Institutions can recapture the trust of citizens by trusting them to be involved. It is also argued that participation can be the antidote to the corroding effects of consumerist culture on our democracy; the solution to the problems inherent in 'post democracy'. The market-democracy in which citizens make demands and politicians offer alternatives based on pre-formed ideas, is challenged by giving citizens the opportunity to shape these alternatives.

Yet, how do you reconcile the idea that new forms of participation can restore trust with the obvious decline in people's willingness to participate? Over time we have seen a decline in traditional forms of political participation (voting,

11. The Governance of Britain (2007)

12. Crouch, C., (2004), Post Democracy, Cambridge: Polity Press.

13. LSE Growth Commission (2013) Investing for Prosperity: Skills, Infrastructure and Innovation, Centre for Economic Performance LSE.

14. Della Porta, D., (2013) 'Can Democracy be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements', London School of Economics public lecture. Ralph Miliband lecture Series, Tuesday 5 February 2013

15. ibid

party membership) only partly mitigated by a rise in smaller less time consuming activities (signing petitions, boycotting products (these less time-consuming activities themselves reflecting citizens' increasingly individualistic consumer-orientated relationship with politics)). Protest movements and direct action have become more widespread and more mainstream but are still largely the activity of a small minority of citizens. Is it the type of engagement opportunities on offer that turn people away from democracy and if so, what sort of political participation do citizens want to take part in?

Unsurprisingly, the types of activity people want to engage in depends on their attitude towards politics suggesting that not all reforms will appeal to all citizens. Paul Webb has researched attitudes to participation amongst two distinct groups of politically dissatisfied citizens he labels as 'dissatisfied democrats' and 'stealth democrats'[16]. Both groups have low trust in politicians and politics but whilst the *dissatisfied democrats* are engaged and interested in politics (they have faith in democracy and are thus more inclined to criticise when they see it falling below expectations), stealth democrats are the very opposite, populist in outlook and far less willing to participate. Webb's research finds that those of stealth democratic orientation are far less willing to participate except in the case of referendum democracy where there is evidence both here and elsewhere that stealth and direct democracy overlap. This is consistent with the stealth democrat's populist world-view; referendums present an opportunity to bypass the mistrusted world of representational politics and have a direct say with limited effort. Likewise, research using the 29th British Social Attitudes survey looking specifically at the Coalition's reforms[17] finds that those who are sceptical about politics and have low trust are more inclined towards the direct democratic reforms (such as referendums and recall). By contrast dissatisfied democrats are far more inclined towards new deliberative forms of participation and direct action.

The distinction between groups with low trust in representative politics is an important one. Whilst improving representative politics with new forms of deliberative or direct participation can help improve trust and the viability of our democracy, we cannot assume that participation will be equally spread. Those who are both mistrustful of formal politics and disinclined towards participation in the fuller sense can easily be marginalised. There are already large inequalities in political activity (most political activities are undertaken by ABs and 'considerably less common'[18] amongst C2s and DEs). Reforming representative institutions, the vehicles which facilitate mass participation, is therefore essential for ensuring equality in political participation.

Dissatisfaction with the politics currently on offer is not necessarily reflective of a lack of faith in democracy or representative politics. Research suggests people have faith in the concept just not in its current manifestation; there is still widespread support for the institution of representative democracy – people just want it to work better. In nationwide focus groups exploring public attitudes to the democratic process[19], researchers found a gulf between party political reform agendas (specifically the Coalition's package) and the reforms to democracy that people actually want. The majority of reforms suggested in the groups were focused on the practice of politics not the outputs; participants wanted to see a change in the culture and behaviour of modern day politics. Improving access, openness and accountability were common themes. As Gerry Stoker summarises, 'the broad thrust of their reform ideas could perhaps be summed up as: it would be desirable if representative democracy was in practice, more like it is described in textbooks on democracy'[20].

16. Webb, P., (2012) 'Who is willing to participate and how? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the UK'. Paper prepared for the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties (EPOP) Conference, University of Oxford, September 2012.

17. Curtice, J., Seyd, B., (2012) Exploring and Explaining Attitudes

18. Hansard Society (2012), Audit of Political Engagement 9, The 2012 Report: Part One, pg73

19. Hansard Society (2012), Audit of Political Engagement 9, focus group research.

20. Stoker, G (2012), 'Reforming Politics: Citizens' Priorities'. Paper prepared for the launch of the Hansard Society, (2012) Audit of Political Engagement 9.

Reform of representative institutions and processes must occur alongside consideration of new forms of participation and whilst structural change is needed, it will require significant change in the culture and practice of politics both for representatives and the represented.

Recommendations

Democracy is not an end state. Democracies evolve and develop and need to respond to changes in society. However, there are principles underpinning a good democracy whatever model it takes:

- Active participation and engagement, giving everyone the opportunity to shape the decisions that affect their lives.
- Fair representation, ensuring our institutions reflect the people they serve, their choices and identities.
- Good governance, in the form, function and culture of democratic decision-making.

How widespread and equal is participation in our democracy? Can it be said to truly represent the population, their democratic choices and their identities? Does everyone have access to politics and is power equally shared? Applying the democratic requirements of participation, representation and good governance to the UK's democracy reveals significant failures in all three areas.

The health of the UK democracy is undoubtedly failing but it is by no means terminal. By improving the culture, practice and operation of democracy at all levels, addressing imbalances in participation and access and reforming the structures of democracy to bring politics closer to people, the health of our democracy can, and will, improve.

This report provides a health check for the UK's democracy and suggests ways of restoring it. No single policy can reverse the gradual decline in participation and engagement, the systemic failures of representation and the creeping distortion of power, but we would argue that the UK's democracy can be brought back to life by:

- Understanding and embracing the changed nature of political participation and building new forms of genuine engagement and participation into our democratic structures.
- Recognising support for representative democracy and preserving it by reforming the culture and operation of it in practice.
- Clearing the path to politics to ensure equality of access and a return to democracy that is 'by the people' as well as for them.
- Improving the operation and outcomes of elections at all levels to ensure every voice counts equally.
- Giving citizens equal power to shape their future by improving access and preventing politics being unduly influenced by the few.
- Bringing politics back to people and communities by returning real power to local democracy.

Popular participation & engagement

The place of politics in society and the declining relationship between people and politics is the most obvious fault line and the biggest challenge to democracy in the UK today. To revive the health of our democracy, the link between people and politics must be restored and a new culture of participation and engagement formed.

The problems: Participation and engagement

There has never been a golden age of political participation and engagement but it is impossible to ignore the decline in formal political participation and the splintering of the relationship between citizen and politics. Last year's Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement[21] summarised that, 'the public's growing sense of indifference to politics as highlighted in last year's Audit has hardened into something more serious as public attitudes become more negative'. The Audit measures key indicators such as interest in, knowledge about and satisfaction with politics. The research found that the proportion of people saying they are interested in politics fell to its lowest level since the Audit began, knowledge about politics has fallen, as has the percentage of people who say they would be certain to vote next time, falling last year to its lowest ever level at just 48 per cent%.

This is in line with the gradual decline in turnout which reached a low of 59.1 per cent in the 2001 General Election and remains at less than 40 per cent for local elections. But turnout at election time is not the only measure of political participation; other traditional channels of political engagement have been steadily declining. On current levels (with combined party membership at most around 450,000) there is just one party member for every 100 electors (it is estimated that in 1964, one in every 12 people held membership of a political party)[22]. Alongside this has been a decline in the number of active party members[23]. This is a problem not just for parties but for wider engagement and participation. Membership of a political party has long been the primary means of engaging and participating in formal politics away from the ballot box. Political parties themselves are the crucial link between civil society and representative government and declining membership and activism makes it increasingly difficult to reach people and engage them in politics.

