



Power to the People: the report of Power, an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy

Standard Note: SN/PC/3948

Last updated: 14 March 2006

Author: Isobel White

Parliament and Constitution Centre

The Power Inquiry was established and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to investigate why there has been a decline in participation in formal politics and to make proposals to reverse this trend. The report of the Power Inquiry was published on 27 February 2006.

Contents

A.	Background	2
B.	Members of the Commission	3
C.	The recommendations	4
D.	Links to relevant Research Papers and Standard Notes	7
E.	Press comment	8

A. Background

The introduction to the report gives a summary of the work of the Commission:

Power was established by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to celebrate their centenaries. Its mission was to understand how participation in British politics could be increased and deepened. To do this it established a Commission of ten people from a variety of social and political backgrounds to consider the evidence generated by the following activities:

- a series of seven meetings across the country at which the Commission questioned 35 witnesses about political participation;
- 143 face-to-face interviews with witnesses conducted by the Inquiry's research team;
- a major review of all relevant literature on the subject of political participation conducted by the Inquiry's research team;
- a process of traditional and on-line public consultation which generated over 1,500 responses;
- a further exercise in public consultation which encouraged people to discuss a series of 'key questions' about political participation at self-organised meetings called 'Democracy Dinners' which led to 400 events across the country; a telephone survey of 1,025 people who failed to vote in the 2005 General Election;
- a study collating and assessing over 50 'innovations' in democracy and participation from across the world;
- a practical experiment in innovative political participation, called the Open Budget, conducted in partnership with and funded by the London Borough of Harrow and involving 300 Harrow residents;
- a research project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which brought together political party, campaign group and community group activists to discuss their perceptions of local political parties in Birmingham, Glasgow and Somerset;
- a 'Citizens' Panel' based in Newcastle-Gateshead which brought together thirty randomly selected people to discuss the same issues as those being considered by the Commission throughout the life of the Inquiry;
- an international seminar co-funded and organised with British Council Brussels bringing together civil servants from across Europe to discuss policy responses to political disengagement.

All of this work generated over a million words of evidence which was collated under thematic headings for the Commission in eight 'Theme Books' which can now be explored at: www.powerinquiry.org. The Commission spent six months deliberating on this evidence and discussing drafts of this report.¹

¹ *Power to the people: the report of Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*, March 2006, p38
Available at <http://www.powerinquiry.org/report/index.php>

B. Members of the Commission

The members of the Commission were drawn from a range of backgrounds and experience. Most of them had no particular party affiliation. The members are listed below with brief personal details taken from the Power website; for additional information see <http://www.powerinquiry.org/commission/index.php>

Helena Kennedy QC – Chair

A barrister, Helena Kennedy has been involved a large number of prominent cases, From 1992 to 1997, she was Chair of Charter88, the constitutional reform group, and from 1998-2004 she chaired the British Council. Helena Kennedy is a life Peer.

Ferdinand Mount – Vice-Chair

Ferdinand Mount was head of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit (1982-4), a director of the Centre for Policy Studies (1984-91), and editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* (1991-2002).

Emma B

Is a Radio 1 DJ and has won awards for shows such as *Sunday Surgery*. She currently presents the *Pop Music* strand on GMTV.

Paul Boakye

Playwright, essayist, editor, and managing director of Drum Media Limited, Paul Boakye has written for theatre, radio, film, TV, academia and magazines.

Phil Carey

Phil Carey is a Sports Coach on the Sport 4 U project in his home town of Hastings. He gained a place on the Commission by responding to a nationwide appeal. Phil is a Trustee of the UK Youth Parliament.

Philip Dodd

Philip Dodd was until December 2004 Director of the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA). He is Visiting Professor at University of the Arts, London, where he is involved in a postgraduate programme in Cultural and Creative Industries.

Ben Freeman

Ben Freeman is the Finance Director of Prudential Property Investment Managers Ltd (PruPIM). He initially qualified as an accountant with KPMG. He is a trustee of Find Your Feet, a world development charity supporting long-term rural development projects in Africa and India.

Barbara Gill

Barbara Gill died on 3 November 2005. She had been Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

Bano Murtuja

Bano Murtuja is based in Blackburn, where she currently works as a freelance consultant. She is chair of the Black and Minority Ethnic Health and Social Care Forum, a voluntary organisation that has an East Lancashire base.

