Neglecting Democracy

Participation and representation in 21st Century Britain

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"[I]t ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions high respect; their business unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions, to theirs – and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own.

But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure,— no, nor from the law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

Edmund Burke

"The English think they are free. They are only free during the election of members of parliament."

Jean Jacques Rousseau

CHAPTER 1

Democracy and Disengagement in Britain

What does democracy mean in the 21st Century? While the collapse of Soviet Communism at the end of the 20th Century has not spelt the end of History, it has certainly extinguished the idea of so-called 'People's Democracies' – at least outside China, North Korea and Cuba. Today, Western liberal democracy stands alone as the only operative system of government to have developed, and to be developing, in a manner that allows it a claim to be the inheritor of the democratic tradition. The individual practice of Western liberal democracy varies from one polity to another but certain core principles unite them and place them firmly in that tradition. They share a belief in the idea of a society based on laws which are made in a way that reflects the right of citizens regardless of ethnicity, gender, class or religion to participate, in some way, in their making; the idea that all citizens are equal before the law; the right of all citizens to associate freely; the right to free expression of opinion; the right to live without fear of oppression; the idea that there is an appropriate balance to be drawn between the individual's right to freedom and the collective good of all and that in the final analysis the government is accountable for its actions to the collective will. Questions and ambiguities exist, of course, but these guiding principles and ideals represent the starting point from which further debates may take place.

The right of citizens to participate in the process of law-making is a central feature of democratic systems. But this raises the question of what defines a citizen and what degree of participation is necessary for a polity to be described as democratic. For example, Aristotle claimed that the ability to participate in politics was the principal virtue that distinguished humans from animals; however, he rejected the right of women and slaves to

participate in such activity because he felt that they lacked the necessary 'deliberative faculties' to do so responsibly. Similarly the founders of the civic republican tradition, with its roots in ancient Greece and later the Roman Empire, aimed to enshrine the idea that political decision-making should reflect and embody the collective will of the citizenry. But they, too, were uneasy about affording the right of citizenship to all members of society – preferring to focus such rights on certain groups and elites defined along gender and class lines.

The tendency to restrict the right of what might be termed political citizenship to certain economic and gender groups was shared to a greater or lesser degree by the great Enlightenment thinkers Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke, whose work so profoundly shaped much of our current thinking about rights and obligations, as well as Conservative thinkers like Burke. The history of franchise reform in Britain is marked by a cautious concern that those receiving the vote should be fit for the purpose, and fitness was defined in terms of property qualifications, as if Britain were a company in which only the shareholders had a right to a voice. Thus the so-called Great Reform of 1832 only enfranchised a few hundred thousand middle-class men who met certain property requirements and the franchise debates of 1866-67 were likewise initially framed in terms of property qualifications. Even while championing the right of some women to be given the vote, the greatest British Liberal theorist of his age, John Stuart Mill, baulked at the idea of full adult suffrage while the radical Liberal, Robert Lowe, provided the most powerful argument against the idea of a democratic franchise on the grounds that it was not conducive to good government. Indeed the right to participate in British general elections was not fully realised until 1928 when the vote was finally extended to all women on the same terms as men. Since then, the extension of the vote to those aged over 18 years, who were not otherwise disqualified, has created an electorate of around 44m.

The question of who has the right to participate in a democracy has thus been answered fairly definitively. In the 21st Century, the vote is a general right of all adult citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or socio-economic class. But if that question has been resolved the related issue of exactly how and to what degree citizens should participate in political decision making has re-emerged as a central concern.

There are two broad models of participation in a democracy which, though distinct, are not mutually exclusive. One asserts the need for a maximalist approach to participation in general and voting in particular. It asserts the primacy of direct, active participation in decision-making by the whole citizenry and has roots in the republican tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, and – differently – in the work of thinkers like Rousseau, quoted at the beginning of this section. Its supporters see 'direct democracy' involving the whole polity as the purest manifestation of the ability of citizens to make laws.