It is highly unlikely that we will ever see a return to traditional mass party membership. The changing relationship between people and politics has forged new forms of political participation. Class dealignment, technological developments and an increasingly consumerist relationship to politics has led to the growth of single-issue campaigns and individualistic modes of participation. But within this are new opportunities to engage and encourage participation. Many recent academic studies[24] have suggested that rather than turning away from politics, citizens are choosing to express their views through informal channels. Whilst party membership and participation in elections are in decline, academics have pointed to a rise in more direct 'do-it-yourself' forms of democracy such as petitioning, protesting, boycotting and contacting political representatives. We have also seen the rise of groups such as Avaaz and 38 Degrees that are involving citizens in new modes of engagement and a rise in interest in deliberative forums such as citizen assemblies and conventions.

Whilst political participation is in decline, involvement in associational activity has remained fairly constant. Democratic Audit[25] find that in 2012, 'most forms of non-electoral and non-party political participation are stable, if not increasing' with civic activism levels remaining stable and a sustained growth in the number of

21. Hansard Society (2012), Audit of Political Engagement 9, The 2012 Report: Part One www.hansardsociety.org.uk

22. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit. www.democraticaudit.com

23. ibid

24. Pattie, C., Seyd, P., Whiteley, P., (2004), Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Norris, P., (2002) Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism. New York: Cambridge University Press

25. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit. www.democraticaudit.com

charities. Naturally economic pressures are likely to affect this growth and the Hansard Society Audit finds some suggestion of a decline in voluntary activity with the proportion of people undertaking voluntary work dropping from 29 per cent in 2010 to 21 per cent last year.

Whilst not directly influencing formal political processes, these types of activities have been considered (since Putnam[26]) to be fundamental to a healthy democracy, forging the trust and cooperation that builds social capital. Whilst the UK can be fairly confident that, in contrast to Putnam's studies in the US, there has not been a corresponding decline in civic activities alongside the decline in formal political participation, the rise of individualistic modes of participation should be noted. Pressure groups and single issue campaigns are not experiencing the same fall in membership as political parties (with over a million members, the RSPB alone has twice the total memberships of all three major political parties). But whilst, at least at one stage, political parties provided opportunities for deliberative discussion about policy, the same cannot be said for all mass membership campaigning organisations. Single-issue campaigns have no need to balance competing demands and it has been argued[27] that they contribute to declining faith in politics as by increasing demands of government to build support amongst supporters, they contribute to the perception that politics persistently fails to deliver. Individualist political activity, divorced from the collectivist and communitarian nature of political party activity, are at odds with the ambition of preserving a common civic life, where individual interests are balanced against the common good. We must not forget about the crucial role of collective political activity.

Trust in government has declined alongside formal participation. The Standard Eurobarometer survey 2012 found only just over a fifth (21 per cent) of those aged 15 and over in the UK 'tended to trust' the government[28]. Looking further back, the NatCen British Social Attitudes survey[29] shows the percentage of people who claim to 'almost never' trust the government rose from 11 per cent in 1986 to 31 per cent in 2011. Trust and participation are inextricably linked. Whilst we are seeing a positive increase in new ways of participating, these alternative modes of political activity could also be indicative of a declining faith in representative democracy's ability to deliver, increasing citizens' desire to take a more direct and seemingly more effective approach.

Whilst political reforms have mostly focused on reforming representative democracy, in response to the growth in new forms of participation and expectations of democracy most representative democracies have introduced formal mechanisms for direct democratic participation. As a result, modes of direct participation from tenants' bodies to school boards are widespread and continue to contribute to a healthy civic life. Yet, the ballot box is the primary means of engaging and participating in representative democracy, and the primary means of influencing and holding decision-makers to account. Attention must be given to who participates and how this power is spread through society.

Equality in participation

Political equality, how greatly it is realised in the exercise of popular control, is fundamental to democracy. Democratic Audit cite political equality as one of two core principles on which their audit is based. Unfortunately at the same time as we are seeing a decline in participation, we are also witnessing a growing imbalance in who participates. The latest Hansard Audit finds that the majority of political activities (formal and informal) are undertaken by those in social grade AB followed by C1s and 'considerably less common' amongst C2s and DEs. The Audit finds

26. Putnam, R. D, (2000) Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York: Simon & Schuster.

27. Stoker, G,. (2006) Why Politics Matters, Basigstoke:Palgrave Macmillan. Grand, W., (2008), 'Changing Patterns of Group Politics in Britain', British Politics, Vol 3.

28. Office of National Statistics, (2012), Measuring National Well-being - Governance, www.ons.gov.uk/ons/cp171766_285148.pdf

29. NatCen (2012), British Social Attitudes 29th Report. www.natcen.ac.uk/study/british-social-attitudes-29th-report

that respondents saying that they voted in the last election were 70 per cent ABs, 59 per cent C1s and 47 per cent C2DEs. A similar pattern emerges for those who said they had discussed politics or political news with someone else (55per cent ABs, 43 per cent C1s, and 24 per cent C2DEs)[30].

Clearly the UK is a long way from political equality. This is a trend that is likely to be self-perpetuating as those whose voices are not heard develop an expectation of non-participation and do not develop the habit of exercising their political rights. This is particularly an issue for younger citizens. The number of 18-25 year olds turning out to vote has been declining since 1979 but in recent years has seen a more distinct drop. Turnout amongst 18-25 years olds fell from 59.7 per cent in 1997 to 49.4 per cent in 2001 - the year general turnout reached its lowest level. But unlike overall turnout, did not bounce back in 2005, dropping again to 37 per cent. In 2010 the number of 18-25 year olds turning out to vote rose slightly to 44 per cent, most likely influenced by the closeness of the contest.

Studies have suggested this is a generational shift representing a long term and fixed trend away from formal political engagement. However, it is also reflective of the political and social period in which young people come into contact with politics. Far from being a problem for today's younger citizens, this decline in participation can be seen as representing a shift in attitudes and behaviours in the population at large. Whether we are witnessing a generational or life-cycle trend in participation, some findings give cause for optimism. In the recent Fabian Society survey of non-voters[31], asked why they didn't vote, 18 per cent of respondents simply said they didn't know. This rises to 42 per cent amongst non-voters aged 18-24. For this age group it seems they have not yet been given a reason to vote but likewise are not yet convinced of reasons not to.

30. Hansard Society (2012), Audit of Political Engagement 9, The 2012 Report: Part One

31. Fabian Society (2012), Fabian Review, vol. 124, no. 3, Another Planet.

32. Judge, D., (2004), 'Whatever Happened to Parliamentary Democracy in the United Kingdom', Parliamentary affairs, Vol. 57, No. 3, p.697.

Improving participation and engagement

It appears that for many citizens, political indifference is cementing into disillusionment. Politics is simply not connecting for a great number of people and this poses a direct threat to the legitimacy of our political system. As David Judge writes, 'the foundations of authorisation upon which governments claim legitimacy are becoming exposed to and corroded by a vacuum of public disinterest'[32].The political world must decide whether it wants an active and engaged citizenry or passive and largely inactive consumer-citizens. Political participation has changed and we need to build new forms of genuine engagement and participation into our democratic structures to meet modern expectations. Alongside this, there needs to be recognition of the widespread support for the principles of representative democracy. The authority of which can only be restored by reforming the culture and operation of it in practice. Participation is not one-size-fits-all and therefore a wide ranging approach is needed to ensure equality of participation across our democracy. The challenge to the political world is to deliver a new culture of politics, one that matches expectations of representation and delivers a diversity of participants and views.

New opportunities for deliberative democracy

Citizen Assemblies

A citizen convention is one way of considering constitutional issues and other political reforms, examining them in the round, rather than on a piecemeal basis. As political parties have reached a stalemate on major constitutional issues, some

ERS Scotland

Democracy Max

ERS Scotland last year launched a programme to involve Scottish citizens in a conversation about what makes good democracy. The programme is helping to bring citizens into the debate about their future outside of the party political discussions and in doing so giving them a voice in the proceedings.