Frances O'Grady

Frances O'Grady became TUC Deputy General Secretary in January 2003, the first woman ever to hold the post. Before joining the TUC in 1994, Frances worked for the Transport and General Workers Union.

C. The recommendations

In her foreword to the report, Helena Kennedy, the chair of the Commission, states that the evidence presented to the inquiry suggests that voting itself 'seems irrelevant to increasing numbers of people' and that there is a feeling 'that there is no choice, despite our living in the era when choice is the dominant political mantra'. Commenting that the world has changed enormously during the past fifty years and that lives are being lived in very different ways she suggests that 'the political institutions and the main political parties have failed to keep up.' Drawing attention to the way in which people continue to volunteer to raise money for charity, join protest marches, undertake voluntary work within their communities and sign petitions, Helena Kennedy comments that political apathy is a myth. However, people 'no longer want to join a party or get involved in formal politics' and the solution is to download power by 'rebalancing the system towards the people'.

Later in the report the Commission identify a 'democratic malaise' which is not just manifested in the recent downturn in general elections. Apart from a decline in party membership the Commission found that there was a 'well-ingrained popular view across the country that our political institutions and their politicians are failing, untrustworthy, and disconnected from the great mass of the British people.'²

The executive summary to the report says it presents 'a detailed analysis of why this disengagement has occurred and a series of recommendations to address the problem. This is a broad agenda for major political reform.'³ There are thirty recommendations; the first group addresses the rebalancing of power between the Executive and Parliament and

² *ibid*, p28

³ *ibid*, p15

between central and local government to ‘allow the freedom for our elected representatives to be the eyes, ears and mouths of British citizens at the heart of government.’⁴

1. A Concordat should be drawn up between the Executive and Parliament indicating where key powers lie and providing significant powers of scrutiny and initiation for Parliament.
2. Select Committees should be given independence and enhanced powers including the power to scrutinise and veto key government appointments and to subpoena witnesses to appear and testify before them. This should include proper resourcing so that committees can fulfil their remit effectively. The specialist committees in the Upper House should have the power to co-opt people from outside the legislature who have singular expertise, such as specialist scientists, when considering complex areas of legislation or policy.
3. Limits should be placed on the power of the whips.
4. Parliament should have greater powers to initiate legislation, to launch public inquiries and to act on public petitions.
5. 70 per cent of the members of the House of Lords should be elected by a ‘responsive electoral system’ (see 12 below) – and not on a closed party list system – for three parliamentary terms. To ensure that this part of the legislature is not comprised of career politicians with no experience outside politics, candidates should be at least 40 years of age.
6. There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers from central to local government.
7. A concordat should be drawn up between central and local government setting out their respective powers.
8. Local government should have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances.
9. The Government should commission an independent mapping of quangos and other public bodies to clarify and renew lines of accountability between elected and unelected authority.
10. Ministerial meetings with representatives of business including lobbyists should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.
11. A new overarching select committee should be established to scrutinise the Executive’s activities in supranational bodies and multilateral negotiations, particularly in relation to the European Union, and to ensure these activities are held to account and conducted in the best interests of the British people.⁵

⁴ *ibid*, p21

⁵ *ibid*, p21-22

The second group of recommendations include measures designed to develop an electoral and party system which is 'responsive to the changing values and demands of today's population.'⁶

12. A responsive electoral system – which offers voters a greater choice and diversity of parties and candidates – should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and local councils in England and Wales to replace the first-past-the-post system.
13. The closed party list system should have no place in modern elections.
14. The system whereby candidates have to pay a deposit which is lost if their votes fall below a certain threshold should be replaced with a system where the candidate has to collect the signatures of a set number of supporters in order to appear on the ballot paper.
15. The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people on lower incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand.
16. The voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).
17. Automatic, individual voter registration at age sixteen should be introduced. This can be done in tandem with the allocation of National Insurance numbers.
18. The citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification.
19. Donations from individuals to parties should be capped at £10,000, and organisational donations capped at £100 per member, subject to full democratic scrutiny within the organisation.
20. State funding to support local activity by political parties should be introduced based on the allocation of individual voter vouchers. This would mean that at a general election a voter will be able to tick a box allocating a £3 donation per year from public funds to a party of his or her choice to be used by that party for local activity. It would be open to the voter to make the donation to a party other than the one they have just voted for.
21. Text voting or email voting should only be considered following other reform of our democratic arrangements.
22. The realignment of constituency boundaries should be accelerated.

