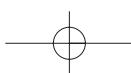


# LONELY CITIZENS

REPORT OF THE WORKING PARTY ON ACTIVE  
CITIZENSHIP

EDITED BY BEN ROGERS



## The ippr

The **Institute for Public Policy Research** (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank and was established in 1988. Its role is to bridge the political divide between the social democratic and liberal traditions, the intellectual divide between academia and the policy making establishment and the cultural divide between government and civil society. It is first and foremost a research institute, aiming to provide innovative and credible policy solutions. Its work, the questions its research poses and the methods it uses are driven by the belief that the journey to a good society is one that places social justice, democratic participation and economic and environmental sustainability at its core.

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There is little that consumers can do except imitate 'Oliver Twist and 'ask for more'

**TH Marshall**

Over and over, our data showed that participatory input is tilted in the direction of the more advantaged groups in society... The voices of the well-educated and the well-heeled ...sound more loudly'

**Verba, Schlozman and Brady Voice and Equality**

The issue, then, is about 'disaffection', not simply 'apathy'.

**Electoral Commission Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections**

Exhortations to virtue are unlikely to succeed.

**Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley Citizenship and Civic Engagement**

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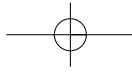
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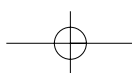
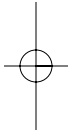
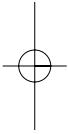
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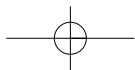
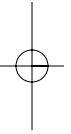
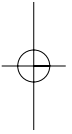
## Preface by Sue Goss, Chair

When I was asked a year ago by ippr to chair the Working Party on Active Citizenship, I leapt at the chance. The role of citizens in our society is of the highest importance and has been neglected for too long. Participating in the working party has proved fascinating. Included on the working party were politicians, journalists, pollsters, academics, a head-teacher, a trade unionist, a police officer, community activists and policy experts. We sifted through a lot of 'spin' to get to the evidence, heard about many lively experiments and debated with a wide range of experts and active citizens. Conversations within the working party have been open, fearless, full of new ideas and always friendly. We discovered that, despite our different backgrounds, we shared common values. We believe that the changing social and political environment makes active citizenship more, not less, important but that it must be encouraged and supported in new ways.

Our starting point was that a successful democracy requires the contribution of citizens. This is not simply a matter of consumer choice: we should all expect at some time in our lives to play an active role. The emphasis of our investigation, then, was on why the current political process is so frustrating and excluding, what gets in our way when we try to get involved, and what can be done to make it enjoyable and easy to take part.

Our messages are not simply for government. If the relationship between citizens and government is to change then politicians, the media, public bodies, local government and citizens themselves have to change.

I want to thank everyone who helped to shake up our thinking: the organisations and individuals who gave evidence to the working party; colleagues who participated in a two-day conversation to launch the working party last June; all the members of the working party; Stephen Coleman, Dan Monzani, Paul Greening and Robin Clarke for stimulating working papers; and especially Matthew Warburton for his heroic contribution to drafting the report, and Ben Rogers and his team at ippr for all their hard work. I would like to express my particular gratitude to the Local Government Association, PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Audit Commission for their generous funding. We hope that this report contributes to a debate that engages organisations and citizens across the country. As we have learnt from our deliberations, these issues are too important to be left to politicians!





## Foreword by Hazel Blears

Progressive governments must learn as well as lead. Labour's historical failing has been to win elections sporadically, to enact sweeping changes, to run into the buffers, and to suffer long periods in opposition. We've been great at the sprint, but fall over exhausted half-way through the marathon. The ability to sustain a governing narrative beyond the pledges of a single manifesto, and to develop radical policies whilst at the same time governing, has hitherto eluded Labour governments. It is a lesson which we are learning fast.

One policy area which stands out as an example of how our thinking has moved forward in office is citizen engagement in the public services. Progressive governance can only be successful with the active co-operation and broad support of the people. Old-style social democracy, whereby progress was delivered from on high by an enlightened class of politicians and administrators, no longer works, if it ever did. If we didn't recognise it already, we have certainly learned it along the way.

There are two salient factors at play here. One is the need for public services to be efficient, successful, and popular. Engaging local people in the design, planning, strategic direction and evaluation of local services is the best way to ensure success in their delivery. Who knows better than mums with toddlers what mums with toddlers need? Who understands the needs of pensioners better than pensioners? The vast, heartless post-war housing estates, designed by architectural experts, but endured by real families, stand as monuments to the failure of planning without consultation with the citizen. Engaging local people in their services makes for better services and gives us the ammunition to convince that public can be best. It helps us shoot the free-marketeers' fox.

The second factor is more subtle yet more important. Citizen engagement is a vital pillar to shore up our democracy. Psephologists are always keen to cite electoral turnout as a factor in the health of democracy in Britain. But democracy for me is more than voting in elections, important though that is. Democracy has to be a daily activity, like eating, sleeping or breathing. It is an active, not a passive state. It means control over your life, in the home, in the neighbourhood, at work, and as a citizen of your country. If we can revitalise democracy at the neighbourhood level, through engagement in local services, we can build democratic renewal at the national level.

Why? Because it is at the local level that people learn to become active citizens. If people can become actively engaged in their local hospital,

police service, school, college, park, or leisure centre, then these services become places where people learn about citizenship and democracy.

But there is a piece of the jigsaw missing. I believe that the ideas discussed in this important ippr report, and in the wider debate around citizenship, engagement and 'new localism', will only become reality if we create a sustainable platform for people. If we construct democratic forums for our public services, and stand back to see what happens next, then the danger is a takeover by the articulate, organised middle-classes. The last thing we need is to recreate local Poor Law Guardians, no matter how altruistic. We need to guarantee the participation of local working people and a rich mix of the local communities.

All the experience points, as this report argues, to the need to give proper training, support, encouragement, and incentives to local people to take part. Such is the dislocation of ordinary people from their services and from government that for most, the idea of serving on a police board or NHS Foundation Trust or parish council is beyond their comprehension.

That's why I still believe, as I have argued in the past, that we need a Citizens' Participation Agency charged with promoting local active engagement in decision making. I see this, not as yet another unit within central government, but an organisation within every community which head-hunts, trains, encourages and supports local active citizens. It should be part-Citizens Advice, part-Open University, part-trade union, with a presence on the high street and on the estate, encouraged by and working with local councils.

The Citizens' Participation Agency should be innovative, community-based and authentic, but backed by the massive resources of government. We've learned as a government these past seven years that if we create opportunities, such as New Deal for Communities or Sure Start, then some people will actively engage. But we need a massive national effort if we are to achieve the step change we want and engage not thousands but millions of people.

Hazel Blears is MP for Salford and Minister of State at the Home Office. She is a member of the Labour Party's National Executive Committee and author of *Communities in Control*.

## Executive summary

Many inside and outside government argue that we need to do more to engage citizens in politics and governance. Others, however, contend that the attempt to promote active citizenship will fail, or will not have the effects its champions claim. The working party on active citizenship was set up by the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) to explore what 'active citizenship' means, what it adds to our individual lives and what could be done to promote it.

This report focuses on active citizenship as civic participation in politics and governance rather than volunteering or acting as a good neighbour. Its argument starts with the claim that whilst the UK and democracies like ours rely on expert representatives and professional civil institutions to defend the public interest, they also require active citizens. These citizens play an indispensable role in holding power to account and ensuring that public services and government are responsive to the views and values of citizens.

### Disconnected citizens

All is not well with active citizenship in Britain today. Active citizens used to play a vital part in civic affairs. Political parties, trade unions, clubs, churches and other civic organisations held together a highly-active civil society. Yet many of these have declined dramatically. Some argue that people are no longer interested in getting involved, that they have become 'apathetic'. Interest in politics remains high, some forms of engagement – boycotting goods, going on protests, organising petitions – are on the increase and the evidence suggests that many people would be willing to take a more active part in civic life. The balance of evidence suggests that, far from being satisfied or apathetic about our political system, citizens feel mistrustful, powerless and frustrated. It is this that deters people from taking on governing positions or otherwise getting involved and justifies our claim that we are increasingly a nation of lonely and disconnected citizens.

### Rivals to active citizenship

Some question the need for active citizens. They claim that governance can be left to elected representatives. Or they argue that the extension of individual choice and markets in public services will diminish the need for collective choices, for governance, altogether. However, representatives can't govern in a vacuum but only through dialogue and engagement with

active citizens. Indeed, as deference declines and the public becomes more questioning of authority, so politicians and public officials will have to work harder to win the trust and cooperation of the public. While there might be space to extend individual choice in some public services, this will not diminish collective or political choices, the outcome of which effect us all.

There is a pronounced and growing class profile to active citizenship. The better educated and wealthier people are, the more likely they are to be active. There is a danger that public choices will, as a result, be biased towards the better off. Far from this being an argument against promoting active engagement, it means that more needs to be done to promote engagement among disadvantaged groups.

### Only connect: changing the terms of engagement

Citizens are ready and willing to engage but only if the terms of engagement are improved. A variety of forms of engagement must be available. People have different skills, resources and interests and will want to be involved in different ways. We distinguish, in particular, between structural and cultural factors affecting engagement.

Citizens will not engage with organisations which don't have the structural power to bring about the changes they want to see. Differences in turnout for national, local and European elections accurately reflect the different powers that national, local and European representatives are perceived to possess. Reforms are needed that will strengthen the powers of parliament over the executive and increase accountability, especially local accountability of the police, prison and probation services, the NHS and other public services. Power needs to be devolved from central to local government and from local government to ward and neighbourhood levels.

Structural reform, however, will not be enough if citizens doubt that their contribution will be valued or supported. We distinguish four cultural factors likely to encourage active citizenship.

- *The ask:* A wide variety of evidence and experience shows that people will not participate unless they have been asked to do so. 'The ask' is particularly important in communities where the habit of participation is not widespread. Most middle class people have extensive networks of relatives,

friends, neighbours and colleagues, which will ensure that they are frequently asked to participate. This is much less true of poorer, less well-networked groups.

- *The talk:* People will only engage if they believe that those in power will listen to them and communicate with them. Politics and governance needs to take a 'deliberative turn' and give citizens more opportunities to listen and debate. Politicians may need to learn new skills and to work in different ways. Leadership will be less about persuading people to follow a given line and more about the ability to communicate, to facilitate and to broker between different groups.
- *The setting:* The very processes of engagement and governance often feel stuck in the past. The most common democratic forums – the public meeting and the committee meeting – were invented more than a hundred years ago. New democratic procedures – citizens' juries, deliberative polls, youth parliaments, online parliaments – have proved their worth. They can ensure that people who are not usually heard *are* heard. Government, especially central government, needs to make greater use of them.
- *The support:* When citizens become active they need to be supported. This can take various forms: providing training and mentoring; ensuring that the work demanded of active citizens is not unnecessarily burdensome or demanding and providing material support, rewards or compensation.

### Making connections

State bodies cannot foster and support active citizenship on their own. It is vital to find ways of rejuvenating or inventing anew the high-membership civic and political organisations that once served to mobilise people into civic life, taught them civic skills and connected representatives and voters. Political parties should continue to experiment with 'primaries' and invite registered supporters to choose candidates for election. State funding of political parties, if proportional to levels of membership, could encourage rather than undermine party efforts to increase membership. Where possible voluntary organisations should encourage grassroots membership.

## Conclusions and recommendations

While we have argued that people are still interested in political issues, there is currently not much interest in active citizenship in UK society. We are naturally tempted to turn inwards to our private worlds. But there are limits to the extent to which we can create the sorts of world that we want for ourselves and others in this way. The case for active citizenship in the abstract, however, is not enough. People's willingness to take a politically-active role is determined by the effectiveness of the system. The system has to be responsive, inviting and supportive.