The Scottish independence referendum debate gives us an opportunity to challenge our political system to change, to confound the low expectations voters have of politics and to deliver on the high hopes they still hold for democracy in Scotland. Much of the current debate around Scotland's constitutional future is led by political parties. ERS Scotland has created a non-partisan space where those with different views can debate and discuss ideas and where political rhetoric can be challenged and unpicked.

To begin the inquiry, ERS Scotland organised a 'People's Gathering' which brought together over 80 delegates from across Scotland with support from the Institute of Governance at Edinburgh University. Delegates gathered in Edinburgh to engage in some radical thinking about Scotland's democracy to answer the question, 'What makes a good Scottish democracy'. They were grouped around tables with up to eight delegates per table and two facilitators. In the morning session they discussed their ideas for Scotland's democratic future and in the afternoon thought about how this might be achieved, or what prevented it from happening.

The ideas that came out of the People's Gathering now form the basis of a sequence of roundtable discussions, which will be distilled into 'a vision of a good Scottish democracy', a vision that is informed by the people whom democracy should serve. Academics, experts, commentators and opinion formers, community activists, campaigners, writers and representatives of Scottish civic society have been invited to a series of roundtable sessions in three phases. The roundtables will consider the following three themes:

Sovereignty of the People
How do we return more power to the people?
Defending our democracy
How do we stop vested interests having too much influence?
How do we write the rules
How do we get the checks and balances our democracy needs?

Democracy Max demonstrates the public desire and appetite for engaging in wider issues about the functioning of our democracy and how this can be harnessed to add richness to an ordinarily partisan debate. With suggestions of further constitutional change on the horizon following the referendum, Democracy Max provides a blueprint for engaging citizens throughout the rest of the union in a debate about their democratic future.

www.electoral-reform.org.uk/democracy-max

form of public deliberation may be the only way to move forward with reform. Citizen conventions or juries also take politics outside of oppositional campaigning and force participants to reason with each other and find agreement. Robert Hazell argues that these benefits extend to affording legitimacy to the outcomes, "the benefit of mechanisms such as citizens' juries is that the citizens with competing visions are forced to reason with each other. This confronts citizens with some of the difficult choices generally left to politicians, and ensure that the outcome – even if this is that no agreement can be reached – has greater legitimacy"[33].

33. Hazell, R., (2007) Constitution Unit response to Cm 7170: The Governance of Britain, July 2007.

The forthcoming referendum on Scottish Independence, whatever the outcome, will have significant implications for the rest of the union. Whether Scotland votes 'Yes' or 'No' in the referendum, a conversation has already started about whether the current constitutional settlement is sufficient, and what future powers could or should be devolved. What one part of the Union decides cannot but have implications for the rest of the state. A constitutional convention presents an opportunity to bring that debate to the rest of the UK.

Successful conventions on constitutional issues have been held in Scotland (1989), British Columbia (2004), Wales (2007), and Iceland (2010). The UK could consider a similar model. An assembly of 200-220 members chosen by semi-random selection with gender parity, age and regional representation built in and based on European electoral areas could provide such a model. As well as representation on the assembly, the convention would need to provide opportunities for the rest of the public to engage in the process.

A clear and specific remit would be needed to achieve a defined outcome and for the convention to gain public support and engagement it would need to be clear about how its conclusions would be taken forward. Whilst any deliberative exercise could provide valuable insight into public opinion on a wide set of democratic problems, a genuine convention would need to make a direct link between the decisions made by the assembly and how they would be enacted (whether through confirmatory referendum or a vote in parliament). Whilst the specific terms of reference should be determined by the convention participants, a wide ranging constitutional convention could cover issues such as the distribution of power between each devolved government and the UK Parliament, representation at Westminster for citizens under devolved governments (both in the upper and lower house) and regional and local representation.

Improving representative democracy: Culture change and a 'New Politics'

Repeatedly we hear that the confrontational politics of Prime Minister's question time is a major turn off for the public. Voters and non-voters alike would like to see a more collaborative and consensual politics, where politicians work together in the interests of the country. The culture of representational politics at Westminster creates an atmosphere of adversarialism and conflict that does nothing to inspire public confidence. This also raises the question of whether it is realistic to expect political parties to balance a more cooperative approach in Parliament with the need to assert difference in order to win elections. Clearly this model works in many other parts of the world, so could it be embraced at home?

The Scottish Parliament was founded with the aim of ushering in a 'new politics', based

on greater cooperation between government, Parliament, civil society and citizens. The process of establishing the Parliament itself was an example of how the new politics of collaborative decision-making could work. The design for devolution came out of the Scottish Constitutional Convention which brought together members of Scottish civic society, political parties, local authorities, church leaders and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. The convention was formed at grassroots level, in opposition to government policy and under pressure to prove that the Scottish Parliament would be different (not another layer of bureaucracy). This atmosphere ensured a focus on creating a Parliament that would foster better politics and policy-making. However, many observers now feel that the Scottish Parliament has failed to meet the ideals envisaged for it and is being drawn back into the Westminster style politics that it set out to avoid. As James Mitchell writes, 'the devolved institutions exhibit the pull of their genealogical roots'[34]; the UK cultural norms of how to 'do politics' preventing evolution of a more consensual model.

The structure for a new politics is evident in the design of the Scottish Parliament with a more proportional electoral system and inbuilt Parliamentary processes to directly involve citizens including a petitions system and the Scottish Civic Forum. Yet whilst these mechanisms have provided new opportunities for public involvement, they have been limited by the resources allocated to them and attitudes towards them[35] the creep of Westminster political culture is evident.

Without changing the voting system, the culture of politics at Westminster is unlikely to change. The pressures created by the First Past the Post electoral system force parties to target key messages at an increasingly small number of voters and by focusing on negative campaigns not only drive down trust in opponents and therefore politics at large, but also disguise the very essence of politics - the practice of compromise and negotiation.

Structural change will facilitate but must also be accompanied by cultural change. Politics and its practitioners must address the consumer culture that increasingly expects politicians to 'deliver'; demoting politicians to the role of market trader, hawking their wares to the political consumer. The language of politics should not mirror that of the market but instead create a more honest and open dialogue with citizens whereby constraints and alternatives are more candidly communicated. Learning from the elements of democratic design built into the devolved Parliaments could help bring Westminster politics into the modern age and facilitate a better quality of dialogue with citizens.

Future participation: Votes at 16

In 2014, 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland will be able to vote for the first time in a referendum on the future of the Union. The following year these same voters will be denied a voice in electing their MP. The extension of the franchise in Scotland creates an urgent need to consider votes at 16 for elections UK wide.

Turnout inequality is a problem across our democracy but persistently lower levels of turnout amongst younger citizens is creating an increasingly worrying political inequality. It is not hard to see how a lack of political voice means policy is rarely shaped with sustainability for future citizens at its heart and this has been borne out in practice. In climate change debates for instance, the immediate cost to the taxpayer often outweighs consideration of the financial, personal and environmental costs to future generations. Even the arguments for

34. Mitchell, J., (2010) 'The Westminster Model and the State of Unions', Parliamentary Affairs, Vol. 63, 1, 85-88

35. Cairney, P., (2011) The Scottish Political System Since Devolution: From New Politics to the New Scottish Government, Exeter: Imprint Academic.

increasing student fees were presented from the perspective of the older taxpayer instead of those affected in the very near future.

Low voter registration levels are particularly prevalent amongst younger citizens. 18-24 year olds, especially students and private renters, are much less likely to be registered than older voters and the transition to Individual Voter Registration next year may exacerbate these inequalities. Reaching young people whilst they are still living with their parents is an opportunity to improve registration rates for this age group. Currently in Northern Ireland, young people are registered by their school. Innovations in registering younger voters should also be considered for the rest of the UK.

This new generation of voters are the first who have needed to study our democracy, our electoral system and the importance of voting. Yet they are denied the right to use this knowledge for at least two further years – possibly seven years depending on the electoral cycle. Lowering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice.