⁶ *ibid*, p22

The final group of recommendations aims to create a culture of political engagement. In such a culture it would be normal for 'policy and decision-making to occur with direct input from citizens.'⁷

23. All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes.
24. Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.
25. The rules on the plurality of media ownership should be re-formed. This is always a controversial issue but there should be special consideration given to this issue in light of the developments in digital broadcast and the internet.
26. A requirement should be introduced that public service broadcasters develop strategies to involve viewers in deliberation on matters of public importance – this would be aided by the use of digital technology.
27. MPs should be required and resourced to produce annual reports, hold AGMs and make more use of innovative engagement techniques.
28. Ministerial meetings with campaign groups and their representatives should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.
29. A new independent National Statistical and Information Service should be created to provide the public with key information free of political spin.
30. 'Democracy hubs' should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.

D. Links to relevant Research Papers and Standard Notes

Reduction in the voting age

Reduction in voting age, SN/PC/1747 available at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snpc-01747.pdf>

The *Electoral Administration Bill 2005-06* currently before Parliament makes provision for the age of candidacy to be reduced to 18 but there is no provision for a reduction in the voting age from 18 to 16. Amendments were put down to the Bill to reduce the voting age at Report stage but these were not reached. During the Second Reading of the Bill in the House of Lords Liberal Democrat peers raised the issue and expressed support for reducing the voting age to 16 but the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department for Constitutional Affairs, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, would not be drawn on the issue during the debate.

⁷ *ibid*, p24

There is a note on the progress of the Bill at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snpc-03877.pdf>

House of Lords reform

Library Standard note SN/PC/3895 looks at recent developments in the debate on House of Lords reform. The note is available at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snpc-03895.pdf>

Youth Parliaments

Library Standard note SN/PC/823 looks at some of the main organisations involved with organising youth parliaments and other initiatives to increase youth participation in the political process. The note is available at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snpc-00823.pdf>

Turnout

For statistics on turnout at the last General Election see Library Research Paper 05-33, available at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2005/rp05-033.pdf>

The Electoral Commission has published reports on voter participation. The report *Social Exclusion and Political Participation* was published in 2005 and is available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/Socexclfinalrept_19491-14052__E__N__S__W__.pdf The Commission have also published research reports on political engagement; the second was published in March 2005 and is available at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/11654> There was also a report on turnout at the General Election available at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/13911>

E. Press comment

Much of the press comment concentrated on the Inquiry's recommendation that the voting age should be reduced to 16. The launch of the report coincided with an interview in the *Guardian* with the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, who said "we must address what today holds Britain back - low turnouts, youth disengagement, falling party membership and a long-term decline in trust - problems that owe more to our political system than our civic culture."⁸ The Chancellor was also reported as signalling support for a reduction in the voting age 'so long as it is part of a package of "citizenship education" in schools.'⁹

The Conservatives opposed the proposal to reduce the voting age to 16. On the Conservative Party website a news item about the Power inquiry includes the following comment by the Shadow spokesman on Constitutional Affairs, Oliver Heald MP:

⁸ Brown backs votes at 16 in radical shake up of politics, *Guardian*, 27 February 2006
Available at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/apathy/story/0,,1718744,00.html>

⁹ *ibid*

Commenting on the Power Commission's recommendation of reducing the voting age from 18 to 16, and Gordon Brown's suggestion that he may support the change, Mr Heald said: "No European country has a nationwide voting age below 18. Of the mere nine countries in the world that do, the likes of Iran, Sudan, Cuba and North Korea are hardly paragons of democracy." Pointing out that the Electoral Commission ruled out reducing the voting age in April 2004, and that the Government recently legislated to allow the legal age to buy cigarettes to be raised from 16 to 18, he added: "Lowering the voting age would do nothing to address the underlying problems of political disillusionment, and would just lead to young people abstaining from an even earlier age."¹⁰