This report highlights the innovations and reforms that we think most promising. Some involve changes to the way we – and especially those in power – think. Some are more practical and involve changes to the way organisations are governed and power structured and how those organisations engage with the public. That combination is important. We have to change norms and to reform institutions.

## Recommendations

As citizens, we should play an active part in governance at some point in our lives, but only where our contribution is valued and we have the training and support we need. Government and non-governmental public agencies should view active citizens as their life blood. They need to develop the habit of inviting people to take part at every turn and supporting and rewarding those who do so.

The public are turned off by 'yah boo' oppositional politics. The way in which the media treats politicians as knaves and fools – and politicians impugn their opponents' characters – undermines trust in the political system. Politics should focus more on substantive issues and less on 'character' and 'trust'. By the same token, politicians must avoid any taint of spin or sleaze.

Politicians need to talk less and listen more. Successful politicians will increasingly be facilitators and brokers: able to help communities find their own solutions, rather than simply announcing a party solution. They need to learn new skills and parties should select representatives that are capable of engaging with an increasingly diverse and independently-minded electorate.

- Representative government cannot function without mass membership political parties. All parties should embrace a system of state funding which reduces accusations of cash for influence and rewards activism. Funding should vary with the size and activity of membership, giving parties an incentive to cultivate and involve members.
- The Government should pilot an official 'democracy day' before important national polls, such as referenda and general elections, giving citizens a chance to deliberate on the choices before them. Some have suggested that this should take the form of a public holiday. We suggest, as an alternative, that students and employees should have an opportunity, in the working day, to research the issues and hear debates. Another alternative is to follow other European countries that have weekend voting. Widespread introduction of postal voting would affect the timing of a democracy day but not pose an insurmountable hurdle to it.
- The Government has already introduced citizenship into the school curriculum and a citizenship programme for new UK citizens. It should build on these good foundations by developing a national strategy for adult citizenship education. Local councils should work with the Learning and Skills Councils, colleges and local public bodies to ensure that would-be active citizens are given the direction and training that they need. Following the example of schools, colleges should not merely teach citizenship but actively encourage its practice, by supporting students in campaigning, deliberating and governing.
- Central government, in particular, needs to learn from best practice in local government and the NHS and be more ambitious in its attempts to involve citizens in exploring solutions to difficult social problems. Deliberative techniques – open space events, ideas laboratories, consensus conferences, citizen juries and deliberative polls – have proved their worth.
- Guidelines to benefits agencies need to be clarified in order to ensure that people claiming benefits know that they will not be penalised if they participate in civic activity.
- The Government should explore whether the Child Trust Fund and other asset-based welfare programmes could be developed so as to encourage and reward active citizens. Tuition credits, business start-up credits and other non-cash rewards could also be offered as incentives.

- Power and control over resources should be devolved further to local authorities. Where possible and where local people want it, this should be to neighbourhood level.
- Public bodies should experiment with 'invitation by lot', asking people at random to take up public positions. Citizens could be invited, for instance, to join local government scrutiny panels, or grant-making bodies. The Communities Fund, one of the grant-making bodies of the national lottery, has appointed panel members in this way since 1999.
- Voluntary organisations should cultivate a grassroots membership where possible, and use civic forums and community conferences to involve citizens in campaigns. Charities play an important role in mobilising and training active citizens. The Charity Commission is currently reviewing its guidelines on campaigning; these should work to allow charities to campaign on political issues.
- The roles and responsibilities of governors of public services of all types should be made more explicit, so that governors (and potential governors) understand what is being demanded of them. The OPM/CIPFA Commission on Public Sector Governance should help in this processes.
- Socially-responsible businesses already recognise the benefits of promoting volunteering among employees. But they could do more to foster civic and political engagement. Employees should be encouraged to improve their understanding of civic affairs and engage in public debate. In return, government should champion those businesses that take a lead, and examine mechanisms – including grants and tax relief – to compensate employers for time taken off for civic activity.



# 1 Introduction

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Tony Blair asserted that his government would be defined by its determination to 'recreate the bonds of civic society and community' (Blair 1997). Over the past seven years New Labour has sought to meet this commitment in a variety of ways. The Home Office has been given a formal target to increase community participation by five per cent by 2006. Programmes aimed at helping poor and socially-excluded groups, such as the New Deal and Sure Start programmes, and Health Action Zones, are expected to involve participants in their development and operation. These initiatives have been accompanied by others intended to instill the values and virtues of citizenship in young people, immigrants and the citizenry more generally, such as the citizenship curriculum, citizenship tests, oaths and ceremonies for new citizens and increased funding for adult civic education. This enthusiasm for citizenship is not confined to New Labour. It is often forgotten that John Major and Douglas Hurd were the first prominent politicians to champion 'active citizenship', and Liberal Democrats would claim active citizenship as their core territory.

At the same time, critics of active citizenship argue that giving power to people encourages government by middle class busybodies and unrepresentative activists. Consultation is expensive, time-consuming, and often ignored; most people have better things to do than waste their time attending public meetings. Some of the strongest criticism comes from the poorest and most deprived communities, who see participation offered as a sop to mask the Government's reluctance to invest the necessary billions that alone can eradicate poverty. Some critics argue the new vogue for public involvement even threatens to undermine representative government itself, leaving more and more decisions to be taken through unaccountable appointees and focus groups or driven by perceived public opinion in general.

The Working Party on Active Citizenship was set up in 2003 to explore what active citizenship means, what it adds to our individual lives, and what, if anything, can and should be done to promote it. The group met many times to hear representations from its members and from others. It commissioned research, organised a conference and held a number of public seminars. Our work was structured around the following questions:

- What is active citizenship?
- What is our role as 'active citizens' as distinct from 'customers' or users, such as patients, passengers, claimants, taxpayers and victims of crime, in the public services?

- What would change if we were more active?
- To what extent are people active citizens today?
- Are people interested in being active citizens?
- If they are, what sort of involvement would they want or choose?
- What are the obstacles in the way of greater citizen involvement in decision making? Who puts them there? How could they be overcome?

We decided at an early stage to focus on active citizenship as civic participation – taking part in making decisions and holding power to account – rather than volunteering or acting as a good neighbour. We do not question the value of these things, but there is no evidence to indicate that this area of our collective civic life is at great risk: indeed volunteering is increasing among most sections of society (Johnston and Jowell 2001; Hall 2002; Attwood *et al* 2003). Civic participation, on the other hand, shows signs of being in crisis: involvement and trust in the traditional political institutions, in particular, are in a parlous state. We are interested in those moments when citizens get involved in campaigning for change or governing society, whether as voters, members of political parties, trade unionists, demonstrators, lay members of primary care trusts, trustees of housing associations or boards of school governors.

Members of the working party argued from the beginning that we should focus on the changing relationship between citizens and government. We, as citizens, can lay claim to certain rights and privileges: the right to freedom of speech and association, to equal treatment before the law, and perhaps, in some societies, to unemployment benefit, health care or a minimum wage. But we also need active citizens willing and able to play a role in protecting these rights and ensuring that society is well-governed and public institutions are well-run. And as our political system works now, it does not do enough to promote and encourage these citizens.

Poor and socially-excluded communities have more to gain – or lose – than the rest of us from changes in the way government works and public services are run. We wanted also to ask ourselves how active citizenship impacts on such communities and to identify whether, and if so how, they might benefit from increased public engagement in politics and governance.

### Dimensions of active citizenship

Citizens can be actively engaged in different ways and to different degrees.

#### **The consultation/participation dimension**

Citizens can be given, or can take on, different degrees of power and responsibility. So, following Arnstein's famous ladder of participation, it is possible to survey their opinions (research), consult them in greater depth (consultation), involve them as partners (participation) or devolve power to them (self government) (Arnstein 1969).

#### **The formal/informal dimension**

Citizens can have a more or less formal role in governing and running public services. They can take on a formal role, elected or appointed, as governors of a public body or service, or they can seek to influence it as ordinary citizens, by filling in questionnaires and taking part in surveys, voting, joining organisations, writing letters, signing petitions and attending public meetings.

#### **The governing/co-production dimension**

Citizens can be engaged as citizens in governing and scrutinising a public service, or as 'co-producers' in the running of public services. For example, a residents' association that works with the police to develop an anti-crime strategy for a neighbourhood is engaging in the first sense. Residents who cooperate with the police to ensure the success of the strategy, by respecting the law or monitoring and reporting anti-social behaviour, are engaging in the second.

#### **The bottom-up/top-down dimension**

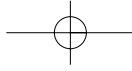
Active citizenship can be led from the bottom up, as when residents campaign against a proposed development, or from the top down, as when a local council consults residents on recycling policy.

## Democracies need active citizens

Complex democracies need expert elected representatives and professional civil institutions – a judiciary, press, watchdogs and public auditors, NGOs, universities and think tanks – to defend the public interest. We also need active citizens. They play an indispensable role in holding power to account and ensuring that public services and government are responsive to public values. Without them, our political system would cease to be seen as legitimate. Some people argue that it is more important to extend individual choice in public services. We do not deny the importance of choice; our argument is that it must sit alongside citizen involvement. We contend that the worst-off have much to gain from political participation. Decision-making is too often the preserve of the middle classes.

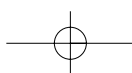
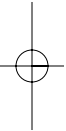
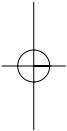
Yet people are turning away from formal civic and political participation. While the better-off and better-educated remain as interested and active in politics – in the broad sense – as they ever were (reading papers, expressing opinions, signing petitions, campaigning), they have come to doubt the integrity of the political system and the honesty of politicians. They do not find it as easy as it should be to contribute and they do not believe that any contribution would be valued or effective. Many less-advantaged people appear close to giving up on civic life altogether, neither following the news, nor trusting the political system to respond to their needs and concerns. Hence the overall decline in confidence, falling levels of political party membership and voter turnout that we have witnessed in recent years. Hence the decline in the mediating organisations – political parties, trade unions and other voluntary civic organisations – that once gave people a political voice. Hence the sense of loneliness and disconnectedness among citizens alludes to in the title of this report. The predicament we describe is not peculiar to Britain. Trust in the political system has declined in most Western democracies and a recent Norwegian inquiry described its political system in much the same terms as we describe ours (Norwegian Study of Power and Democracy 2003). But this common predicament is perhaps particularly pronounced in Britain.

The society in which we live has changed radically, in ways which make old approaches to citizenship and old relationships between citizens and government out of date. Some of the institutions that served in the past to connect individuals with government cannot function any longer in the way they once did. They need to be re-invented. They need



to be complemented by new public forums and new kinds of engagement. Our political system has begun to respond. Politicians and parties, government and public bodies, are finding new, less hierarchical, more deliberative ways of involving the public. Many new or more responsible positions have been created for service users or ordinary citizens to be appointed or elected to roles in public service governance, as citizen-governors, on a voluntary and usually unpaid basis. New Deal for Communities boards, foundation hospitals and the neighbourhood councils mooted in Labour's Big Conversation are examples. But simply creating new opportunities to be consulted or participate, new governance structures, and more people to vote for, will not work if it does not tackle the problems already facing active citizens.

We argue that while people are willing – often eager – to take a more active role, they will only do so if they believe it will further the interests, causes and values they believe in. They have to be convinced that the terms of engagement make involvement worthwhile.