Turnout is a symptom of the failing health of our democracy, not the problem itself, and a potential drop in turnout should not be used as an excuse for not tackling political engagement for the next generation. Whilst there is no 'silver bullet' for improving citizen participation in formal politics and no singular cause, the way young people come into contact with politics in their formative years is crucially important for the future of representative democracy. If we get young people registered early and into the habit of voting, we will not only see lasting improvements in turnout, but a lasting improvement in the health of our democracy.


POLLING
STATION

Democratic representation

36. Fabian Society (2012), Fabian Review, vol. 124, no. 3, Another Planet.

37. Inter-Parliamentary Union, women in national parliaments. www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

The central pillar of a good representative democracy is equality of access to free and fair elections. Within this core principle, modern democracies take representation to embody the idea that those that are elected should also reflect the citizen body they represent. Today politics is failing in this regard more than ever. A failure of representation in the context of declining participation, engagement and trust raises the question of how long the current system of representative democracy can continue to command public support.

Increasingly professionalised and seemingly exclusive, politics today feels to most people like alien territory. The distancing of politics creates an 'us' and 'them' situation which fuels anti-politics culture. This is despite MPs spending a greater proportion of time on constituency issues than ever before. It is also clear that today's democracy does not provide free and fair elections with equality of access. The electoral system regularly fails to represent citizens' views and choices. Alongside these failures of representation, we find the Westminster model no longer fits; it has become a steam-age relic in a modern post-devolution world, where new systems of representative democracy have been introduced.

The UK's representative democracy is not a place where everyone has equal access or an equal stake in the future. How well politics represents those it serves can, and should, be made better.

The problems: Representatives

In recent years we have seen a substantial narrowing in the range of people elected to serve and alongside this, the growth of a professionalised political culture. The term 'political class' is frequently used to denote a separate section of society earmarked for the political world. Indeed for many people, politics does feel like a different planet, as evidenced in the recent Fabian Society survey of non-voters. The results suggest that voters and non-voters alike feel unrepresented. 31 per cent of respondents agreed with the criticism that, "Politics is a game played by an out of touch elite who live on another planet – politics isn't made up of people like me"; 34 per cent of respondents felt that, "Most MPs have too little experience of the real world before they go into politics"; 19 per cent of respondents thought that if political parties, "looked more like the society they are supposed to represent: more working class, more women, more ethnic minority MPs" they might seem more relevant to their lives[36].

Alongside declining party membership, the apparent exclusivity of the political sphere means many people would never consider or know how to take that path into politics. Whilst strides have been made in the last decade, the UK Parliament remains highly unrepresentative.

Women make up only 22 per cent of MPs, 22 per cent of Peers and 17 per cent of the current Cabinet and Britain continues to drop down the global league table for women in the legislature, currently sitting in joint 57th place[37]. Similarly minority ethnic communities are not represented in public life at the levels found in the population. Whilst the number of black and minority ethnic members of the House of Lords has doubled and the proportion of civil servants from BME backgrounds has risen significantly over the last decade, local government remains disproportionately white and shows little sign of progress. At all levels of government, change is occurring at a glacial pace and as a result, politics is failing to reflect our society.

Where progress has occurred, particularly for women's representation, it has been down to positive action by political parties. Increases in

the number of women in political life have been facilitated by the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 which has enabled parties to take positive action. Increases in the electoral success of women in devolved governments in 2003, whilst facilitated by opening up new institutions unconstrained by incumbency or the cultural practices of Westminster, was driven largely by positive action measures adopted by the Labour party. The electoral shift away from Labour after 2003 and the disinclination of other parties to adopt similar measures resulted in a decline in women MSPs and AMs[38].

A new regressive trend is being seen in the class backgrounds of representatives with those who access positions of power coming from an increasingly narrow pool. Of the 2010 intake of MPs, over a third of MPs (35%) attended a fee paying school (with twenty MPs educated at the same fee-paying school) and over three quarters of MPs are university graduates (with a quarter of MPs graduating from the same two universities). In 1979 around 16 per cent of MPs were formerly manual workers; in the 2010 intake just 4 per cent of MPs were. For more than half (56%) of the 2010 intake the MP's salary represents a decrease on their wage with almost one third (31%) taking a pay cut of £30,000 p.a. or more[39] (the average full-time salary in the UK was £26,100 in 2011)[40].

Alongside a narrowing of class, the number of MPs from political backgrounds is increasing. 14 per cent of those elected in 2010 came from occupations within politics, be it as politicians or political organisers. In 1979, only 3 per cent of MPs had a political role prior to being elected to Parliament[41]. This is not just an issue for Parliament. Democratic Audit find that local councillors are increasingly drawn from the professional and managerial classes. They report that 70 per cent of councillors in 2010 came from professional or executive occupations, up from 60 per cent in 1997. Those from manual occupations dropped from 13.6 per cent to less than 10 per cent during this period[42].

Part of the problem lies in the selection and election process which for many is prohibitively expensive, unmanageable alongside other responsibilities and mysterious to those outside the political world. Parties themselves can exacerbate the problem with the distribution of safe seats and promotion of favoured internal candidates. Research on seat distribution in 2010 finds that only Labour disproportionately distributed women candidates in held seats (30% compared to 19% for the Liberal Democrats and 15% for the Conservatives)[43]. The Conservatives placed most women candidates in unwinnable seats. The result - Labour fielded 30 per cent women candidates and returned 31 per cent women Labour MPs[44].

Barriers to selection and election can be cultural as well as structural. The Equality and Human Rights Commission report *Pathways to Politics*[45] published in 2011 identifies a number of factors influencing the diversity of our political institutions. The report defines these as prevent factors (barriers such as discriminatory practices), push factors (such as exposure to politics, family background, education and previous political involvement) and pull factors (the actions of political parties and political institutions in attracting and supporting diversity). Three critical prevent factors identified were financial and personal costs, with those in underrepresented groups also disproportionately in lower income groups; the influence of a perceived 'ideal' candidate - male, white, middle aged, middle class and professional (mirroring the characteristics of former successful candidates and often of those involved in the selection); and internal party practices. Pull factors identified within political parties included recruitment of a more diverse membership, mentoring and peer networks, All Women Shortlists and opening up selection processes. Within political institutions

38. Hansard Society (2011) Women at the Top: Politics and Public Life in the UK, briefing, updated 11 Jan 2012.

39. Hansard Society (2011), 'A year in the life: from member of public to Member of Parliament' Interim briefing paper

40. ONS 2011 Annual survey of hours and earnings (based on SOC 2010)

41. House of Commons library (2010), 'Social background of MPs'

42. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit.

43. R. Campbell & S. Childs, (2010) ''Wags', 'Wives' and 'Mothers'.....But What About Women Politicians?' in A. Geddes & J. Tonge (Eds) (2010), Britain Votes 2010, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.186.

44. ibid

45. Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K., and Eason, C., (2011) Pathways to Politics, Equality and Human Rights Commission research report 65.

the report highlights the problems of adversarial politics and the lack of family friendly culture at Westminster. It also highlights the beneficial effects of the new more consensual politics embraced by the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, London Assembly and present in the practices of the European Parliament.

The EHRC report also highlights the professionalization of politics as older pathways into politics (political activism, trade unionism and local politics) give way to new pathways followed by those with a university education, work experience in politics and a particular skill set linked to professional experience (such as debate and advocacy from law). Younger candidates are more likely to come into politics via this new professional pathway and the report notes that examination of the intake of MPs suggests a university education and professional experience in politics, 'have become the defining features of the modern politician'. The report also suggests that this new dynamic in who comes to power is potentially even more exclusive than previous political routes.

Coupled with declining numbers of people attending and getting involved in party politics, these barriers contribute to an increasingly narrow pool of candidates from which representatives are selected and elected. The situation cannot be said to constitute free and fair access with power increasingly concentrated in the hands of an unrepresentative minority. Diversity of representation is essential for the legitimacy of our democratic institutions as well as for the quality of the decisions they make. We need only look to the diversity of the boardrooms in the banking sector to find evidence of the problems of group-think. Representative democracy needs to reflect the communities it serves, only then will it be able to address the disconnection.