This approach has proved less influential in practice than one based on the belief that the ordering principle of the democratic process is an indirect form of representative democracy, where citizens periodically vote for either single or multi-numerate representatives to make laws on their behalf. It is this approach which defines the British form of representative parliamentary democracy, as it has developed over the past 200 years. For its supporters this form of indirect democracy is seen as a more practical method of law-making, but it is also seen as a surer way to law-making which will enable the polity to develop in a more unified manner. Advocates of representative democracy believe that dedicated, elected representatives are able to make better laws because they have the opportunity to be more fully informed about, and better able to judge, the implications of laws for society as a whole. Such a sentiment has been expressed most succinctly by Edmund Burke, as in the other quote with which we began this section. In a direct democracy, they believe, powerful interests, emotions and short-term concerns will hold sway and lead not merely to bad laws but will ultimately prove divisive to the survival of other core democratic values associated with the rights of individuals and minorities.

In a representative democracy, the fact that the mass citizenry elect the law-makers periodically and have the right to dismiss them periodically means that ultimate power resides with the people but is mediated through a representative system. However, while the case of the representative democrats appeared broadly unassailable in a time when public confidence in the system was manifestly clear, it has recently come under challenge due to declining participation in politics generally and electoral politics in particular. Advocates of direct democracy point to such global trends as evidence that the representative model is in crisis and argue that the solution lies in the development of a system in line with their vision of mass participation. In what

follows, we explore the historical and philosophical roots of the British democratic system and democracy more widely, in order to show that a move toward direct democracy would be a mistake. Our intention is to defend the representative system, show that it is able to meet the fundamental challenges posed by the 21st Century, and present an agenda for change aimed at rejuvenating British politics and democracy.

CHAPTER 2

The State, the Citizen, and the Broken Chain

"We want a society where people are free to make choices, to make mistakes, to be generous and compassionate. This is what we mean by a moral society; not a society where the state is responsible for everything, and no one is responsible for the state."

Margaret Thatcher

2.1 Where are the People?

British democracy should be stronger now than ever. Citizenship education is on the national curriculum, providing young people with the intellectual and practical resources to engage in political debates and make up their own minds about the importance of politics and the role of Parliament in their lives. The media – arguably bigger, more powerful and more accessible than ever before – is capable of providing the latest news and political analysis from around the world 24 hours a day. The rise of the internet and telecommunications technologies has meant that information is more readily available than ever before. And formal and informal mechanisms are in place which give all individuals the ability to lobby their MPs, to get involved in local politics, and to engage with decision-makers at virtually any level on a wide variety of issues. Scotland and Wales even have their own legislative bodies and there have been attempts – as yet unsuccessful – to devolve power to regional assemblies throughout the UK.

There has arguably never been a time when so many opportunities have been available for 'the people' to contribute to the democratic process, yet political

participation seems to be in decline. Turnout at local and European elections is amongst the lowest in Europe, with fewer than half the electorate bothering to cast a ballot in either poll. Participation in parliamentary elections is at an historic low, with just 59% of registered voters going to the polls in 2001; a figure that is unlikely to rise significantly, and may well fall, next time. Even the devolved bodies have failed to excite the public: less than half of the Scottish electorate voted in the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections and a mere 38% of Welsh voters cast a ballot in the Welsh Assembly elections. Worryingly, for the future, the young are the least electorally active section of society, with just 39% of eligible voters aged 18-24 taking part in the last general election. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the problem of electoral disengagement is confined to one age group. As Peter Kellner noted in a recent issue of *Parliamentary Affairs*, the phenomenon of non-voting may be most stark amongst the under 30s (and the poor), but the trend is evident across society.