## 2 Disconnected citizens

The working party considered a great deal of evidence about the way our democracy and our public services are changing. In the UK, we tend to think of our political system as long-established and unlikely to change fundamentally. In fact, the elements of the basic framework that we take for granted – a sovereign parliament, elected multi-purpose local government, universal adult suffrage and mass political parties – came together only in the early years of the 20th century (women becoming fully enfranchised only from 1928). While this framework has remained relatively stable, signs of strain have been obvious since the 1970s. The sovereignty of Westminster has been challenged by globalisation and the emergence of the EU, on the one hand, and demands for Welsh and Scottish autonomy on the other. Local government – already the subject in 1985 of a study entitled *Half a Century of Municipal Decline* (Gefland *et al* 1985) – has lost much of its freedom and become more financially dependent. The great democratic victory of universal suffrage seems hollow as electoral turnout falls. All the main political parties have been haemorrhaging members.

This political system is usually characterised as a representative democracy. But it was never a system in which political activity was confined to elected representatives. Active citizens played a vital part in civic affairs. Since the 19th century, trades unions, political associations, conservative, liberal and working men's clubs, farmers' clubs, veterans' clubs, churches and church organisations, women's cooperative guilds, the Women's Institute, colleges and societies, voluntary organisations and charities have criss-crossed the political spectrum and held together a highly-active civil society. In any democracy, the links between electorate and representatives are mediated by a number of organisations within civil society which act as conduits of ideas, transmitters of responsibilities and civic education, and as 'connective tissue' which holds society together. It is the absence of these organisations that is always remarked upon in studies of the old Soviet Union and China: there was nothing 'joining up' civil society outside the state.

Mass membership political parties in particular – once with memberships counted in millions – played a number of crucial roles. They mobilised people around a range of causes, nurtured a shared set of beliefs and a sense of public purpose, provided opportunities for activists to hone political skills, and mentored those who sought to take on more important roles, and, obviously, they put forward candidates for public office. They also provided a route through which elected representatives could find out

what people thought, and transmit their ideas and their message, thus increasing connections between people and government.

They no longer play this role as effectively as they did. They are seen as adversarial, partisan and out of touch with ordinary people. The culture of politics is seen as bullying, hectoring and about 'winning arguments' rather than finding solutions.

- At 59 per cent, turnout for the 2001 election was the lowest since 1918, lower even than the previous post-War low of 70 per cent for the 1979 election. Low turnouts have also been the norm in recent elections of members of the European Parliament, local councillors, members of the Scottish, Welsh and London Assemblies, and the election for the London mayor. These falls in turnout are unprecedented, even by international standards (Evans 2003; Dunleavy *et al* 2003).
- Only 39 per cent of 18-24 year-olds are estimated to have turned out at the 2001 election, down 27 per cent from the 1997 election (Electoral Commission 2001). A recent survey of the 'millennial generation' of young people who reached the age of 21 just before or after the millennium, found they were less involved in politics than the equivalent age group was 30 years ago, and have little knowledge of local, national or European politics (MORI 2003).
- Voters are much less attached to parties or their value systems than they once were. The first British election survey conducted in 1964 revealed that 44 per cent of electors described themselves as 'very strong' party identifiers. By the time of the 2001 survey only 14 per cent placed themselves in that category (Whiteley 2003; Bromley *et al* 2004).
- Surveys of Labour Party membership show that in 1989 just over half of Labour Party members devoted no time at all to party activities in the average month. By 1999, this figure had grown to 65 per cent of the membership. In 1989, ten per cent of members devoted more than ten hours a month to party activities, but by 1999, this figure had become three per cent. The decline is less dramatic for the Liberal Democrats, although they started from a lower position. The authors of this survey judge, however, that if 'comparable data were available for the Conservatives, it would be unlikely to show a different picture' (Seyd and Whiteley 2002).

Political parties are not the only institutions losing membership and support. Fewer people are also engaging in trades unions. Surveys suggest that the percentage of employees who were union members fell by over a third between 1983 and 2001, from around half to just under a third. Some of this decline is to be explained by changes in the composition of the workforce: traditional union strongholds have seen their share of employment decline. Some of the decline is due to decline in workers' attachment to the values and goals of the unions (Bryson and Gomez 2002). Another reason for the decline is that union organisation is not what it was. There are fewer activists asking people to join. Turnout for union elections is also down: even ordinary, non-activist members have become more passive (Bryson and Gomez 2002).

There has also been a decline in a third, more heterogeneous category of civic organisations, such as farmers' clubs, Labour clubs and working men's clubs, women's organisations like the Women's Institute, veterans' clubs and church networks, Rotary clubs, Scouts, Guides and friendly societies, business networks, veteran organisations and similar bodies. While not primarily political, these organisations nevertheless schooled their members in the arts of organisation, and took an interest in politics, campaigning and lobbying on issues that concerned them. To the extent that they have declined, they have been replaced by new mass-membership organisations, such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the National Trust, and the RSPB. The combined membership of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth now exceeds that of all of Britain's political parties. But these organisations do not tend to stimulate intensive, deliberative engagement among their members in the way the older civic organisations often did (see box facing page). They rely mainly on their members' cheque books, rather than their time or their political judgment (for trends in membership of organisations see Hall 2002; Jonstone and Jowell 2001).

### The problem is not lack of interest

Much has changed in our society over the last 30 years that might have contributed to a decline in the traditional forms of civic participation. The majority of people have become more affluent, separating them from old notions of class loyalty or political tribalism; society has become much more diverse and many communities are much more heterogeneous, no longer easy to label in terms of class, race or cultural identity. British society



### The decline of old-style mass-membership organisations

Early in our working party's existence, the American political scientist Theda Skocpol gave a presentation to an ippr seminar, based on her recent book, *Diminished Democracy: From membership to management in American civic life*. Skocpol's presentation highlighted the existence of an extraordinarily influential range of mass membership organisations in American life. The names of many of these bodies – The Society of Oddfellows, The Order of Good Templars, The General Federation of Women's Clubs – are now all but forgotten. But, along with better-known groups like the YMCA and the American Legion, they attracted, at their peak, from the Civil War to the Kennedy years, the allegiance of a large proportion of Americans; astoundingly, Skocpol and her colleagues identified nearly 60 voluntary organisations that once enrolled more than one per cent of citizens as members. These organisations gave people a voice. They trained them in politics and governance. They fostered a sense of common civic belonging and ensured government was responsive to their concerns, and that they, in turn, helped legitimise government decisions. As Skocpol showed, these organisations were responsible for a great deal of progressive, public-minded state and federal government policy. Then, over the 1970s and 1980s, they disappeared. Skocpol argued that the people that used to lead and fund them switched their energies elsewhere – to exclusive small-membership, Washington-based pressure groups, campaigning organisations and think tanks – leaving their rank and file members adrift (Skocpol 2003). We argue that something similar, though less dramatic, has been happening here.

is less hierarchical and less parochial; we are no longer as deferential to those in authority and global media bring national and international issues into every living room. Time for civic participation has been squeezed, it is argued, by longer working hours, higher economic activity rates among women and competing leisure interests.

Against this background, simply saying that people 'ought' to be active citizens, is wishful thinking. What if no one wants to be? And there are many explanations as to why the public no longer want to be involved. One is that we are too well off. Adversity, it is claimed, brings people out.

Where people are affluent, they do not feel the need to get involved. A less forgiving explanation has it that we have come to see ourselves as consumers rather than citizens: we have become so fixed on the pleasures of the purchase that we simply no longer identify with the larger public realm. Alternatively it is argued that lack of participation reflects satisfaction with our political system. On this view, recent falls in voter turnout are partly explained by absence of large ideological divisions between the parties, and this is itself a reflection of a social and political system which is viewed as relatively fair and effective (Cox 2000).

We are neither as contented nor as apolitical as such explanations suggest. While there are many senses in which it is true that we have 'never had it so good', people still have much to contend with. We are richer, but we are not generally much happier. We battle to achieve a reasonable balance between work and the rest of life; we are frustrated by the poverty of the public realm and poor public services; we are threatened with unemployment and debt, and we struggle to achieve distinction and status. People also worry deeply about long-term and less parochial issues: environmental degradation, global warming, war, terrorism and disease.

Perhaps these stark truths account for the fact that, contrary to the expectations of those who believe we no longer care about the civic realm, interest in politics has not declined but remained constant over the last three decades at around 30 per cent (Park 1999). Even among young people interest in politics has not declined. There is evidence that people do want to involve themselves directly in the governance of their communities and public services. One recent survey found that 55 per cent of respondents would be interested in being more involved in the decision-making of their local authority (Bromley *et al* 1999). Perhaps the best evidence that people will get engaged is offered by the thousands of people already involved, despite the barriers to engagement we discuss later in this report. Similarly, people continue to believe in basic democratic principles and subscribe to democratic values: three quarters of the population are willing to serve on a jury, and almost as many believe they have a duty to vote in elections, and are willing to take part in a local neighbourhood watch scheme (Seyd and Whiteley 2003).

While formal political participation has fallen precipitously, informal or micro-level political involvement appears to be holding up well. The recent Citizenship Audit found that, over the past year, more than half of respondents had given money to a cause with the aim of 'influencing rules, laws

or policies', almost half of respondents had signed a petition, almost a third had boycotted certain products, and a quarter had contacted a public official (Seyd and Whiteley 2003). Finally, we have seen a rise in protesting and demonstrating: the Countryside Alliance marches, or the protests against the Iraq war are only the most dramatic examples. This is an untraditional but important and relatively demanding form of engagement and one which should be seen as an expression of democratic values, rather than a challenge to them. Demonstrators vote at a higher rate than the public at large (Doherty *et al* 2003).

If disengagement really were attributable to affluence or consumerism we would expect to see greatest engagement among the worst off. Yet engagement is lowest not among the richest but among the disadvantaged and marginalised. Liverpool Riverside, which has three of the top ten most deprived wards in the UK (Index of Multiple Deprivation), had the lowest turnout in 2001 (33 per cent); affluent Winchester had the highest (72 per cent). Looking at the US, Robert Putnam found it was the busiest people, with demanding jobs, and high incomes, who were most active in civil society (Putnam 2000). Though voter turnout in Britain, and most of Europe, does not vary very much across the classes – unlike in the US – non-electoral participation does. It is much lower among those without a degree than those with (Curtice and Seyd 2003).

The picture of our society as made up of affluent middle classes too busy enjoying their wealth to care about politics or the public realm is just not convincing.

### Disconnected citizens

The balance of evidence suggests that, far from being satisfied or apathetic about our political system, citizens feel mistrustful, powerless and frustrated. John Curtice and Ben Seyd might well be justified in invoking Britain's relatively high and stable levels of informal political activity to argue that we face no 'crisis of participation' (Curtice and Seyd 2004). We believe, however, there is a threatening crisis in the relation between the formal political system and its public.

- Trust in elected government and politicians has reached new lows. Recent MORI evidence shows that where 79 per cent of citizens trust their local hospital, only 48 per cent trust their local council and even

less – 43 per cent – the British government. Politicians and political parties are viewed with special wariness. Only 18 per cent of Britons trust politicians, giving them the same ranking as journalists and putting them well below business leaders (28 per cent) and trade union officials (33 per cent). And only 16 per cent trust political parties, four per cent less than trust the press. By contrast, a massive 82 per cent trust the British army (MORI 2003a). We have already mentioned increasing mistrust for the political system: in 1987, 37 per cent of respondents to surveys agreed with the statement ‘British governments of any party can be trusted to place the need of the nation above the interests of their own political party’. That figure fell to a low of 16 per cent in 2000 and has risen only slightly since (Bromley *et al* 2001; Bromley *et al* 2004). It is important to stress, against those who think decline in trust is a global trend, and as such irresistible, that while trust in political institutions has fallen in most western countries, it has not fallen in all (trust in parliament increased in Denmark and Italy between 1981 and 1999). The fall, moreover, has been particularly pronounced in the UK (Strategy Unit, undated, Fig 12 and Table 2).