Electoral representation

The importance of elections to the functioning of representative democracy means that any assessment of its health must include consideration of the openness, fairness and equality of its elections. Unfortunately here we find a failure of representation in the inability of the system to reflect electoral choice. The operation of the electoral system for the House of Commons has become increasingly dysfunctional when measured by its own standards. A significant drop in electoral support for the two main parties, the growth in support for smaller parties, a decrease in the number of Conservative-Labour marginals in favour of safe seats and the increasing bias in the relationship of seats to votes suggests the conditions required for first-past-the-post to function properly no longer exist in the UK.

These trends, which affect the operation of First Past the Post, mean our democracy is increasingly failing to represent voter choice. The results of UK general elections have become increasingly disproportional in the translation of votes to seats and produce majorities far in excess of votes received. The system has prevented voter preferences for a wider range of political parties being realised and distributed power unevenly. As the number of marginal seats diminishes and those few marginal seats become the battleground for elections, voters in these constituencies exert a much greater influence on election outcomes.

Political inequality is also increasingly evident in voter registration. Ensuring every qualified voter is able to cast their vote is a crucial element of the electoral system but the UK's electoral registers have failed to keep pace with the growth in eligible electors. Inequality is compounded by the uneven distribution of under-registration across different groups in society.

A report by the Electoral Commission[46] found that the completeness of the electoral register has declined since the late 1990s. In April 2011, registration in Great Britain stood at 82.3 per cent complete. This is equal to approximately 8.5 million people not registered. From this, the Electoral Commission calculates that the December 2010 register was 85-87 per cent complete – missing approximately 6 million people (an increase from approximately 3.9 million in December 2000). Registration levels are particularly low for young people and tenants in privately rented properties. Registration for people aged 19-24 is just 56 per cent, whilst for the 25-34 age group only 72 per cent. Private-rented sector registration is just 56 per cent, (completeness of registration for those living in mortgaged properties is 87 per cent). The research also shows lower registration rates for BME communities – 77 per cent completeness compared to 86 per cent for white registration levels.

In one additional and substantial regard, the UK is failing to be democratically representative. No assessment of the health of the UK's democracy can fail to note the presence of a wholly unelected upper chamber; one of only two unelected upper houses amongst advanced democracies. The presence of an unelected House of Lords, despite attempts at reform, continues to challenge the democratic integrity of the UK.

Reflecting identity & community in representation

One group that has more recently suffered from a lack of representation in the framework of the UK's democracy is the English. Devolution in Scotland and Wales alongside the increasing centralisation of the English state has created a power imbalance in the UK's political system which has brought with it an increasing concern for representation of an English cultural identity. Recent research[47] finds an increasing concern for England's position in the union amongst voters. 59% of English voters say they do not trust the UK government to work in the best long-term interests of England. This change in views on how England should be governed is underpinned by an increasingly English national identity. The research finds that 40% of people prioritise their 'English' identity over their 'British' identity.

There is no simple solution to the English question, but whilst asymmetrical decentralisation within the union persists, the UK's democracy is plagued by constitutional instability. This not only affects England, the asymmetric progress of devolution has created variations in the extent to which power has been devolved with fundamentally different settlements in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The tensions created by the progress of devolution can only be resolved by looking again at how power is distributed within the Union and asking citizens what they want for the future of the UK.

The UK's representative democracy is failing on a number of fronts. Above all, widening inequalities in who holds the power to elect and who has access to stand for election are undermining the principle of electoral equality. Asymmetric devolution has created unequal balance of representation within the Union but most worryingly, across the UK, power within the political process is increasingly residing with elites instead of the electorate.

46. The Electoral Commission, Great Britain's electoral registers 2011, (2011)

47. YouGov 'Future of England' survey undertaken for IPPR July-Aug 2011. Details in 'The dog that finally barked: England as an emerging political community', IPPR, (2012).

Improving democratic representation

Improving the representativeness of our representative institutions is crucial to rebuilding the link between people and politics.

The more that our institutions are seen as out of touch the more politics is seen as irrelevant. Politics needs to be 'by the people' as well as for them and this means clearing the pathway to politics to ensure equality of access. Widespread inequalities in who stands as well as who gets elected can only be addressed by looking at the structural and cultural barriers inherent in our

Clearing the pathways to politics

The Electoral Reform Society held a roundtable on diversity in political representation in September last year bringing together MPs, candidates and potential candidates, trade union representatives and party officials to discuss the problems for candidates coming forward for selection. Four key barriers were identified:

The cost of selection.

Candidates noted the numerous financial commitments required to stand for a seat. Even if a candidate is already living in the constituency, selection can require many personally funded items such as printing and postage for leaflets and calling cards, petrol or additional travel costs, phone charges, paying for a website, new clothes for interviews and loss of wages for time taken off work. These costs are likely to be off-putting, particularly for anyone on a lower income.

Knowledge gap – how to get involved, how the process works.

The opaqueness of the selection process was highlighted as a factor contributing to the professionalization of politics. Those working in political jobs or regularly involved in party procedure have insider knowledge and therefore greater access.

The 'archetypal' candidate and party culture

Party culture plays an important role in creating the right conditions for candidates to come forward. It was widely felt that local parties are not always the most welcoming of newcomers. The problem of the image of the 'ideal' candidate means that candidates who are different from the norm struggle in selections as local party members believe their electoral chances will be maximised with the archetypal candidate.

Ability to take time off work or caring responsibilities.

The time commitments required for 'nursing' a seat are substantial and for candidates not working in political or flexible careers (which allow time off for political activity) the commitment may be too great or financially unmanageable.

The roundtable concluded that a number of practical measures could be taken to open up party processes and ensure all candidates have equal access to the process in practice. Addressing party practices such as placing favoured candidates in safe seats and reviewing candidate access to late selections and by-elections would help. The roundtable also felt it was essential to open up new pathways to politics. Encouraging those active in their communities in non-political roles and giving time off work for public duties would support candidates from a more diverse range of backgrounds.

political institutions and party political practices. Likewise we need to address inequalities in who can vote as well as addressing the deep institutional biases preventing those votes having equal value.

Addressing underrepresentation

Political parties are central to making positive change in our institutions. They must ensure their systems and structures help rather than hinder people interested in politics. The three main parties now all engage in equality promotion but not all in equality guarantees. Political parties need to take action to increase the number of women candidates at all levels of election and ensure there are as many women candidates from a wide variety of backgrounds in winnable seats in 2015 including considering positive action measures for selection processes.

Removing the practical barriers to selection for all candidates is an essential future task for political parties. Given the widespread decline in membership, without expanding the way they recruit and select candidates, parties will be choosing from an ever narrowing pool, damaging their relationship to the wider public and exacerbating the inequalities in our representative institutions.

Alongside practical measures both our institutions and parties need to look at cultural barriers. It is now three years since the publication of the final report of the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation[48]. The report, which received cross-party support, outlined 71 conclusions and recommendations for improving representation at Westminster many of which addressed cultural barriers to greater diversity in Parliament. Most of these recommendations have yet to be implemented. It is essential that these recommendations are revisited and acted upon. Further changes as highlighted in the Pathways to Politics[49] report should also be considered.

The EHRC report also noted the positive benefits of structural change and the opportunities presented by changing the electoral system. The FPTP electoral system in Westminster and for local elections in England and Wales remains a major barrier to securing better democratic representation.