Just as voter turnout has declined, so membership of political parties has dropped dramatically. From a peak in the 1950s, when the individual membership of the Conservative Party was well over two million and Labour over one million, today the party rolls of the two largest parties add up to around 500,000. Moreover, as noted in the recent report by the Electoral Reform Society, *Turning out or turning off?*, 'the situation may be worse than the raw figures [suggest], as the proportion of members who are active in any fashion has been falling too…Although statistics are very sketchy perhaps 30% rather than 50% of party members ever do anything. Party organisation has succumbed to terminal decay in some areas…'. Significantly, as with voting, party membership is lowest amongst the young and the dwindling band of party activists are characterised by their longevity; the average age of Conservative party members is now over 60, while Liberal Democrat and Labour members are younger – but not by much.

The decline in party membership and activism is part of a broader trend of partisan dealignment which, according to the British Electoral Study, has been underway since the 1960s. Fewer and fewer people now claim to identify with a particular political party and the strength of identification among those that do has substantially weakened. Between 1931 and 1970, the vote for the two largest parties in every UK general election totalled over 85%; by 2001 it had fallen to 72%. More recently, in the 2004 European elections, the two-party share of the

vote fell to below 50%, with the Liberal Democrats and a string of smaller, single-issue parties gaining ground. The disintegration of the old two-party system was evident in the 2004 Hartlepool by-election, in which the Conservative candidate was pushed into fourth place – the first time a candidate from the Official Opposition has finished outside the top three in a parliamentary election since the Second World War. Such has been the decline in traditional party attachments that local and national politics has seen the return of Independent candidates. A local doctor defeated a government minister in the Wyre Forest constituency at the 2001 general election; Ken Livingstone was elected London Mayor on an independent ticket (though he has since been re-elected under the Labour banner); Ray 'Robocop' Mallon topped the poll in Middlesbrough; and fringe candidates were also successful in Mayoral contests in Stoke and Mansfield. Back in Hartlepool, the town opted to hand the gold chains of office to H'Angus the Monkey – the local football club's furry mascot.

The latter result, on one reading, would suggest that the British public is treating politics less seriously than it once did or indeed ignoring it altogether. The joint Hansard Society/Electoral Commission *Audit of Political Engagement 2004* certainly found some evidence that public interest in politics has declined. But other findings suggested that the reduction in the proportion of people declaring an interest in politics was more a reflection of negative perceptions about how politics is currently practiced than evidence of apathy. Significantly, an overwhelming majority of people still said that they wanted 'a say in how the country is run' and disagreed by two to one with the statement that 'being active in politics is a waste of time' – views since reaffirmed in the 2005 *Audit*. More generally, the Citizen Audit has found 'a good deal of evidence of civic vitality' in contemporary Britain. On average, it revealed, 'people engage in three political activities over 12 months, and they devote between one and four hours per week to associational activities'. Indeed, in the same period that political party membership has declined and electoral turnout plummeted to record lows, other forms of political and social activism have increased. People are now more likely to have signed a petition, boycotted a product, or contacted an elected representative than ever before. Furthermore, as evidenced by the recent mass marches over the Iraq War, tuition fees and fox hunting, large numbers of people – millions, in fact – are sufficiently motivated by political issues to take to the streets. The repeated desire among many members of the British public to march in mass protests against aspects of

government policy suggests something very significant about how they perceive their role as democratic citizens. It suggests that they are not apathetic or indifferent to political issues but, rather, simply do not see formal political institutions as able, or willing, to represent their views. It suggests that they increasingly see voting in elections or lobbying MPs as a less effective means of getting things done than taking matters into their own hands and hitting the streets. In sum, this is not a polity in disintegration but one undergoing real and significant change.

2.2 Turning Off or Turning Over?

An interesting clue as to what that change could entail may be found in the *Study of Power and Democracy*, which was initiated by the Norwegian Parliament in 1998. As Professor Stein Ringen reported, in a recent review article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the Study was led by five professors who were given a practically unlimited budget to inquire into the health of Norwegian democracy. Over the course of five years, the Study produced 50 books, 77 reports and reams of articles, culminating with the publication of the final report in August 2003, which concluded that 'the democratic chain of command in which governance is under the control of the voters has burst, and the very fabric of rule by popular consent is disintegrating before our eyes'.