- Citizens are less inclined than they once were to believe that they can personally affect the system and this is particularly true of less well educated people. While nearly 60 per cent think that, if they act collectively, they can make a difference, around half of the electorate state that the political system is so complicated that they find it hard to understand. The great majority of people do not see government as being responsive to their concerns (Curtice and Seyd 2003).
- Many surveys show that the public, far from not wanting to be burdened with political responsibilities, believe that local and national government is too controlling and that public services should make an effort to engage with people. For instance, 60 per cent of Britons agree that ‘government power is too centralised’ (cited in Clarke 2002) and 80 per cent believe that ‘councils should make more of an effort to find out what local people want’ (MORI 2003a). It could be argued that this only shows that people want more power as customers or consumers and not as citizens. But 2000 ICM/JRRT polling revealed that while over two-thirds of respondents felt that voters should have ‘a fair amount or a great deal of power’ between elections, over three quarters judged that they had ‘a little’ or ‘none at all’ (Clarke 2002). Summing up ten years

of regular polls on constitutional issues, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Trust, the authors of the polls conclude:

the public has consistently been strongly in favour of constitutional reform...even after the Labour government's major programme of reforms, they want more complete reforms than those which the government has enacted and reforms which the government has so far failed to enact. (Dunleavy *et al* 2001)

- More qualitative research also points to high levels of mistrust. ippr focus group work from 2000 found widespread support for the view that 'the government and other decision makers are out of sync with the public voice'. The sense of disempowerment was especially marked among young people and ethnic minorities (Clarke 2002).
- Finally, telling evidence comes from recent work by Stephen Coleman. His research, which the working party will be publishing separately, strongly suggests that although people feel relatively connected to their neighbours and local GPs, they feel unconnected to councillors and even less connected to MPs, who rank with clergymen in terms of disconnectedness.

This distrust and sense of powerlessness, rather than apathy, explains the decline in voter turnout and party membership. It is this, rather than pleasures of the private sphere, that deters people from taking on governing positions or otherwise getting involved. It is this that, we argue, justifies our claim that we are increasingly a nation of lonely and disconnected citizens. We contend that the terms of engagement between ordinary citizens on the one hand, and those in authority on the other, are very often very wrong. All is not well with active citizenship in Britain.

### 3 Active citizenship and its rivals

Why should we care whether old forms of active citizenship are declining? Declining membership may be a problem for the political parties, trades unions and other organisations, but why do the rest of us need to worry? Some people believe that representative democracy can largely do without active citizens. We do not need to be vigilant or to scrutinise what government is doing, because we elect representatives to do it for us. Others claim that we no longer need to place such reliance on collective decision-making because the best way of giving people control over their lives is to offer individual choice in public services. In this chapter we show why both these arguments should be rejected. Now, more than ever before, there is a need for citizens to take an active interest and get involved in the way society is run.

We still have a democracy that is primarily a representative one, but we cannot simply rely on our representatives to govern on our behalf. Put from the citizen's point of view, this argument goes back as far as Rousseau: people with power – politicians, professionals, wealthy business leaders – cannot be allowed to exercise it uncontrolled. Citizens have to keep their representatives in check otherwise they may put their own interests before those of the public. The point can just as easily be made from the representatives' point of view: they cannot represent effectively except in dialogue and through engagement with active citizens. The counterpart of disconnected citizens is disconnected representatives; the result is inadequate governance.

As communities have become more diverse, it has become harder for elected representatives to 'speak for' everyone they represent. Representatives can no longer claim, as they once did, that they have a natural, unmediated grasp of the preferences and values of their electorate, that as a farmer, for example, or a docker, they could speak for a local community of farmers or dockers. The diversity of interests, experiences, lifestyles and perceptions in today's communities is too great.

Nor are the decisions facing politicians now as simple as they once were. Matters that might formerly have been seen as the preserve of experts – such as MMR immunisation or GM crops – are now matters for political judgment. There is now a class of major political challenges that involve persuading people to change their behaviour, and therefore can only be addressed through engaging and winning popular consent. Our society is faced with difficult trade-offs between competing needs: between, for example, our desire to drive cars and our need to escape traffic chaos and gridlock;

or between our desire to consume more and more products and our need to reduce waste and pollution. Increasingly, politicians need to negotiate solutions and as citizens we have to participate in making them work.

We do not believe, therefore, that there is a choice between elected representatives and active citizens. Both are needed. Indeed, we argue that representation itself, properly conceived, depends vitally on active citizens; that, as John Stewart has put it, 'In contrast to the passive act of being a representative is the possibility of an active process of representation' (Stewart 1995). In other words, representatives govern most effectively where they are in close and constant communication with the people they represent, engaging them in discussion, listening to their views and judgments, and feeding back and accounting for the decisions they make as representatives. They need citizens willing and able to talk to them and forums and channels that can ensure an open two-way conversation. They will often need to act as brokers and facilitators, helping people within their constituencies to reach conclusions and solve problems rather than solving them on their behalf.

As Stephen Coleman argues in his forthcoming pamphlet, consultation and engagement are not a threat to proper representation (or in Coleman's language 'direct representation') but a condition of it.

### The limits of choice

There is widespread agreement that the post-War welfare state was too paternalistic. Since the 1970s, successive waves of reform, largely driven by government rather than the grassroots, have left few areas of government or public services untouched. Two contrasting approaches to reform have run alongside each other almost from the start. One emphasises individual choice for public service users (including, at the extreme, the right to exit the service altogether, as with council tenants' right to buy); the other aims to strengthen users' or citizens' 'voice' in the way government or a service is run. Examples of the 'choice' approach include: parental choice of school;

direct payments for social care; the current proposals to extend patients' choice in the NHS; and a host of initiatives intended to extend the rights and choice available to social housing tenants, from right to buy to the current pilot choice-based letting schemes. The 'voice' approach is exemplified by the now-ubiquitous use of consultation processes in connection with major policy or service development issues, including surveys, focus groups, consultation meetings, panels and the like, but also more radical steps to extend involvement through devolved governance. Many new or more responsible positions have been created for service users or ordinary citizens to be appointed or elected to roles in public service governance, as citizen-governors, on a voluntary and usually unpaid basis. Local management of schools gave new responsibilities to school governors, of whom there are now 200,000. Reform of council housing has, since the 1980s, led to the creation of housing cooperatives, tenant management organisations, local housing companies, arms length management organisations, and a rapid growth in the number and size of housing associations, creating many new citizen-governor roles for tenant representatives and others. Ministers have recently mooted the possibility of creating new democratically-elected police boards, primary care boards, and neighbourhood panels (Blunkett 2003; Blears 2003).

The voice agenda, it is clear, is founded on a commitment to extend citizen engagement and opportunities for active citizenship. But choice, it would seem, leads in a different direction. A current argument (once, but no longer exclusively, a right-wing one) is that we no longer need to rely to the same extent on collective mechanisms or shared decision-making. The best way of giving people control over their lives is to offer individual choice in public services. By extending markets in the school system, health service and council housing, giving parents a greater choice of schools, patients a greater choice of types and places of treatment, council tenants a greater choice of accommodation, people can be empowered. It is argued that competition ensures that service users get exactly what they want. They can leave a service that is costly, ineffective or inferior in other ways and turn to others on the market. Where old-fashioned, single-provider public services tend to be run either in favour of public servants who staff them, or the middle classes who govern their boards and know how to manage them, marketised public services make ordinary 'customers' sovereign.

Advocates of choice characteristically take a dim view of motivations of public servants: they see them, in Julian Le Grand's terms, as 'knaves' rather



than 'knights', out to get the most from the system, at the expense of those they are meant to serve (Le Grand 2003). They complain that while giving the public a stronger voice benefits the articulate and resourceful middle class, choice can empower the less well off (Osborne and Gaebler 1994; Collins 2004).

By contrast, opponents of choice (almost always on the left of the political spectrum) argue that choice will lead to sink schools, or second-class health services for the poor and socially-excluded. They argue that markets tend to benefit the rich or well-educated over the poor, erode professional and public service ethos and undermine solidarity (see, for example, Brighthouse 2000, Appleby *et al* 2003; Mohan 2003).

The working party decided early on that it did not want to take sides on arguments as to whether there is space to extend individual 'choice' in a particular public service. As a working party incorporating a wide range of political views, we would probably not have been able to reach agreement.

We did all recognise, however, that choice has fairly strict limits. Many important decisions about the shape of public services, and the society in which they find their place, are of an irreducibly collective and so political kind and can not easily be left to the market or quasi-markets. Examples of these include:

- Decisions on levels of tax and expenditure.
- Decisions as to how to distribute resources across the public services.
- Planning decisions about the shape of towns, cities and countryside.
- Decisions about what to conserve as part of a nation's or community's heritage.
- Decisions pertaining to schools and hospitals, in cases where no practical choices exist for users, such as in remote communities, or cases where only one or two teams in the locality, region or even country are qualified to provide training or treatment.
- Decisions about crime prevention strategies, policing and criminal justice.

In fact, as the Harvard public management expert Michael Moore has pointed out, the very decision as to how to structure and regulate the market is an essentially political decision, and is one that the market alone cannot decide (Moore 1997). People who are poor or otherwise excluded

are particularly poor in choice. They cannot move out of a declining estate or travel the distance to a first class hospital. They cannot resort to the car when the bus service is cut. Not even the middle classes can buy themselves out of the public sphere.

We believe it is dangerous to cast the relationship between the state and citizens as one between a company and its customers. At the very least, this threatens to diminish the public sphere as a space of deliberation and collective choice, so undermining trust in government. At worst, it will encourage people to see themselves as consumers rather than citizens, with the result that they will come to resent any limitations to public service provision, or reject any sacrifices that government requests of them (Needham 2003).

### Collective choice for all

Our conclusion is that there is room for argument over whether voice or choice represents the best way forward in relation to this or that aspect of a particular service, but no case for believing that choice provides a general alternative to active citizenship. However, it would be wrong to conclude from the long, but incomplete, list of voice initiatives given earlier that governments have been successfully rolling out an active citizenship agenda for the last two decades, or that the argument is already won. There have undoubtedly been some clear successes in widening involvement and providing effective voice, but the evidence surveyed in Chapter 2 suggests that they have made little overall impact on public attitudes. There are also other indications that all is not well.

The gap between the 'power rich' and the 'power poor' is widening. The poorest people feel most excluded from decision-making, from government, and from the ability to control their own lives. Individual choice does not solve this problem, since the poorest people remain those with least choice. We do recognise the criticism of current efforts at inclusion that do not take account of the structural problems that make power unequal. In a powerful study, *Voice and Equality*, Verba, Schlozman and Brady, have suggested how much louder the middle class voice is in American politics than the working class one: 'Over and over, our data showed that participatory input is tilted in the direction of the more advantaged groups in society... The voices of the well educated and the well heeled...sound more loudly' (1995). The same is true of the UK. Home

Office research has shown that the 35 to 49 age group are the most likely to participate in civic affairs (44 per cent), and those aged 16 to 24 least likely (28 per cent). In terms of ethnic group, white people are the most likely to participate in civic affairs (41 per cent) and people from Chinese/Other ethnic groups are the least likely (26 per cent). In terms of gender, white men are the most likely to participate in civic affairs (41 per cent) and Asian women are the least likely (24 per cent). People in the most advantaged areas are the most likely to participate in all of the community activities, those in the most deprived areas are least likely (Attwood *et al* 1993). It is surely right to argue with Verba, Schlozman and Brady, that at least part of the challenge here is to find ways of ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.