Ensuring every voice counts equally

Improving the operation and outcomes of elections at all levels is essential to move the UK closer to an acceptable picture of democratic representation. Trends affecting the operation of FPTP mean our democracy is ever increasingly undermining voter choice. The results of UK General Elections have become increasingly disproportional and further from the principle of equality of votes. It is clear that representational equality cannot be achieved without changes to our outdated voting system. Within our system there are other inequalities that should be addressed:

Improving voter registration

Inequalities in voter registration (and therefore in who can vote) seriously undermine the principle of democratic representation. Depleted electoral registers are a concern especially given the unequal distribution of registration. There is ample evidence to show that under-representation is concentrated among young people, tenants in private rented

48. House of Commons, (2010), Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Final Report, HC 239-I

49. Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K., and Eason, C., (2011) Pathways to Politics, Equality and Human Rights Commission research report 65.

accommodation, certain BME groups and Commonwealth and EU citizens as well as evidence of growing local and regional variations. Getting the basics right is essential but there is much more that can be done to encourage voter registration.

Fair electoral boundaries

Ensuring fairness in constituency boundaries means reducing electoral bias where possible, ensuring every elector has an equal vote and promoting equality of representation. Not all of these are achievable under our current political system and care needs to be taken to ensure that reform does not create new biases in the system.

Electoral bias derives from different effects: unequal electoral size, turnout rates, the impact of smaller parties and vote distribution. Academics maintain that most bias in the system stems from differences in vote distribution (not differences in electoral size). The geography of party vote (how they are distributed across different constituencies) is central to the bias in the system. Vote distribution is affected by

50. Poll carried out for the Electoral Reform Society by YouGov from 4-6 March 2012 [sample 2776 GB adults aged 18+]

51. ibid

52. Rigby, E., Springer, M. J., (2011) 'Does Electoral Reform Increase (or Decrease) Political Equality', Political Research Quarterly, 64 (2).

A registration revolution

Application for Registration

Individual electoral registration makes it possible to integrate registration into other day-to-day transactions with the government. This is common in the United States where citizens can register at their county or government registration office, their motor vehicle agency and at universities, schools and hospitals. To increase registration in the UK, the government should consider providing registration forms at government offices and Post Offices, and electors should be reminded to register to vote in official transactions such as when applying for a passport, driver's licence, social security and registering for council tax. A poll carried out for the Electoral Reform Society[50] found that 38% of respondents said they would be more likely to register to vote if they could register when paying council tax, or applying for car tax.

Online registration

Online registration is a cost effective way of increasing participation and is used in the US and New Zealand. Since 2002 New Zealand has also allowed voters to text a free number to request a registration form. In the six months leading up to the 2008 election 37% of new registrants initially ordered their form by text. The ERS poll[51] found that 52% of respondents said they would be more likely to register to vote if they could do it online.

Election Day Registration

Election Day Registration would allow voters to turn up at the polling station, register and vote all in one go. With the introduction of individual electoral registration with personal identifiers, the potential for fraud is reduced. Election Day Registration is an innovation that is increasingly being used in the US, and there is considerable evidence to show that it increases registration and turnout rates significantly. Groups with lower registration rates see the largest gains through Election Day Registration, especially among those who have recently moved address. Academic analysis of the equality impacts of voter registration reforms in the US found that same-day registration had a significant impact on equality in political participation[52].

voter behaviour and party campaigning activity (mobilising supporters). Neither can be legislated for nor easily manipulated.

The equality of votes in the UK's First Past the Post system depends much more upon factors other than constituency size, primarily turnout and marginality. Disproportional voter power cannot be cured by boundary changes without a proportional system of representation. The increased dysfunctionality of FPTP (greater support for smaller parties not reflected in seats, growth in safe seats as support concentrates geographically) means without a change of electoral system, equality of voting power cannot be achieved.

Representational equality is most affected by basing electoral boundaries on the electoral register. Inequalities in the electoral register currently pose a threat to equality in our democracy by providing the basis on which electoral boundaries are drawn. Constituents seek representation both in the legislature and in contact with MPs on individual issues regardless of whether they are registered or eligible to vote (foreign nationals, children and prisoners are all entitled to this representation as indeed are those who are eligible to vote but not registered). Amongst major democracies with single-member constituencies, population is the basis of electoral districts in the United States, Canada, India and France. Only the UK and Australia use registered voters (in Australia registration is compulsory and much higher). In equalising constituencies, population derived from the census would be a fairer measure on which to draw electoral boundaries.

Power & governance

The UK's system, practice and culture of representative democracy is failing to deliver on participation, engagement or representation. Growing divides in our society are reflected in our politics with increasing political inequality in terms of who participates and who represents. Changes to the democratic landscape have exacerbated these inequalities and undermined the democratic principle of equal votes in elections. These developments call into question the distribution of power within our democracy; who holds and exercises power, who has access to power and how close power comes to citizens.

There is a crisis of confidence in our institutions, the parliamentary expenses scandal, banking crisis and revelations of press intrusion and insider collaboration have damaged the relationship between public institutions and the people they serve. With our system of democratic representation in decline, a failing faith in the power of institutions to deliver for people in an era of economic instability and globalisation has created a sense of powerlessness and fatalism. In short, a crisis of faith in the institutions that should bind us together.

This imbalance throughout society (in institutions both public and private) cannot be divorced from the form and culture of our politics. Two major trends have emerged over the last two decades; an increase in the individualistic, consumerist style of political engagement and a centralised, delivery-focused approach to governance. These trends can be seen as two sides of the same coin; as governments have adopted a market-based approach to delivering services so too citizens have adopted a customer-orientated relationship to the state and politics.

Neither of these approaches can realistically succeed. Good democracy simply does not function like the free-market. Yet this dynamic has shaped how political parties campaign, how policies are formed and increasingly excluded people from political decision-making, stripping power from people and their communities.

The problems: Accountability and transparency

Abuses of power are damaging to democracy, eating away at the relationship between the citizen and representative. And because this bond is formed on trust, it doesn't need to be proven abuse; merely the perception of it damages this relationship. It follows that a functioning democracy needs to put measures in place to prevent the abuse of power and keep democracy free from the undue influence of sectional interests. Openness and transparency are crucial. Unfortunately reforms to restore faith in our institutions, increasing transparency and oversight, have not always succeeded. The increase in independent bodies set up to oversee political processes and reforms to open up access to official documents have, if anything, increased the public's perception of wrongdoing. Of course perception is different from experience of malpractice but nevertheless contributes to eroding faith in the system.

Faith in our political system is undoubtedly in decline but distrust of politicians is not a new phenomenon. Indeed the Hansard Society Audit in 2010[53] showed that the expenses crisis had done little to change the public's level of trust in politicians, mainly because it was already extremely low (in 2004, 70% of people said they trust politicians either 'not very much' or 'not at all', in 2010 this figure was 73%). However, last year's Audit reveals a decline in measures of engagement, many of which had remained reasonably stable until now. This could suggest

53. Hansard Society (2010), Audit of Political Engagement 7: The 2010 Report.

that current global economic issues facing the country have left people feeling powerless and overwhelmed. It is possible that people don't feel that their democratic voice is strong enough to meet these challenges.

It is not only politics that suffers from a lack of public trust. Perceptions of corruption are fairly widespread across a number of public bodies including the civil service, business and media[54]. According to the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the proportion of the public who regard standards of conduct in public life as either 'very high' or 'quite high' declined from 46 per cent in 2004 to 33 per cent in 2010[55].

The media's role in our democracy, exposing issues and holding those in power to account, can also contribute to the erosion of trust in public institutions. The second part of the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement 2012[56], finds that 'the coverage of politics in all media, but the tabloid media in particular, contributes to a sense of fatalism among citizens about their capacity to influence the political process'. The Audit finds that most people do not believe the media fulfils its role in adequately conveying information to their readers nor in holding the government and politicians to account. The majority of citizens believe reporting in tabloid and other newspapers to be unduly negative with two-thirds of the public identifying tabloid newspapers as negative in their coverage of politics and politicians. The Hansard Society research demonstrates a strong link between political engagement and media consumption and raises concerns about the media's role in contributing to our democracy. They conclude that, 'The media – particularly the print press and specifically tabloids – do not appear to greatly benefit our democracy from the perspective of nourishing political engagement. Indeed, in this respect, the press, particularly the tabloids, appear not to be living up to the importance of their role in our democracy'.