The break in the democratic chain of command could not be explained by reference to national calamity, economic collapse or decline in civic life. On the contrary, Norway is among the richest nations in the world and appears politically stable and socially cohesive. In spite of all that, democracy was found to be in a seriously weakened shape. Many of the findings from the Norwegian study chime with the situation in Britain: declining membership of traditional democratic institutions, notably political parties; voter participation in local and national elections on a downward trend; and the greatest incidence of disengagement from traditional political institutions and activities amongst the young. Yet people remain political animals, interested in a variety of issues and willing to actively campaign on them. The difference is in the nature and forms of political participation. In Britain, as in Norway, the old representative institutions are being abandoned in favour of different and in some senses more direct channels of political action.

To understand why, we need to explore the nature and impact of substantial social, political and economic changes that have taken place over a number of decades. For much of the period after the Second World War, political action was largely embodied in – and regulated by – collective public bodies of one kind or another. Political parties were stronger than they are now and represented the principal route through which political opinions and interests fed into the political and policy-making process. The labour movement was represented by strong trade unions capable of communicating the views and opinions of their members to the highest levels of government; and the state itself was larger than it is now, owning and managing a raft of public utilities and services (such as the railways, the public services infrastructure, and council housing for thousands of people). The public realm, we might say, extended wider and deeper than it does now, influencing and regulating a huge proportion of each and every individual's daily life, from the transport that carried them to and from work to the gas and electricity that lit their way and heated their homes.

From the late 1970s, however, this picture began to change. During the period of the Thatcher Government, in particular, the remit and functions of the state were significantly reined in. Many of the services and functions which were most visible to people were placed in the control of bodies which were (rightly) seen as separate from the state and driven by different concerns. Huge swathes of the population were encouraged to buy their council houses. By the end of the 1980s, the state had not only given up control of the utilities and services that kept people's homes running, but the homes themselves.

These developments had a major impact on patterns of work, accelerating a process of century-long social change which, as A.H. Halsey noted in his introduction to the 2000 edition of *Social Trends*, saw old class categories significantly blurred. As a proportion of those in employment, manual workers fell from three quarters to under a half between 1911 and 1981, and to a third by 1991. Far greater numbers of women entered the workplace – by 1998 comprising 46% of the total occupied population. As patterns of work were radically altered, so living arrangements underwent significant change. Between 1971 and 2003 the proportion of one-person households increased from 18% to 29%, and the proportion of households containing the traditional family unit – couple families with dependent children – decreased from around

one third to just over a fifth. In the same period, the proportion of lone-parent households with dependent children almost doubled.

Such fundamental socio-economic change inevitably impacted on forms of association. Old collectivist structures and networks exhibited a decline. Trade union membership fell from just over 13 million in 1979 to 7.3 million in 2002. Active membership of a Trinitarian church fell from 9.3 million in 1970 to 6.6 million in 1990, and has fallen further since. A rise in active membership of other religions – notably Islam and Sikhism – has not been anywhere enough to compensate for that fall. Even leisure pursuits reflected the move away from group activity, with social surveys indicating a growth in participation in individual sports, such as swimming, at the expense of team games such as football and rugby. Against this backdrop of socio-economic and cultural change, previously entrenched views and outlooks began to unravel, with many people shifting from collectivist to individualist, consumerist modes of thought.

In saying this, one should be wary of exaggerating the shift in popular values – and of any suggestions that this change took place in a short timeframe or as the direct result of one period of government. As we have seen, the socio-economic changes outlined above took place over a long period and whatever shift in popular outlook they affected was uneven and incremental. Nevertheless, it does seem that the period of Conservative Government in the 1980s helped to accelerate a process that had been underway for a century and which has had a significant impact on the way people think about society and politics, and in particular on how they now view the state.