True, where opportunities have been provided for wider involvement in governance, experience has been mixed. Some elections for New Deal for Communities board positions have attracted relatively high turnouts; in others, turnout has been low, or positions have not been contested (Rallings and Thrasher 2002). Many schools experience chronic difficulties in filling school governor positions. Turnout in the first Foundation Trust Board elections has been disappointingly low (Gould 2004). Little work has gone into evaluating the experience of people elected or appointed as lay governors of public services, but the evidence available shows that these roles have not been made easy. Citizen governors complain about being used as 'rubber stamps'. Their roles and responsibilities are not defined, and they are rarely given the training or support they need to govern effectively (Jane Steele and Greg Parston 2003)

Overall, this evidence might seem to support those sceptical of the appetite for active citizenship. We argue that it is better understood as evidence of failure by government – and public service managers – to develop citizen-friendly governance, to understand what motivates engagement and what deters it and adopt governance arrangements accordingly. We need to design the way we govern with the citizen in mind. To this we now turn.

### The pleasures of active citizenship

Active citizenship tends to invoke images of tiresome public meetings in decrepit town halls. But this is not how it is always experienced by active citizens themselves. As BBC research into grassroots campaigners discovered 'enthusiasm for campaigning is cumulative and habit forming'. (Lodestar/BBC 2003)

- Research into parent governors show that while most become governors out of concern for their children, many 'progress from an initial preoccupation with their own child to a growing understanding of, and commitment to, the needs of the institution and the wider community. Often, on ceasing to be parent governors, they transfer to other categories of nominated membership'. (Ranson et al 2003)
- Recent Home Office commissioned research found that over half of jurors surveyed would be happy to do jury service again, while 19 per cent said that they 'would not mind doing it again'. The most positive aspects of engaging in jury service were reported to be having a greater understanding of the criminal court trial, a feeling of having performed an important civic duty and finding the experience personally fulfilling. (Matthews et al 2004)
- Citizens who serve on citizens' juries seem to find the experience a positive one, both enjoyable and educative (see, for example, Lowndes et al 2001).
- Studies of Switzerland and elsewhere have shown that, controlling for other factors, 'the extent of democratic participation possibilities exerts a statistically significant, robust, and sizeable effect on happiness' (Frey and Stutzer 2002). Political participation makes us happy!

## 4 Changing the terms of engagement

In the previous chapters we have argued, against those who questioned whether we need them, that active citizens are vital to our democracy. We have also suggested, however, that we need to improve the terms of exchange between active citizens and public servants. This is not just a matter for government. There are implications for all of us, for the political parties and campaigning organisations and the way active citizens are represented and active citizenship is covered in the media. To these we turn in the second part of this chapter. But first we look at how government and public services treat citizens now and what they could do to engage them more effectively.

In discussing these issues, the working party came up with the metaphor of a swimming pool of participation, with a shallow and a deep end. Most would-be active citizens considering going for a swim in the pool of public life know that they will be thrown into the deep end, regardless of whether they can swim or not. There will be no one there to offer them swimming lessons or throw them a life belt if things get tough. Indeed, as things work now, public life hardly has a shallow end at all. The response must include ensuring that the pool has a shallow end where citizens can feel safe and involvement does not make excessive demands on their time or skills. If citizens find participation at the shallow end a rewarding experience it should become easier to encourage them to venture deeper. But we adopted the idea of a swimming pool, in preference to the more familiar analogy of Arnstein's ladder of participation, because we wanted to avoid the implication that higher up the ladder is better. Some citizens will choose never to leave the shallow end, and that should be recognised as a respectable choice, and their contribution is no less valuable as a result; others will need swimming lessons, and the opportunity to practice the skills they will need as they venture deeper.

Getting the terms of engagement right requires tackling a number of barriers that currently obstruct effective involvement, act as disincentives to active citizenship and contribute to citizens' sense of frustration and powerlessness. We suggest that, in general, citizens are much more likely to get involved if:

- the issue is one they care about or one close to their personal experience;
- they are asked and made to feel that their input is welcomed;
- the body asking for their views has the power to do something about the issue;

### Four levels of TV audience participation

TV has led the way in finding news ways of engaging audiences. Here, drawing on the work of Stephen Coleman (Coleman 1988 and 2002), we distinguish four different levels of involvement. Government and public bodies rarely get beyond the equivalent of level 2.

#### 1. Collusion

Phone-ins and studio-discussion formats like Trisha or Kilroy-Silk. In these, the audience can ask questions but control remains with the producers who filter who gets to ask questions and control the microphone.

#### 2. Weak interaction ('Big Brother'/'I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here')

The audience have control over some aspects of the show but within the boundaries set by the producer (ie it has to vote off one of the housemates each week). Note: this is similar to buying monopoly rather than making up the rules of a game yourself.

#### 3. Strong interaction

Online discussion forums, such as BBCi or Slashdot. The audience frames exactly what happens. Producers retain a filtering and aggregation role, but do not determine the shape or flow of the event.

#### 4. Contestation

Sometimes in live broadcasts the audience gain control of the show and impose their own agenda, as when 'Oprah' was taken over by the audience following the LA riots or Dina Gould confronted Margaret Thatcher on 'Nationwide' after the Falklands War.

- their views are given due consideration, and can be seen to be reflected in the decision that is taken or action agreed on the issue;
- the form of engagement is fit for purpose and in particular asks no more from citizens than is necessary. There has to be a proportionality between what citizens are asked to put in and the social benefits that result; and
- if they receive the training and support they need to carry out their role effectively.

Looking at the extent to which current practice falls short of these conditions, we can distinguish structural and cultural barriers to civic engagement.

### Structural factors affecting civic engagement

We contend that citizens are more likely to become active where they judge that the democratic structures to which they have access have the authority to effect the changes they want to see. When they think that an institution has appropriate powers, they will engage with it; where they do not, they will not. So differences in turnout for national, local and European elections accurately reflect the different powers that national, local and European representatives are perceived to possess. Turnout for local elections varies across Europe in line with the standing and influence of local government.

Many of the forces shaping our lives are now beyond national or even European control, and this no doubt accounts for some of the loss of faith in our national political system. Finding ways of bringing these forces to account is one of the greatest challenges that democracies face today. But this is not a challenge we are bold enough to address here. Instead we draw attention to the relative powerlessness in crucial aspects of our major democratic institutions. Large areas of public life are not accountable to popular democratic control. The British executive remains one of the most powerful in the democratic world and Parliament's powers over it remain relatively weak. The Lords remain unelected and unrepresentative. Power within the executive is arguably shifting away from Cabinet towards the Prime Minister (Democratic Audit 2002).

There are particular obstacles affecting local engagement. These are important both because local issues rank particularly high among people's

priorities, and because local action will often be the most practical and effective form of engagement in any issue (remember the Local Agenda 21 slogan 'Think Global, Act Local'). Yet British local government has less power than in other European countries and, by international standards, the tier of local government closest to the citizen (district and unitary councils) is large and has a high ratio of representatives to voters. There are 21,000 councillors in England and Wales, supplemented by perhaps 100,000 parish councillors, whereas France, for example, has almost 200,000 elected representatives within local government. Police forces and health services are in most respects only indirectly and distantly accountable to citizens.

A further problem is the lack of fit between the issues that most concern people and the functional focus of local government and public services. Few people understand the division of functions between district and county councils. On such issues of major public concern as drug abuse or anti-social behaviour, a number of agencies have an interest and need to be involved in planning and delivering a response. Yet it is totally unrealistic to expect citizens to navigate engagement with each of them separately. The only practical response is to bring the organisation to the citizen.

If we want people to take seriously their role as active citizens, power has to be accessible. A number of clear recommendations for central and local government emerge:

- Decision-making power should be returned to local government, including power over resources.
- The linkages between different levels of government need to be strong enough for citizens to track a decision through – and know when and how to influence each level.
- New levels of governance – regional government or neighbourhood government – should have clear responsibilities and accountabilities and also be transparent and easy to access.
- Citizen governors at all levels need to be clear about their power and authority, and be encouraged to exercise it.
- Citizens should have clear routes to challenge and replace non-elected public bodies.



## Cultural factors affecting engagement

Structural reform will not be enough unless the experience of engagement is a positive one for citizens. People are much more likely to get involved if institutions are seen to be willing to work and share power with them, if they invite involvement and have an open, participatory culture. We distinguish four cultural determinants likely to encourage active citizenship.

### The ask

Why is it that you can't open your post without a letter from some charity asking you for a donation? Why is it that you can't walk down a high street without being asked to join a voluntary organisation? Because the voluntary sector understands that people are much more likely to give their money or time when they are asked to do so. They want to be approached directly and personally, and treated as important individuals. They also want to be thanked.

There is now an established body of research on what motivates individuals to get politically involved which underscores the importance of 'the ask'. In their famous 1990s study of political participation in the United States, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) found that even politically-literate and well-educated citizens with plenty of spare time are unlikely to participate in political society unless they have been asked to do so. Summing up their recent research on what motivates civic engagement, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003) concluded, 'Mobilisation is a very consistent influence on civic engagement. People who are asked to undertake a particular action are more likely to be civically active than those who are not'.

The importance of the ask in encouraging electoral turnout has been particularly well documented. Turnout at elections is effected by face-to-face contact with candidates. Puzzled as to why one particular ward had shown an unexpectedly high turnout, Rallings and Thrasher (2003) found that one of the sitting councillors had personally canvassed as many homes as possible in a widespread and thinly-populated area (See also Pattie *et al* 1995; Whiteley and Seyd 1998).

The ask is particularly important in communities where the habit of participation is not widespread, as in many 'hard-to-reach' deprived communities. As Verba, Schlozman and Brady suggested, most middle class people have extensive networks of relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues,

### The power of the ask

The power of the ask is strikingly highlighted in a new study by Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker. They ranked eight local authorities according to levels of socio-economic deprivation, social capital and political participation, only to discover that there was little correlation between the three. Levels of political participation, in particular, were not linked, in any very determinate way, with deprivation or social capital. So wealthy Sutton had low levels of social capital but high levels of political participation. Deprived Hull had medium levels of social capital but dismal levels of participation. And deprived Middlesbrough had medium levels of social capital, but very high levels of political participation. They concluded that the extent to which political parties; public management and the voluntary and community sectors ask the public to participate has a dramatic effect on whether latent social capital is mobilised or constrained. While the citizens of Hull are willing to participate to a relatively high degree in their communities, closed and conflict-ridden institutions have prevented them from engaging in the political process. Middlesbrough, in contrast, has a strong tradition of harnessing the social capital of its population through innovative public consultation. The city boasts a network of 'community councils' and an active and engaged voluntary sector (Lowndes et al 2002).

which will ensure that they are frequently asked to participate. This is much less true of poorer, less well-networked groups. As we have indicated, many voluntary civic organisations have experienced dramatic decline over the last few decades. These once served as recruiting agents for the political system, precisely because they encouraged the face-to-face ask. Party members were invited to sit on boards and chair committees, voters were asked to vote and workers to enrol in the union. Part of the work of the political parties and trade unions was focused on mobilising those at the bottom of the social pile. Today, electoral campaigns are increasingly directed at a small class of swing voters, who, heavily canvassed, turn out in relatively high numbers. The rest, however, are neglected. A registered blood donor will receive four or five letters a year asking for donations and are thanked for donating. Registered voters rarely get the same treatment.

Having been asked, many citizens find engagement a positive and rewarding experience, and one they are willing to repeat. Nothing, however, puts people off more than the perception that the invitation is not genuine and that it is being done for form's sake or as window dressing. When the Government invited people to apply to become 'people's peers' more than 3,100 did so. After what was perceived as appointment of establishment figures, only 28 applied for the next round (Hall 2003). Furthermore, despite this low number, no effort was made to explain to unsuccessful candidates why they had been unsuccessful.