The growing divide between politics and the public, exacerbated by recent scandals and perceptions of corruption, coupled with pervasive negativity in the print media, fuels an 'us' and 'them' relationship which is corroding political participation. Disappointingly, the perception that politics is not something for the ordinary person is, in some areas, corroborated by the reality that political access is not equally shared. When it comes to access and influence on public policy, the UK's democracy conceals a grossly imbalanced distribution of power.

Access to Power

Good democracy relies on the principle of equal access and participation, yet it is clear that access to politics and power is not evenly distributed. One area of concern is the influence of business on political decision-making. Whilst corporations have always had access to decision-makers and indeed exercised considerable influence, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship between those in power and those with finance is becoming increasingly close. Democratic Audit find that connections between ministers and corporations in the UK eclipses those found in other democracies. In the mid-2000s, 46 per cent of the top 50 UK firms had connections to a minister or MP with many elected representatives maintaining positions as company directors or consultants[57]. The constitutional set up of the House of Lords, basing representation on part-time service, encourages the continuation of professional interests outside of Parliament whilst serving as representatives within it. Predictably given the structural set up, corporate ties in the Upper Chamber are extensive.

Within the system, corporations are able to influence public policy in other ways too. The current system of party funding in the UK leaves the door open for further influence on the

54. Transparency International UK (2012), Corruption in UK Politics http://www.transparency.org.uk/our-work/publications

55. Committee on Standards in Public Life (2011) Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life

56. Hansard Society (2012), Audit of Political Engagement 9, The 2012 Report: Part Two

57. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit.

political process by those with wealth. The dual problems of declining membership (and therefore membership fees) and increased spending mean that political parties are increasingly relying on a small number of large donors.

Whilst parties need funding to operate and perform their essential democratic role, money in politics creates potential opportunities for buying influence, status or commercial gain. In the current system, those with wealth can buy considerable influence from a comparatively minor input. This makes British politics vulnerable. The public is suspicious of the way parties obtain funding and the motivations of those who make large donations. The power of parties in the appointment of House of Lords representatives means public suspicion in the motivation and practice of large donations will remain. The current party finance system also threatens the future functioning of our democracy. Political parties are essential to our democracy, and it is clear that sourcing party finance from a small number of major donors is both unstable and probably unsustainable.

The rise in professional lobbying activity has become a new focus of concern for those in power and those without it. Data on the number of meetings ministers held with various interest groups outside government shows significantly more meetings take place with corporate interest groups and individuals than charities or trade unions[58]. With increased professionalisation of lobbying activity comes naturally an increase in the cost of such activity, giving a clear advantage to those with greater resources. Legislation to address the role of professional lobbying in our democracy seems to have stalled despite moves to regulate.

The access to political decisions afforded to organisations and individuals with greater financial resources creates an unacceptable power imbalance which undermines the principle of political equality. Even where corruption and malpractice are not in evidence, the system itself, by failing to create a barrier to them, can foster a perception of wrongdoing. This alone is enough to undermine the foundation of trust that democratic legitimacy is based on.

58. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit.

Power and people

One of the most fundamental aspects of a good democracy is that power is exercised at the most appropriate level for those affected. Local democracy is in many ways the arena which can offer the best model of democracy, taking advantage of smaller decision-making units and providing the closest relationship between representative democracy and citizen participation.

Yet local democracy in the UK is failing to provide democratic accountability, openness and responsiveness and failing to connect with citizens. Decades of centralisation has left local government without the responsibilities or financial control to give meaningful local political choice to voters. The operation and outcomes of local elections (particularly in England and Wales), with extremely low turnouts, disproportionate results, uncontested seats and a tendency for national issues to prevail, undermines the democratic legitimacy of local government. The hollowing out of local government autonomy and shift in political culture to a consumerist model of service delivery has further weakened the democratic relationship between local government and communities. The failure of regionalism in England whilst devolution has been extended in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, has moved democracy farther away from English citizens. And recent attempts at improving democratic accountability at a sub-national level through referendums on Elected Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners have demonstrated that trying to inject

democratic accountability without clarity on powers and responsibilities is an empty exercise and one that citizens do not want to engage in.

Whilst faith in central government is in decline, research suggests that citizens feel a greater sense of democratic connection with local decision-making. The Hansard Society note that, 'A sizeable difference has now emerged between the proportions of the public who say they want to be involved in decision-making locally (38%) and nationally (33%)'. The latest Audit shows that people are twice as likely to feel they can impact local decision making than national decision making (24% of people feel they have some influence on decisions taken in their local area, 12% national decisions). Whilst the global economic problems facing the country at large may leave citizens feeling powerless, at a local level there is a greater sense of possibility in the democratic process. Local democracy is the forum to address the issues that affect people day to day and differences in feelings of political efficacy and connection highlight the possibilities for reinvigorating democratic participation at the local level.

Whilst the local arena holds great possibilities for citizen involvement, democracy is currently moving further away from citizens, particularly in England. Only 16% of the UK population live under devolved government. The remaining 84% that live in England have recently seen the dismantling of the last elements of a regional strategy with the abolition of Regional Development Agencies. Any wider strategy for greater regionalism stalled in 2004 with the defeat of the North East regional assembly referendum. Arguably there is little appetite for greater regional government in England, or at least little appetite for more politics and politicians. However, the growing sense of political identity in England coupled with greater devolution of powers elsewhere (possibly even Independence for Scotland), suggests that the trend towards highly centralised government in England (despite the introduction of Elected Mayors and Police Commissioners) cannot continue. Devolution has proceeded up to this point on the basis of demand; it may not be long before the demands are made for England too.

Local democracy, in England especially, is failing to meet expectations of democratic accountability and legitimacy. Turnout remains stubbornly low for local elections (typically less than 40%). Given the highly centralised nature of government in England and the lack of financial autonomy for local councils, it is unsurprising that citizens do not feel driven to participate in local elections. Those that do turn out to vote will find that their votes produce vastly disproportional results. In England and Wales, first past the post and multi-member FPTP ensure some councils (particularly county councils) rarely change hands even with significant swings in vote share and others where parties with a significant vote share are completely unrepresented, creating councils without opposition. Seats go uncontested at many levels of local government. The size of local authorities creates a further problem for democratic responsiveness, making them even more remote from citizens. Local government in the UK is the least 'local' of any European country with the largest units of government by population size and the highest ratio of citizens to elected local politicians.[59] The UK's democracy at a national and sub-national level is therefore failing to provide democratic accountability and representation and creating political inequalities across the Union.

Local government has, as with the national picture, followed the trend of an increasingly consumerist, service delivery model of governance. The increased role of unelected service providers as well as the increase in partnership mechanisms has weakened democratic accountability and made the already complex local governance picture even more

59. Wilks-Heeg, S., Blick, A., and Crone, S. (2012) How Democratic is the UK? The 2012 Audit, Liverpool: Democratic Audit.

60. Fabian Society (2012), www.fabians.org.uk/frustrated-powerless-and-ignored

unclear. Instead of electoral accountability, citizens have service-user surveys and complaints procedures. The market model does not work for local democracy any more than it does at a national level, damaging democratic connection and engagement. Tellingly, those who feel a greater satisfaction with and ownership of public services are also those most likely to vote whilst those who feel frustrated and powerless in their experience of public services are much more likely to be non-voters[60]. The link between good governance at the local level cannot be separated from democratic engagement.

In contrast to the remote and centralised picture in England, devolved legislatures have succeeded in creating models of democratic accountability and responsiveness that have to some extent enhanced community engagement. The elements of participatory democracy built into the Scottish and Welsh parliaments such as the petitions system, have started to create a better relationship between politics and citizen. And the introduction of proportional representation for local government elections in Scotland has produced better outcomes for local democracy across the board. Though far from perfect and suffering from many of the same problems of engagement as the Westminster parliament, it is a model that Westminster could learn from. The issue is not one of simply creating more government, but creating the right structures to ensure government at the right level.