For those who chose to buy their council house and gain work in the private sector, for example, it had become entirely possible, by the 1990s, to own, manage, light, heat and run their home without ever coming into direct contact with formal state institutions. Even those who found themselves beholden to private landlords quickly got used to their homes being maintained and regulated at a distance from (and hence, free from the protection of) the state. The private realm of individual choice and freedom – autonomous from the various organs of the state – was vastly expanded. Decision-making therefore became at once more centralised and more diffuse: individuals and private companies were given greater decision-making power in a wide range of new

areas, and the government afforded itself stronger powers in others. What developed throughout this period, then, was a new sense among many people that the state was less influential and less concerned with the kinds of political issues that directly affected their lives. As the state became more centralised, and the power and influence of the unions waned, growing numbers of people began to judge that political problems could best be resolved through means other than formal public channels. For many, politics – like charity – increasingly began and ended at home.

Even more recently, the significance of the nation-state in the everyday lives of citizens has been further eroded by the globalisation of political power and markets. Just as the role of the state became increasingly concerned with macro issues like defence and foreign policy over the more localised issues which affected people's lives in the 1980s, so in the 1990s its role in these areas too had been diminished. Increasingly, supra-national institutions like the EU, and non-governmental bodies like the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and multi-national corporations like Microsoft, McDonalds, and Citibank are seen to wield enormous political and economic power on the global stage, capable of affecting national economies and influencing government decisions across borders. The growing sense among citizens of developed nations that big businesses, super-rich entrepreneurs, and unelected bodies have the power to influence the fate of nations throughout the world has been fed by the recent boom in books by writers like Naomi Klein, Norweena Hertz, and Joseph Stiglitz, who have helped to bring these debates into the political mainstream. As a consequence, many UK citizens are now more sceptical than ever about the role of the Westminster Parliament in political decision-making and economic planning, as its power is reduced not only in the domestic sphere but the wider sphere of international and foreign policy too.

It is not the aim of this paper to evaluate the merits of the decisions and developments outlined above. Rather, it is merely to point out that in the wake of all this change people now approach politics and political institutions differently from how they once did. The way in which people participate in the democratic process has changed: many tend not to vote, as they see the commitments and actions of political institutions and politicians as divorced from the issues which affect them in their lives. Instead they sign petitions,

attend meetings, boycott products, and hold demonstrations: political actions which are real, visible and born out of genuine political commitment, but which circumvent traditional mechanisms and structures. Hence, critics who argue that civic disengagement is the consequence of a wider erosion of 'social capital' – or social trust – among the public are only half right. They are correct that traditional structures and networks – trade unions, working clubs, church groups and so on – that used to act as facilitators of political debate and organisation have declined and that this has caused a shift in the way people understand themselves and their place in the political community. But it is simply not the case that this has caused the kind of generalised disengagement with political issues or the death of political debate in Britain that certain commentators fear. The problem is not widespread political apathy, but rather that a vital link that connected citizens to the state and the formal democratic process has been broken.

2.3 The Institutional Response: A Problem Compounded

What all this suggests is that Britain would appear to be suffering from the same kind of breakdown in the democratic 'chain of command' between voters and political decisions as was identified in Norway. Britain, like Norway, is suffering from a breakdown in representative democracy caused in part by seismic socio-economic changes to which existing democratic institutions have not adequately responded. At a time when they badly needed to adapt their structures in order to counteract the corrosive effect of socio-economic and political change, state institutions have in fact helped to make matters worse. Instead of seeking to provide new and alternative avenues to involve people in decision-making, the formal political process has sucked power further away.

Political parties have become professional electoral machines with few formal members and even fewer active members, and largely exist for the sole purpose of propelling career politicians into municipal chambers or national legislatures. Once there they are subject to the tight discipline of party leaders, enforced by party whips, which restricts the scope for independence of thought and action. Moreover, party loyalty often requires support to be given to measures that irk grassroots members and the wider public, and, at times, go against the instincts of the representatives themselves. Of course, that is always likely to be the case in a representative system where representatives

are obliged to exercise their own judgement. The problem is that the majority are seen to sacrifice their own judgement, not as Burke feared to the opinions of the public, but rather to the views of their party leaders.