#### The talk

People do not just want to be invited to take part. They also want those in power to listen to them if they do. We are less accepting of authority than we once were, and we each have a stronger sense of our own individuality. We want to be spoken to as equals to those in power and we want to have an opportunity to tell our story and be heard. The era of the public speech and the political broadcast are coming to an end. The day of the conversation has begun.

The importance of listening and communicating has been well brought out in a number of recent surveys, which have asked people what they want from politicians. These show that people do not demand that representatives be exceptionally intelligent, knowledgeable or efficient. Nor do they expect them to represent their interests or points of view in a mechanical way. They do expect them to be honest, open, and to communicate well. They want them to engage in proper discussions: to listen, to deliberate and to account for their actions.

MORI evidence from the People's Panel, for instance, shows that while 15 per cent of people think it most important that public leaders are efficient, 18 per cent think they should be accessible, 26 per cent think they should be good communicators, and 38 per cent think they should be honest (MORI 2000).

Work by the Audit Commission and others suggests that trust in public institutions is driven by people's perception of

- honesty and keeping promises
- working for the common good
- personal contact and accessibility, and
- learning from mistakes (MORI 2003).

### Community Fund Panel members

Late in 1997, the National Lottery Charities Board (NLCB), now the Community Fund, was asked by its Yorkshire and the Humber regional advisory panel whether either one or two members of the 130-strong panel could be chosen randomly from the electoral roll. The NLCB agreed to a pilot scheme under which two members of the Yorkshire and the Humber panel and two of the Greater London panel were chosen by lot followed by interview. The two panels wrote at random to 25 citizens from the electoral roll in each of two randomly-chosen authorities within their areas. Between three and six citizens expressed interest from each local authority. All respondents were interviewed, and two were appointed to each panel.

The pilot was commended in 1999 in an independent evaluation, and in the autumn of that year the NLCB system was extended to all nine English regional panels and retained as the panels were turned into awards committees with enhanced powers. More than 25 people have been chosen by lot. Their ages range from 18 to 55 and their jobs include electrician, swimming instructor, police officer, student, health visitor, housewife and production manager of a plastics firm. Eighteen men have been appointed and eight women. They have served for between one and four years and helped give away tens of millions of lottery pounds. In its recent report, **Government by Appointment**, the Select Committee on Public Administration called for more lay governors to be appointed in this way.

Finally, when participants in Stephen Coleman's YouGov poll were asked to say why they did not feel connected to their elected representatives, it was notable that hardly any complained that they had not voted for their representative, disliked his or her political views or that their representatives failed to advance their interests and values. They complained that they did not listen or communicate well, that they were 'invisible', 'aloof' or 'arrogant' (Coleman forthcoming).

Some sectors of society have been quick to understand the importance of allowing the public a voice. Newspapers and TV stations provide myriad opportunities for readers and viewers to vote, respond and converse. Where once the TV audience in the studio sat and listened, now it talks; where once viewers sat at home and watched, now they vote, text and chat online. Politicians and public services have not always been as quick to keep up with the times. Too much political information is 'spun', and too much political debate is pointlessly adversarial. Too many public meetings are still a form of broadcast.

This is a tension between two models of democracy: an aggregative model that makes majority rule the key characteristic of democracy and winning votes the key activity of politicians, and a deliberative model that emphasises open discussion in which all can participate aiming to reach an informed consensus. Much political practice remains dominated by the aggregative model, but evidence from citizens exhibits a clear preference for a more deliberative approach. 'Many studies have shown that citizens will accept the legitimacy of collective decisions that go against them, but only if they think their arguments and reasons have been given a fair hearing, and others have taken seriously what they have to say' (Kymlicka 2002).

It can be argued that socially-excluded groups are particularly likely to gain when democracy takes a deliberative turn. Their points of view tend to go unheard, and their interests and insights tend to get overlooked in the ordinary course of events (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power 2000). Too often they have been denied the opportunities and capacities they need to participate in the democratic process on an equal footing. We are not naïve about the inequalities of power and resource that make consensus difficult to achieve in our society. However, as the problems that face communities become increasingly complex, and involve trade-offs and compromises between different outcomes – as our communities become more diverse – so, we argue, negotiation, dialogue, and conversation become stronger democratic 'tools' than the traditional ones of voting and representation.

We recognise, however, that deliberation requires a lot of those who take part in it. Participants in deliberative processes need to be able to approach issues with an open mind and assess claims on their merits. They need to be able to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant claims regarding the public good. They need to be able to articulate their own point of view, and – just as importantly – allow others to articulate theirs. These ‘deliberative virtues’ are not natural to us: we have to be educated into them. The Government has already introduced citizenship curriculum into schools, quite rightly encouraging not only the teaching but the practice of citizenship. We argue that colleges and local and central government need to develop a national strategy to promote adult civic skills, including deliberative skills. We suggest that the Government should pilot an official ‘democracy day’ before important national polls, such as referenda and general elections, giving citizens a chance to deliberate on the choices before them.

### Alternative conceptions of democracy

#### Aggregative or vote-centred

everyone has equal right to participate  
 aim: to win votes  
 form of exchange: debate  
 the majority wins  
 uninformed opinion  
 voting as essential  
 voting based on raw preference  
 opinion polls  
 ‘tabloid’ journalism

#### Deliberative or talk-centred

everyone has equal right to participate  
 aim: to reach an informed consensus  
 form of exchange: deliberation/discussion  
 the best argument wins  
 informed debate  
 voting as last resort  
 voting based on refined convictions  
 deliberative polls  
 civic journalism

If most of us need to improve our democratic capabilities, this is particularly true of representatives whether politicians or citizen-governors or others in leadership roles. Politicians may need to learn new skills, in order to work in different ways. If new stress is to be put onto dialogue, negotiation, networks and if we are to rely more on the internet and informal methods of communication, politicians and other citizen governors will need the skills to cope. The ability to communicate, to facilitate and to broker between different groups within a community, become more important.

### The setting

The very processes of engagement and governance often feel archaic. The most common democratic forums – the public meeting and the committee meeting – were invented more than a hundred years ago to serve a model of democracy in which deliberation was the preserve of an elected elite. The layout of most council chambers and committee rooms, inherited from the same era, reinforces the message that the public can expect at most to watch and listen what goes on in council meetings, not to participate (Rogers 2004). The governance of nearly all other public bodies, as well as political parties and other civic organisations, is carried out in private. The public are excluded.

Committees and public meetings still have their place, but they need to be complemented by other forums and processes better suited to eliciting the full range of views on an issue and engaging the full range of stakeholders. There are many models: the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) guide to consultation methods (part of IDeA Knowledge [www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)) describes 35 distinct approaches, the majority with a deliberative element, including citizens' juries, deliberative polls, neighbourhood forums, open space events and youth parliaments. These new procedures need to be employed with care: they must fit the issue or decision at stake and participants have to be convinced that the findings will be taken seriously, and that the debate is not constrained or fixed. However, they have been proven to have an ability to change the views of both experts and citizens and to forge consensus. They can ensure that people who do not usually feel confident enough to take part in public debate are heard (Barnes 1999; Fishkin 1997; Dolan *et al* 1999). Government, especially central government, needs to make greater use of them.

Paul Brickell, Director of Regeneration at the Bromley-by-Bow Centre in East London, has argued, powerfully, that 'community involvement' currently relies excessively on formal meetings and committees, inevitably dominated by public service professionals, councillors and others with committee experience (Brickell 2000). He makes the case for a more entrepreneurial structure that is less about the community sitting on committees and more about enabling them to run things on their own. The 2002/3 evaluation of the Government's New Deal for Communities programme similarly registered a concern that Partnership Board meetings 'can prove overly long and complex, leading to disillusionment and opening up Partnerships to the possibility of small and unrepresentative cliques enjoying disproportionate influence' (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2000). Yet

### Langdon School

Langdon School in Newham, East London, is a large comprehensive, serving a disadvantaged and diverse community (52 per cent of pupils get free lunches). The school, however, has built up an extremely strong civic ethos, encouraging all those connected with it to take an active part in school, local, national and even international affairs.

A student School Council, Year Councils and a Sports Council give pupils the chance to get involved in making decisions about school policy. This September two students will join the governing body as Associate Governors. Students have been supported in making presentations to the local community forum, local council and to the Government's Children and Young People's Unit. In April 2004, 30 students gave a talk on poverty in the developing world to Overseas Development Minister Hilary Benn and Education Secretary Charles Clarke at Westminster.

Pupils are also encouraged to volunteer and take an active part in local community life, with all pupils involved in fundraising for Comic Relief, Sport Relief and Action Aid. Local people and ex-pupils are also encouraged to get involved in the school, as volunteer sports coaches, classroom assistants and fundraisers and in helping with weekend and summer learning programmes, both for children and local adults. A number of former students have received Millennium Volunteers recognition for the work they have done with the school, and a number of parents who began by helping run sports events, and would never have considered themselves as governor material, are now governors. 'It shouldn't just be the middle classes who get involved', as the school's headteacher Vanessa Wiseman told our working party.

The school's achievements have been recognised in various awards and grants. Langdon, praised in its last OFSTED report, for its 'pivotal and positive position in the community', was one of the first schools to receive a Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Award for Citizenship, and many students have been winners of Newham's 'Shining Through' awards.

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### Hansard Society Online consultation on Domestic Violence

In March 2000 the Hansard Society arranged an online consultation in which survivors of domestic violence gave evidence to the All-Party Domestic Violence Group (APDVG). This proved a groundbreaking exercise, illustrating the potential of e-technology as a means to involve hard-to-reach groups usually excluded from the democratic process.

The Hansard Society put thought and time into winning the confidence of potential project participants, working with trusted intermediary organisations – women's groups, disability groups and Women's Aid – attending regional meetings of domestic violence workers, and guaranteeing the women both technical support and confidentiality. Only five per cent of women said they would have participated if the site had not been secure from outside users.

A total of 222 women registered to use the website and on 1 March 2000 the consultation began, with MPs on the APDVG logged on and contributing as they felt appropriate.

As promised, the Hansard Society devoted great energies to ensuring the consultation website was both easy to use and private. The organisation produced a manual specifically designed for novice users, and offered full telephone and some face-to-face support. Women who registered were issued with a username and a password that allowed them access to the secure discussion forum. They were also given a pseudonym to provide an additional assurance that their identities would not be discovered by abusive partners. Confident that discussion was private, the women felt they could talk freely and give more honest and personal evidence about their experiences. The Hansard Society's project coordinator acted as a moderator. She had previously worked with survivors of domestic violence and so had enough background knowledge to understand their situations. Discussions were still led by participants, who could express their views, relate personal stories, or ask the MPs questions.

The consultation was extremely well received. Nearly 19 out of 20 participants said that it had been useful and they would be willing to take part again. The participants particularly valued the fact that concerned MPs were listening to and contributing to the exchange. Seventy four per

cent of women said it made a difference to their participation – and the MPs themselves thought the consultation was an excellent opportunity to allow victims of domestic violence to contribute to the debate. The APVDG took note of all the issues raised and many were subsequently discussed in Parliament.

[www.democracyforum.org.uk/womendiscuss/default.htm](http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/womendiscuss/default.htm)

there are dangers in trying, as Brickell seems to want to do, to avoid governance altogether. We would argue, instead, that governance does not have to be intimidating, exclusionary or boring. The imaginative use of 'new' procedures, most of them no longer new, can make civic engagement engaging, even fun.

#### The support

Finally, citizens, when they become active, need to be supported. Participatory democrats sometimes write as if people only need to be given a chance to speak and they will hold forth volubly. It is true that most of us prize the chance to shape the world around us but participation can be a time-consuming and otherwise demanding process, especially for people without the education, skills and networks that middle class professionals take for granted (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power 2000).

