Contribution from David Durant

This is the third theme from the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy. This time the subject of interest is democratic representation.

The consultation asks for feedback on a number of specific questions which I will address below.

What will democracy look like in 15 – 20 years?

At first glance this might be a short post as, in most ways, I strongly agree with our current system of representational democracy as a bulwark against the tyranny of the majority. I am as highly suspicious of direct democracy as I am hugely in favour of significantly better methods of finding out if our representative's opinions match their individual constituents on key matters.

I am also ambivalent about the recall of sitting MPs. I think it's a power that would be used very infrequently and the energy going into it could probably be used to greater effect elsewhere.

There are some things I would change though.

I am a strong supporter of the UK finally becoming a fully fledged republic. I have nothing whatsoever personally against the Queen or any of her family but the idea of hereditary leadership, even as a concept, in the 21st century feels deeply wrong. I feel very sorry for Prince George who, despite the advantages of money and power, will likely lead one of the most narrowly defined lives in the country. I would strongly favour replacement with a largely, but not completely, ceremonial Head of State based on the model of the Irish Presidency.

I also believe in instituting a form of proportional representation. Those of us in favour of doing so need to make a much better version of our case the next time.

Much of the above is well beyond the remit of this consultation but is included for context.

Members of Parliament are elected to represent local people's interests in the House of Commons. How can the internet and social media help with this?

There is a massive inherent dichotomy in the responsibilities of our elected representatives between spending time representing their local constituents and, for the party in power,

performing duties of government. This issue can only increase as they gain further authority. How the Prime Minster represents the local interests of those that elect him as an MP I do not know.

The use of the internet should greatly aid in this manner. Citizens are already becoming used to interacting with government via GOV.UK and will continue to do so with planned improvement in local council digital services. This will naturally translate in them wishing to be able to do the same thing with their local and national representatives.

I have previous written some brief thoughts on how digital systems can aid MP's interactions with their constituents (see points 4, 8 and especially 9). In short, while I believe that both a "debating platform" for both local and national political discussions is probably inevitable and that an "issue ticketing system" for constituents to interact with MPs would be useful for many - both of these pale in usefulness compared to just generally educating and mentoring MPs in their uses of digital technology. We need representatives that are comfortable working directly in this area instead of ignoring it or leaving to people in their offices.

Use of interactive technology is increasing. Is this likely to increase pressure for more direct democracy, such as crowd-sourcing, referendums and citizens' initiatives?

It may increase the pressure for more direct democracy but I feel this should be resisted. I'm a huge fan of 38 Degrees and other campaigning groups but I believe their responsibility is to persuade our representatives to do the right thing - never to exercise any kind of direct power.

As I have blogged about previously I believe that most people don't know that many of the things they wish to influence aren't being directly worked on by the government as legislation but have been delegated to civil service departmental policy makers to implement. As such for citizen and other lobbying groups it often becomes an issue of interfacing with those policy units that is important. Thankfully many departments, lead by the Cabinet Office, are not starting to engage in Open Policy Making.

I think it is very important for the Speaker's Commission to highlight and encourage the work being done there.

Influencing MPs and ministers could be made more open by the creating of a "national political deliberation platform" (which would need to be developed starting small and in the GDS Service Design Phases - Discovery / Alpha / Beta / Live). However, it would still be up to each representative to vote or act on their own conscience - against the will of the majority of the people if they believe it is the right thing to do. After all, "the people" have been wrong about many things in the past.

How can online provision of information about elections be improved, including details of where to vote, how to vote and the results?

The correct answer to this - as with much in the Digital Democracy Commission - is for Parliament to hire one or more highly skilled and experienced User Researchers.

The news media is changing rapidly - and the ways that people consume information, including news, is changing fast too. Will objective information about the political process continue to be easily available, and even if it is, will citizens be willing to seek it out?

This question is in two parts. Firstly, news is written by people and hosted by organisations which, despite best intentions, will always produce non-objective reporting. Completely objective reporting is impossible, just choosing what to report on is inherently non-objective, and we should not pretend it can be done.

That said - some organisations endeavour to produce information that is as balanced as possible. The BBC is an excellent example of this as always.

The second question is whether citizens will seek out such information. Well, information from various Hansard Society reports shows the low level of political interest and engagement of the populace in general. Those that are motivated to take part tend to be either specific issue driven or have strongly held beliefs one one side or other of the political spectrum. Alas, the media landscape, driven by commerce, has large evolved to reflect this - thankfully not nearly as badly, as yet, as it is in the USA.

Whether it is possible therefore to encourage citizens to seek information from a variety of media outlets remains to be seen. This is one of the reasons of my inherent fear of the tyranny

of the majority - many people don't have time to form coherent opinions about political matters and will take to parroting one or other media owner's opinions (this happens on all sides of the political spectrum).

The good news however is that by engaging in deliberation citizens can become much better informed and change their opinions on political matters. This excellent paper from Sciencewise discusses this further.

The bad news is that the good results from that paper are from face-to-face meetings of citizens. If something similar to the "national deliberation platform" I mentioned was put in place it would inherently suffer from the well recorded phenomena that people are more aggressive, rude and intolerant online. This can be seen by reading the comments section of pretty much any major blog (c.f. the BBC, Comment is Free, etc).

The above problem can be partially ameliorated by using community managers, whose job it would have be to not just to ban active troublemakers but to attempt to both keep discussions on-topic and taking place in a civilised atmosphere. It would be a very interesting exercise to build public transparent dashboards, based on the Performance Platform from GOV.UK, which measure the "quality" of discussion on any such hypothetical system.

Can we expect continuous election campaigning through digital channels – what would citizens feel about that and would it undermine or strengthen representative democracy?

It will be interesting to see how candidates and prospective candidates forge ongoing links with the citizens of a particular constituency. I suspect that those who do this for some time before an election will fair better than those who are "parachuted in" to an area shortly before the election.

I fell that, to a greater or lesser extent, citizens don't care which party a representative is in as long as they are seen to be doing good work that constituency and the country. If there is repeated introduction of what is seen as political point scoring I believe that it will weaken the relationships being forged. MPs with many followers, e.g. Tom Watson, only infrequently mention specific political points rather than focusing on specific issues.

Note: The Commission will be consulting separately on the issue of online voting in elections in September

The Open Rights Group has been working extensively in the area of assessing online voting for many years. They have concluded that currently the risks involved far exceed the benefits.

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That's the end of my feedback on representation. I'm honoured to have been invited to participate in further discussions with the Commission's day in a day's workshop at the Guardian on the 14th of July. I'll try to remember to share my thoughts after.