With declining trust in central government and increasingly individualistic and protest-based forms of engagement becoming the norm, reformed and participative local governance and local democratic engagement may be the key to building the relationships that could help restore feelings of efficacy and trust and help build a new culture of political participation.

Improving governance, sharing power

The health of our democracy depends on accountability and transparency in the form, function and culture of our decision-making institutions, but primarily it depends on people. Democracy doesn't work without fair access, participation and engagement. An imbalance in who can access power, how those with power are held to account and how close power comes to people, can damage the relationships on which democracy is founded. People need to trust politics but politics also needs to trust people. By giving meaning to democratic choice, creating the structures which encourage openness and transparency and distributing power to a level where citizens feel involved, those in power can nurture a better and more sustainable democracy.

Equality of access:

Improving access and preventing politics being unduly influenced by the few is fundamental to ensuring citizens are equally able to shape their futures. The post democracy described by Colin Crouch, which this report suggests we are slipping towards, is a democracy where the voices of citizens are weakened, crowded out by those of business and professional lobbyists. In these conditions the interests of citizens give way to the far larger spending power and influence of business. The demands of economic success, investment and growth simply hold much greater power. It is a picture that it is easy to recognise in our economically uncertain times with countries across Europe rejecting politics in crisis.

This report contends that less democracy is not the answer to our problems but that improving the functioning of our democracy and therefore

improving the quality of decision making requires a strengthening of democratic structures and culture change. Ensuring equality of access is an important part of this renewal, as Crouch puts it, 'The more that a level playing field is ensured in such matters as party funding and media access, the more true the democracy'[61].

Party funding

Public confidence in political parties and our political system is essential for a thriving democracy and reforming the party funding system is a crucial task in restoring confidence in the operation of political parties and improving the transparency and integrity of the political system. Political parties play an essential role in our democracy: representing and giving voice to a diversity of opinion; giving voters choice at the ballot box; developing policy and scrutinising the policies of other parties; providing channels for public participation in politics through party structures and recruiting and selecting candidates. Whilst it is important to ensure these functions are free of any potential influence, it is also important that parties have finance to carry out these roles. State funding, donations caps and election spending caps have been put forward by the Committee on Standards in Public Life report on political party finance[62]. These reforms aim to restore faith in political parties whilst creating a level playing field and have the potential to engender wider cultural change in our democracy through the way election funding is spent.

Changes to funding are highly unlikely to reverse the decline in party membership. However a cap on loans may spark a culture change, encouraging parties to go after smaller donations rather than courting a handful of big donors. A cap would break any perceived link between cash and honours which has some potential to increase confidence in the system though it is not guaranteed to prevent corrupt practices and needs to be matched by robust transparency and enforcement. But if donations are limited, it is important that parties are able to continue to perform their role. Ultimately then it will also be important for us as citizens to consider what price we are willing to pay for an open and transparent democracy and to consider the cost of continuing as we are.

Accountability

Corruption doesn't stem from too much politics; it thrives when politics retracts from the public sphere. Safeguarding political accountability means addressing participation and engagement. Giving citizens greater oversight through transparency mechanisms doesn't always result in greater trust. In fact, as we have seen in recent years, the very opposite can happen. Nor do citizens always want to perform the role of policing the activities of those in power. But without mass citizen engagement the political system is left open to the influence of those with deepest pockets and we cannot hope to prevent corruption in the system. We need to strengthen the functioning of our democracy in order to create conditions that work against corruption. The first step is to involve the public not as political police but as the custodians of political power. Votes need to count so that those elected know that they can also be held to account by the ballot box. And the public need to be involved in decision-making, as an engaged and participating electorate.

As well as returning the voice of people to representative democracy we need to ensure that those elected have the freedom and power to be the voice of the electorate and this means addressing the balance of power at Westminster. For years academics, commentators and politicians have pointed out the growing power of the Executive over Parliament. There is

61. Crouch, C., (2004), Post Democracy, Cambridge: Polity Press. p18.

62. Committee on Standards in Public Life, (2011), 13th Report on Political Party Finance: Ending the big donor culture.

no shortage of suggestions for rebalancing Parliament, wrestling power from the whips, giving more independence to Select Committees, reducing the 'payroll' vote. Returning authority to Parliament was a central recommendation in the Power Inquiry in 2006[63] and the Wright reforms[64] have gone some way towards giving a bigger voice to backbench MPs but there is still a lot further to go to restore the 'Parliamentary' in our Parliamentary Democracy.

Trust in politics, trust in people

Local democracy may well hold the key to improving democracy at all levels. The local arena is more accessible and deals with issues that people connect to and that really matter to them. It is also a facilitator of participation; the closer and more local the institution, the more likely citizens are to engage with it. Reconnecting with citizens at a local level could break down some of the barriers to participation more widely. People are not apathetic, they care about issues that affect their lives and our democracy needs to respond, bringing politics back to people and communities by giving real powers and accountability to all levels of local democracy.

There have been numerous attempts at 'localism' in various guises from all sides of the political spectrum and it has nearly always been framed in terms of community empowerment. Yet whilst the language of localism has talked of empowering communities, the form that it has taken has been centrally defined and left little room for self-direction and local freedoms. The stated ambitions of localism policy have not been met in reality taking the form of 'top down' strategies from a highly centralising state. An analysis of localism to date also brings into question how far citizens and communities have been empowered, as individuals or as communities. Empowerment is often taken to mean participation but too often this participation has taken a passive form through consultation exercises, a 'tick box' for community engagement. Again the citizen is participating in the role of consumer; a user of services rather than political agent.

We need to bring politics back to local democracy, engage with citizens not consumers and that means improving the function of representative democracy at a local level and creating genuine community engagement through deliberative participation. Seats which go uncontested, councils that never change politically and systems that block representation for those with an equal share of the votes, are not representative of citizen choice. We need to reform our electoral systems at the local level to restore the integrity of local elections. But we also need to make those elections matter by extending political and fiscal power to local authorities. People don't vote when they see their vote as not counting and not meaning anything. Turnout at local elections will not improve on its own. Improving engagement means giving real decision-making power to local democratic institutions, independence and fiscal control. Busy citizens do not want to take responsibility for running local services but many do want to have a say in how they are run. Engagement with communities, rather than individual consumers, needs to involve deliberative, consensus building politics and the local arena is the ideal forum in which to do it.

63. The Power Inquiry, (2006), Power to the people, the report of Power: An independent inquiry into Britain's Democracy.

64. House of Commons Reform Committee, (2009), Rebuilding the House, HC1117

A Future for Reform

It is clear that the health of our democracy is failing, with declining participation and engagement, systemic failures in representation and widespread inequalities of access and power. There is no magic cure for improving our democracy, no singular cause or straightforward answer. Likewise we need to be wary of mistaking the symptoms of the illness for the cause. This report has attempted to give a fuller picture of the many symptoms of our democracy's failing health, their causes and context. Whilst reforms cannot promise to cure all ailments, they can help to breathe life into a democracy that has failed to keep up with modern society. Many of the reform ideas covered by this report are oft repeated and long overdue.

Democracy can take many forms and as this report outlines, there has been a tendency to move towards one version of democratic representation. This report argues that the future of our democracy depends on reforming our representative institutions whilst also embracing a different view of democratic engagement, one that seeks to give citizens greater voice. We need to try to improve trust in politics and faith in democratic institutions by reforming how they work in reality and we need to improve citizens' sense of efficacy and power by promoting greater involvement. This can only be achieved by making both structural and cultural changes. In doing so we cannot simply extend the options for engagement but need to look closely at who participates and how, to ensure that the principles of equality that underpin democracy are maintained.

Democracy is worth saving. Defending it means changing it. We need to move our steam-age democracy into the modern world where it meets citizens' expectations. A healthy democracy is essential for effective democratic governance without which we cannot hope to meet the social and economic challenges ahead.

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