Once again, the old intermediary voluntary organisations – the political parties, trades unions and civic societies – used to play a constructive role here. At their best, they provided would-be active citizens with guidance and mentoring, offered them the company of like-minded fellows, and proffered social standing. Their decline has left a hole that government and its public bodies do not do nearly enough to fill. The support needed by active citizens can take various forms:

- Providing training or mentoring. If you begin a new job or go to a new college, you are introduced and initiated. But if you join a public committee you tend to be on your own. Your initiation is usually the arrival, through the post, of the first weighty set of committee papers – minutes, agenda and reports. Yet there are many examples of successful training and mentoring programmes.

### Espoo Youth Council

In 1997 the young people of Espoo in Finland established their own Youth Council. Espoo City Board then took the decision to create a formal link with the Youth Council by allowing its members to sit on the various city committees responsible for running the city's services. Youth Councillors could put forward proposals for consideration at committee meetings and represent the views of Espoo's youth population to the city authorities.

There are 21,000 young citizens who have the right to vote in the Youth Council elections. Terms of office are two years and the elections, involving 74 candidates aged between 13 and 19, are held in the autumn. Votes can be cast via the post, internet or text messages, and 30 candidates (15 boys and 15 girls) are elected.

One of the means through which young people can present and develop their ideas is via the online 'Ideas Factory' (winner of the EuroPrix 99 Award for Improving Democracy with Multimedia). Anyone who registers on the site can submit their ideas, which, if feasible, are then presented as proposals at the three-weekly General Assembly Youth Council meetings. Votes are then cast by the Council to decide whether the proposal will be taken to the City Committees. Since 1997 approximately 25 per cent of proposals have been enacted.

The scheme has been a recognised success and Finland has subsequently begun a process of establishing Youth Councils on a national basis. In 2002 there were over 80 such councils throughout the country and the numbers continue to grow.

<http://english.espoo.fi>

### Lambeth Youth Council

In February 2002, Lambeth borough, hoping to make its service more responsive to young people and foster future community leaders, established a Youth Council. Meeting twice a week in Brixton Town Hall, the Council, which won a 2002 ippr Public Involvement Award, is open to anyone between the ages of 11 and 24. The meetings are chaired by the County Council's development worker and so far nearly 100 young people have signed up, with around 30 regularly attending meetings, taking leadership roles and driving the project forward.

The local authority has provided strong support, offering training so that Youth Councillors can go into local schools and take part in lessons, and has made a point of trying to act on the Youth Council's recommendations. It has also encouraged Youth Council members to become governors of local primary schools.

Early on in its existence, the Council decided it wanted to look at the police's use of stop and search, a major concern for young people in Lambeth. The Youth Council interviewed key figures including the Chief Superintendent and the London Mayor's policy advisor on race. It subsequently provided feedback to the Home Office on new stop and search guidelines and made presentations to the Lambeth Community Police Consultative Group and at a national conference.

In another initiative, The Teenage Pregnancy Project, Youth Council members developed model Personal, Social and Health Education lessons, aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy rates. Youth Councillors also developed a proposal to start peer education in these classes and met the borough's teenage pregnancy co-ordinator, who has subsequently funded a full-time worker to take the project forward. Young people can now sign up to the project and receive six weeks' training, before going into local schools and colleges and giving talks on issues such as HIV-Aids.

[www.lambeth.gov.uk](http://www.lambeth.gov.uk)

- Ensuring that the work demanded of active citizens is not unnecessarily burdensome or demanding. Many active citizens complain of the amount of work, some of it unnecessary, expected of them.

#### A shadowing scheme for potential magistrates

In July 2001 Operation Black Vote (OBV) and the Department of Constitutional Affairs (DCA) launched a pilot shadowing scheme known as the Magistrates Shadowing System (MSS) in which members of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities shadow magistrates with a view to raising awareness of the workings within the magistracy.

Forty five 'shadowers' were selected and 94 magistrates actively volunteered to participate. The OBV-DCA partnership launched the scheme initially in Birmingham and Bristol and subsequently in Bradford, Cardiff, Oldham, Inner London, and Middlesex. OBV co-ordinates the scheme from its offices in Bethnal Green, providing one full-time and two part-time members of staff who are responsible for its day-to-day management. The project uses the OBV website to keep interested parties informed about the scheme's progress. Shadowers keep journals of their experiences and submit them to OBV via email, excerpts of which are posted on the online notice board. Day-to-day activities include observing trials and appeals, meeting probation officers, and undertaking prison visits.

In order to generate interest in the run up to the scheme's launch, OBV organised circulars and advertisements in the local and national press inviting individuals from minority groups aged 25 and over to apply. The application process adhered strictly to criteria requiring that candidates dedicate a minimum of ten working days over six months to the scheme and be willing to undertake the role of Community Ambassadors, promoting the magistracy in the local community and encouraging other BME individuals to apply to become magistrates.

The scheme has been widely recognised as a success in demystifying the magistracy and removing negative stereotypes, with both

shadowers and magistrates responding positively and saying that the project has been challenging but rewarding. Key factors contributing to this success are:

- Shadowers are generally respected members of their local communities who see their role in MSS as one of civic engagement and an extension of their interest in community affairs.
- Magistrates are given plenty of assistance by Clerks of the Court, who help to ensure that MSS does not interfere with their regular responsibilities.
- The unique partnership between OBV and the DCA gives the scheme the credibility it needs to function in the criminal justice system.

Many shadowers said they had been unaware of the possibility of becoming a magistrate before their involvement in MSS but subsequently at least three have applied and many more are interested in doing so.

After a favourable evaluative report commissioned in August 2002, the DCA relaunched and extended the scheme. It is now based in 12 areas across the country, with six to eight shadowers selected from each.

<http://www.obv.org.uk>

The experience of local councillors is telling: among those that gave up their seat voluntarily in 2000 (rather than lose it at an election or due to boundary changes), less than one per cent identified their expecting to be defeated as a factor and only 2.5 per cent complained of inadequate allowances. Among those in employment, half cited the effect that the time taken by council business had on their employment as a factor, and more than a third adverse effects on family (IDeA 2001).

- Providing financial support or compensation. Providing free childcare and elderly care for all public appointments can lower the barrier to participation. Even where childcare is available, it is rarely advertised widely and is difficult to apply for. All appointees in the Office of the Deputy

Prime Minister have long been entitled to claim the costs of childcare, but a recent survey of female appointees showed that few were aware of the entitlement (Fresko 2001). Similarly, government has to ensure that involvement as an active citizen does not jeopardise benefit rights, as it sometimes does. The Equal Opportunities Commission, the Disability Rights Commission, the Engage Network and the Commissioner for Public Appointments have all flagged this up as an area of concern.

We acknowledge that the question of remuneration for those who take on formal roles as lay governors, magistrates and councillors is a very difficult one. There is a clear danger that the moment people start to be paid for an activity or service, they cease to be citizens and become professionals with professional interests. We note merely that, firstly, practices in this area are not consistent at the moment (Select Committee on Public Administration 2003); and secondly, it is possible, in principle, to sustain a distinction between an allowance, or even compensation for professional earnings foregone and other forms of remuneration.

We could be more imaginative in the way we encourage and reward participation. Instead of payment in cash for instance, which might indeed turn active citizens into employees, they might be paid in the form of a contribution to their or their children's Child Trust Funds, or towards tuition fees, a deposit on a home, capital for business start-up or pension credit. These sorts of rewards have a distinct social meaning from that of a cash reward (Paxton 2002).

- Where groups are under-represented, even those who do take part are likely to remain silent. Some local strategic partnerships encourage community representatives to meet together as an 'action learning set' to discuss how things are going, and plan how to intervene at meetings. This type of practice – which has some analogy to recent development in corporate governance, where non-executive directors increasingly ask executive board members to leave the room for part of a meeting (*The Economist* 2004) – could be extended.
- Active engagement in public life is often treated by government, and experienced by citizens in an episodic way. Government and public bodies need to do more to ensure that citizens are encouraged to move from one form of engagement to another. In terms of the swimming pool analogy, we need to create opportunities for people to move from

### Developing and supporting active citizens

Bradford Metropolitan District Council has estimated that the Bradford district has approximately 3,300 positions that require active citizens to fill them, including positions for councillors, parish councillors, non-executive members of PCTs, school governors, magistrates, community representatives on housing association and regeneration boards. It is concerned that that the people on these boards have the capability and the support to deliver essential services to the people of the District but also that they are truly representative of Bradford's makeup.

In order to address these concerns the Council is developing a strategy to help widen the pool of potential active citizens and ensure that they have the necessary support.

- The Council is currently developing a strategy to help widen the pool of potential active citizens. It has established a network and run meetings to identify what recruitment strategies and training initiatives are in place and how they could be best co-ordinated.
- They are working with Bradford University's International Centre for Participation Studies and School of Lifelong Education and Development to develop courses for supporting and training people who hold public offices.
- At a wider level they are also identifying possible career paths for active citizens. Bradford's schools have developed an enhanced Citizenship Curriculum and the Council is examining routes from School Councils through bodies such as the Youth Parliament to other public bodies.

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the shallow to the deep end, or, if they want, from the deep end back to the shallow.

This means that local government and other public organisations need to map our possible 'career paths for citizens', and ensure that they are invited and supported in moving from one engagement to another. Local councils, in particular, should, in their capacities as community leaders, work with Learning and Skills councils, colleges, public bodies and third sector organisations to ensure effective training and support for active citizens.

### A strategic approach

We have made a distinction between 'structural' and 'cultural' barriers to active engagement in civic life, and identified a range of possible 'cultural barriers'.

Governance is a complicated business, with many stages and elements. Generally more than one barrier will be in place. It is often the case, for instance, that structure and culture work together in ways that are hard to distinguish. Recent Home Office research with focus groups suggested that hardly anyone had heard of police authorities or knew their role (Myhill 2003). Once informed of their existence, members of the public doubted their effectiveness, and so were unlikely to work with them. This judgment seems to have been based on doubts about whether the police authorities had the (structural) authority to effect necessary change, and whether they had the sort of open culture that would ensure that ordinary citizens were heard. Similarly, when councillors resign, they do so out of a sense that they do not have institutional power or cultural support.

This means government and public services need to take a strategic approach. The Audit Commission found that 'the most effective [local] councils use a combination of approaches that enable people to communicate with their council at a time and in a manner that suits them. North Lincolnshire for instance, uses a range of channels to identify issues that are important to local people. These include quality of life surveys, community/citizens' panels, service satisfaction surveys, their websites, and surveys about specific issues' (Audit Commission 2003). And it was a feature of some of the most impressive and ambitious innovations we heard about – notably participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre – that they allowed different levels of engagement, and made contact with people through different routes (Baiocchi 2003).

### BBC iCan

Since the web became a mass medium, people have talked about how it can be used as a tool for democratic participation. But beyond one-off, single-issue campaigns such as the Stop the War coalition, it has done little to engage disparate groups and allow them to campaign on issues that effect them.

In 2002, however, in the wake of falling voter turnout and other signs of disaffection with politics, the BBC decided to explore the ways of using new technology to connect citizens to each other. Over a year in development, iCan was launched in October 2003.

The site allows people to find information and advice on hundreds of issues, see what's going on in their local area, post notices about issues that concern them, and start an online campaign. For example, it allows individuals in a local area with a shared concern about a rundown park to post their grievances online, have a discussion and propose solutions, and then arrange to meet in person to take things further. Meanwhile somebody in a different area with a similar concern can get in touch to share ideas and advice. Together they can set up a mini-site specifically focussed on their type of concern.

'People don't approach politics through party allegiances any more' says Sian Kevill who jointly heads the project, 'they approach it through an issue, and this site makes it easier for people to connect into politics through an issue'.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk>

## Making connections

We have discussed some of the barriers in the way of active citizenship, and means of overcoming them. We return, finally, however, to stress the importance of rejuvenating or inventing anew the high-membership civic and political organisations that once served to mobilise people into civic life, taught them civic skills, provided forums for collective deliberation about politics, priorities and public life, and connected professional politicians to citizens.