The *Times* reported that 'both main political parties are understood to be sympathetic to the inquiry's findings...Several of the changes, such as encouraging communities to be active in local decision-making and greater local autonomy over spending, are likely to be at the core of Mr Brown's reform agenda and, should he become Labour leader, would feature in the election manifesto.'¹¹

The *Independent* reported that 'on the eve of the report the government moved to head off one of its 30 recommendations – that 70% of the members of the House of Lords should be elected. Lord Falconer of Thoroton, the Lord Chancellor, announced that talks would be held with other parties in the hope of reaching a consensus on the powers and composition of the second chamber.'¹²

Sir Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, chairman of the Local Government Association, was reported in the *Guardian* as welcoming the proposals: "The Power inquiry's underlying message is that too much power is held centrally and must be given back to people. We now need to see action from the government," he said.¹³

There was critical comment from some commentators. Philip Cowley, of Nottingham University, asked why 'a report which has taken eighteen months to put together, and cost oodles of money' had to be so vague? He suggested that the recommendation to place restrictions on the power of the whips was the vaguest one of them all; there were no specific recommendations about what these restrictions should be and how they would work.¹⁴ Peter Riddell, in an article in the *Times*, said that 'the inquiry has spread itself too broadly - setting out a programme for several Parliaments - with a breathless compendium of the familiar reformist agenda: a majority elected Lords, electoral reform and changes to party funding to reduce dependence on big donors.' Riddell also suggested that

too much of the debate rests on misleading and outdated stereotypes: big bad central government and a weak Parliament, both ignoring the wishes of voters. That oversimplification is the main flaw of yesterday's report...

¹⁰ http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=128164

¹¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,17129-2060513,00.html>

¹² Blueprint to give power to the people, *Independent*, 27 February 2006

¹³ Radical overhaul of party funding urged: Curb donations from rich individuals and reconnect with voters, inquiry says, *Guardian*, 3 March 2006

¹⁴ <http://www.revolts.co.uk/>

...the assertion that "Parliament has had many of its teeth removed" is plain wrong. Parliament has seldom been more assertive: just look at the number of revolts in the Commons and the doubling in the number of defeats in the Lords since the removal of most hereditary peers in 1999...Moreover, MPs are more active than ever in working for their constituents.

Riddell also criticised the report's 'over enthusiasm for single issue campaigns':

This is treacherous ground. Direct democracy risks giving too much influence to unrepresentative groups of activists - like phone-in programmes. A march by lots of people, even the one million against the Iraq war in February 2003, captures attention but does not of itself convey legitimacy. Government and Parliament have to decide, as they did over Iraq, and it is up to voters to respond, as they did.

However he adds that the Power Inquiry has stimulated debate even though the report 'exaggerates not only the scale of the problem, but also the impact of its proposals. Disillusionment with politics is mainly about the style and record of politicians, not about the structures of government.'¹⁵

John Rentoul, writing in the *Independent*, was also critical of the report's findings:

What is wrong with the democratic system in this country is easy to diagnose. It produces the wrong results. At least, it does in the opinion of the right-thinking people, who write letters to newspapers and who sit on hand-wringing commissions to inquire into the health of our democracy.

He also suggested that the Inquiry should be 'wary of the "wasted vote" argument. To say that people do not bother to vote in safe seats because their vote is unlikely to affect the outcome is a step away from the statistical truth of any system: that a single vote has a near-zero probability of deciding the outcome.'

Rentoul comments that 'the main substantive proposal of the Power Inquiry that deserves to be taken seriously is that of direct democracy - that Britain should move to a system of referendums triggered by a minimum number of citizens.' Rentoul adds however that

Citizen-sponsored referendums are a mechanical response to a perceived problem. But there is nothing structurally wrong with a system of representative democracy in which parties and party discipline organise the preference of millions of citizens. If people choose not to vote, or to join political parties, that should surely be a matter of concern to political parties, or to people who want to be politicians.¹⁶

¹⁵ 'Toothless' Parliament is fighting fit, *Times*, 28 February 2006

¹⁶ Voting reform won't bring a different result, *Independent*, 27 February 2006