Clearly, political parties, which today face near extinction, were the exemplar of this type of organisation. There is no magic key to their regeneration. Indeed, they have to tread a very difficult balance, becoming more open and deliberative on the one hand, while, on the other, retaining a distinct political identity. Politicians will have to learn to avoid the practices that do most to turn the public off: impugning their opponents' characters and trustworthiness, or engaging in flagrant opportunism, thoughtless tribalism and control freakery. They will, as we have already suggested, have to learn to talk less and listen more. At the same time, political parties will have to remain value-driven organisations, with distinct ideological orientations and politicians will have to be seen to act from deeply-held political principles, otherwise voters will not have cause to vote for one rather than another and so will not vote at all.

However they execute this balancing act, the future legitimacy of political parties depends on their successfully cultivating a large and active local membership. Only in this way can they rebuild trust between politicians and the communities they serve (Taylor 2003; New Politics Network 2003). Here we were persuaded that state funding for political parties, where it is accompanied by a cap on the amount of money an individual can donate to a party, and linked to the size of a party's paying membership, could help both stem accusations of sleaze and encourage parties to cultivate new members (Cain and Taylor 2002). The political parties should also continue to experiment, as the Conservatives have done in Worthington, with 'primaries', and invite registered supporters, and not just fully paid-up members, to choose candidates for election (Robinson 2003). This offers another way of reconnecting voters to parties.

There are also implications for other organisations of civil society: community and voluntary organisations such as trades unions and clubs. They all can and do play key roles in mobilising citizens and providing them

### London Citizens and the Mayoral Accountability Assembly

London Citizens is an excellent example of a civic organisation effectively mobilising grassroots support.

Set up in 2001 as an alliance of London-based faith congregations, trades unions, schools and other community groups, London Citizens campaigns on wide range of issues of concern to Londoners – especially poor Londoners. The organisation holds a strategy team meeting ever six weeks open to delegates from all 54 member groups, which sets the organisation's strategy and scrutinises its performance. Once a project has been decided upon, an action committee takes over its day-to-day management. Among recent projects, London Citizens lobbied a local hospital to provide better meals for patients and campaigned for a higher minimum wage for workers in the capital.

In September 2003, in the run up to the campaign for the mayoral election, members of London Citizens began a 'listening exercise' in which they canvassed tens of thousands of people in mosques, churches, hospitals and universities across South East London as to the issues they cared most about. The concerns raised were then developed into a number of concrete proposals which delegates from member organisations debated and prioritised. Members collected around 15,000 supporting signatures for the proposals (concerning a higher minimum wage for Londoners, affordable housing, a summer work scheme for young people, and community policing) which they presented to Mayoral candidates at the Accountability Assembly in Westminster Central Hall in May 2004. Over 2000 people from communities across London attended the televised assembly and the Mayoral candidates were asked to state their position in relation to each proposal. All the candidates promised that, if elected, they would meet representatives of London Citizens again within two months of the election and again on its anniversary and account for their performance in delivering on their pledges.

[www.londoncitizens.org.uk](http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk)

with opportunities to learn and practice the skills of citizenship. The challenge for national campaigning organisations, as Theda Skocpol has argued with reference to the US (Skocpol 2003), is to rethink the balance between focusing on high-level lobbying of central government and high-profile work with the national media on the one hand, and developing local branches and a local activist base on the other. Our argument implies that even if short-term advantage points to national action, there are longer-term benefits in ensuring the survival and development of local networks and interactions.

Finally we argue that employers from the public, private and 'third' sectors can help by providing active encouragement and support for active citizenship, both by fostering education in, and debate about, civic affairs, in the work place and by supporting citizens who want to get involved. Government, in return, needs to ensure that employers that allow their workers time off as active citizens are compensated. This is a point that has been made with reference to local councillors but applies more generally (Local Government Information Unit 2003).

## 5 An agenda for active citizens

There are points in political debate where suddenly something that seemed unimportant becomes important; when an area largely neglected by government becomes of urgent public concern. We hope this report will encourage people to recognise that active citizens, the life blood of our democracy, cannot be taken for granted. They need to be empowered, cultivated and supported. Here we identify in summary form, our recommendations.

### Overview

As citizens we should play an active part in governance at some point in our lives but only where our contribution is valued and we have the training and support we need. Government and non-governmental public agencies should view active citizens as their life blood. They need to develop the habit of inviting people to take part at every turn and supporting and rewarding those who do get involved.

The public are turned off by 'yah boo' oppositional politics. The way that the media treats all politicians as knaves and fools, and politicians impugn their opponents' characters undermines trust in the political system. Politics should focus more on substantive issues and less on 'character' and 'trust'. By the same token, politicians must avoid any taint of spin or sleaze.

Politicians need to talk less, and listen more. Successful politicians will increasingly be facilitators and brokers: able to help communities find their own solutions, rather than simply announcing a party solution. They need to learn new skills and parties should select representatives that are capable of engaging with an increasingly diverse and independently-minded electorate.

### Recommendations

- Representative government cannot function without mass membership political parties. All parties should embrace a system of state funding which reduces accusations of cash for influence and rewards activism. Funding should vary with the size and activity of membership, giving parties an incentive to cultivate and involve members.
- The Government should pilot an official 'democracy day' before important national polls, such as referenda and general elections, giving citizens a chance to deliberate on the choices before them. Some have suggested

that this should take the form of a public holiday. We suggest, as an alternative, that students and employees should have an opportunity, in the working day, to research the issues and hear debates. Another alternative is to follow other European countries that have weekend voting. Widespread introduction of postal voting would affect the timing of a democracy day but not pose an insurmountable hurdle to it.

- The Government has already introduced citizenship into the school curriculum and a citizenship programme for new UK citizens. It should build on these good foundations by developing a national strategy for adult citizenship education. Local councils should work with the Learning and Skills Councils, colleges and local public bodies to ensure that would-be active citizens are given the direction and training that they need. Following the example of schools, colleges should not merely teach citizenship but actively encourage its practice, by supporting students in campaigning, deliberating and governing.
- Central government, in particular, needs to learn from best practice in local government and the NHS and be more ambitious in its attempts to involve citizens in exploring solutions to difficult social problems. Deliberative techniques – open space events, ideas laboratories, consensus conferences, citizen juries and deliberative polls – have proved their worth.
- Guidelines to benefits agencies need to be clarified in order to ensure that people claiming benefits know that they will not be penalised if they participate in civic activity.
- The Government should explore whether the Child Trust Fund and other asset-based welfare programmes could be developed so as to encourage and reward active citizens. Tuition credits, business start-up credits and other non-cash rewards could also be offered as incentives.
- Power and control over resources should be devolved further to local authorities. Where possible and where local people want it, this should be to neighbourhood level.
- Public bodies should experiment with ‘invitation by lot’, asking people at random to take up public positions. Citizens could be invited, for instance, to join local government scrutiny panels, or grant-making bodies. The Communities Fund, one of the grant-making bodies of the national lottery, has appointed panel members in this way since 1999.

- Voluntary organisations should cultivate a grassroots membership where possible, and use civic forums and community conferences to involve citizens in campaigns. Charities play an important role in mobilising and training active citizens. The Charity Commission is currently reviewing its guidelines on campaigning; these should work to allow charities to campaign on political issues.
- The roles and responsibilities of governors of public services of all types should be made more explicit, so that governors (and potential governors) understand what is being demanded of them. The OPM/CIPFA Commission on Public Sector Governance should help in this processes.
- Socially-responsible businesses already recognise the benefits of promoting volunteering among employees. They could do more to foster civic and political engagement. Employees should be encouraged to improve their understanding of civic affairs and engage in public debate. In return, government should champion those businesses that take a lead, and examine mechanisms – including grants and tax relief – to compensate employers for time taken off for civic activity.



## 6 Conclusion

There is not much belief, in our society, in active citizenship. This scepticism has many sources, some that can be traced back deep into our history and culture, some which lie closer to the surface, in people's experience of politics and government.

We are naturally tempted to turn inwards to our private worlds, and enjoy, as far as we can, the real and valuable pleasures of the personal realm. We rely on family and friends. We strive to increase our incomes, to get the best we can, as individuals, from the public services and the market, and, when in need, from support groups and charities, while helping others, as private individuals and workers, in countless ways.

There are severe limits to the extent to which we can create the sorts of world that we want for ourselves or others in this way. Our lives are shaped and directed by the way markets, bureaucracies and services are structured, opportunities and privileges distributed, public services run, and the environment regulated and managed. While society deals many a good hand, it is for many a crushing, crippling force.

Active involvement in decision-making has most to offer the worst off: they have less ability to buy their way out of problems, fewer other resources to draw on (education, language skills, networks) and are more likely to be ill, or to be victims of crime and subject to violent abuse. Political participation offers them the chance to be heard, to ensure that collective political decisions are made with an appreciation of their predicament, needs and interests. It offers them the chance to make sure that public services are tailor-made to fit their needs, that they are enabling and not humiliating and that they are a source of self respect rather than stigma. It can also help them acquire new skills and networks further increasing mastery over their own lives.

The abstract case for active citizenship is not enough. The extent to which people will take a politically-active role is determined by the effectiveness of the system. Each of us makes a calculation. That calculation will rarely be made on purely prudential grounds. On the contrary, political involvement will only occasionally be justifiable in this way. People tend to get involved to advance not just their own interests but, at the very least, the interests of people close to them. They are usually motivated by broader thoughts about fairness, justice or the public good. Even if these sorts of considerations do not originally prompt them to enter the political arena, they tend to keep them there.

We all have our limits. We need to feel involvement is worth it and that we are not wasting our time. The system has to be inviting, responsive and

supportive. This is particularly true for disadvantaged people. The cost of becoming an active citizen is much higher for them than for the rest of us. They are often busier and sometimes holding down more than one job. They do not have childcare readily to hand, and are often less healthy than middle class equivalents. Lacking the know how that many middle class people can take for granted, politics can be much more daunting. That means that the gains have to be correspondingly greater. The benefits to involvement have to be tangible and substantial.

We do not subscribe to the view that people are not interested in becoming involved. As we have tried to show, there is a lot of interest in politics and still more concern for the fate of the public realm. Engagement has many levels, not all of them conventional or obvious. We agree with Pippa Norris when she writes 'The pervasive idea that the public has become disengaged from every form of civic life oversimplifies a far more complex and messy reality' (quoted in Blears 2003).

At present, there is little belief in the established system. Citizens increasingly doubt that they have the power to change things, either because political institutions lack the requisite authority themselves, or because they do not ask, listen to or support ordinary citizens (or a combination of the two). Hence, the lonely citizen and the increasingly lonely representative.

We do not want to underplay the genuine barriers to increasing popular participation in civil and political life. The old intermediary organisations that mobilised citizens and gave them a voice are not going to be easy to reinvent. As we have indicated, many of the policies and developments designed to restore trust and increase engagement in the political process (devolution, reform of local government structures, reform of the laws governing donations to political parties) appear to have had little success (although disengagement might have proceeded much faster without them).

We have highlighted the innovations and reforms that we think most promising. Some involve changes to the way we all think and changes to the way those in power think. Some are more practicable, and involve changes to the way organisations are governed, power administered, and the public involved. That combination is important. If we are going to become a more politically-active, civically-engaged nation, we need at once to change norms – values, dispositions and expectations – and to reform institutions. We have to know where, roughly, we want to get to, and offer practical suggestions as to how to get there. In this report, we have tried to furnish suggestions as to both.

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