The charge that elected representatives are no better than party automatons is nothing new and has long been reflected in anti-party sentiment, which can be traced back over a century. However, deeply ingrained public hostility towards party politics has been compounded in recent years by the tone of political debate, which appears at odds with reality and thus fails to excite or engage the public. It has become increasingly clear that the old ideological divide that used to serve as the lens through which people came to understand the world, and seek solutions to social, economic and political problems, is closing. The clash between 'capital' and 'labour' embodied in the political tussle between the Conservatives and Labour has been largely eclipsed by a newer, largely social democratic consensus on some form of limited capitalism.

Interestingly, in the one area of the UK where tribal politics survives and clear ideological divisions remain – Northern Ireland – electoral turnout is far higher than the national average. However, throughout most of the country (and increasingly, even in the north of Ireland), we have seen what Ferdinand Mount has described as 'the decline of rage and fear politics'. Political identities have become freed from their traditional ideological moorings; they are more complex, fluid and changeable than they were when the adversarial system was conceived. Consequently, we have seen a rise in issues-based politics (and, connectedly, single-issue parties), with traditional ideological identities and conflicts taking a back seat. Yet, in terms of their dialogue, political parties appear unable to break out of the adversarial mould. In a world of changing political identities and issues-based political action, the politics they present to the public through the media is increasingly dislocated from the reality of everyday life and is still couched in overwhelmingly negative terms. In direct contrast to consumer marketing, electoral appeals are dominated by one party attacking another – usually for being untrustworthy – rather than each proclaiming its own virtues. In consequence, growing numbers of people perceive all parties to be unworthy of their support.

In large part, the reason why the political parties are trapped in this cultural time-warp is due to the forums in which politics and government is conducted.

Municipal town halls up and down the country and the Westminster Parliament appear as monuments to another age. The sheer physical layout of these buildings encourages an adversarial style of politics and debate that no longer usefully serves or applies to modern society. But the flaws of these democratic institutions run much deeper. They have become less relevant and less effective in the eyes of the public, not just because of their outdated traditions and ways of working, but because they have seen their powers eroded and their status undermined. In the case of local government, power has been draining back to the centre ever since the Second World War. Similarly, the Westminster Parliament has also lost power and influence as a result of the centralising tendency of successive governments, and is now dominated by an increasingly amorphous and unaccountable executive, which is in turn dominated by the Prime Minister. Yet absolute power does not reside in Downing Street. The growth of supranational bodies like the European Union has transferred power even further away from citizens, into the hands of an elite of largely unelected politicians, judges, lawyers, civil servants, and lobbyists. On top of that, as we have already mentioned, the globalised economy has meant that multi-national corporations wield enormous power over democratically elected governments. This has not gone unnoticed. The *Audit of political engagement 2004* found that the public placed the media and business ahead of Parliament and the Prime Minister as having the greatest impact on their everyday life. A survey of MPs conducted simultaneously revealed that they held the same opinion.

In such circumstances it is scarcely surprising that citizens in established democracies throughout Europe and indeed across the globe are choosing to abandon traditional forms of political organisation and activity in favour of different and more direct channels. As a consequence, many people now suggest that entrenched systems of governance need to be overhauled and recast in order to give citizens a more immediate input into decision-making. The tools of direct democracy, such as locally initiated referendums, are increasingly put forward as the solution to a public disengaged from the political process; the medicine that will restore democracy to full health. But is a move toward a more direct form of democracy really the best way to address the problem of declining formal participation? Given the criticisms we have made of the current system, one might be forgiven for thinking that it is. However, for all that is wrong with the current system, it is our firm contention that representative democracy remains the best way to reconcile competing interests and that the move to direct

democracy would be a mistake. Far from strengthening democracy in Britain, direct democracy would undermine it – weakening the policy-making process, failing to address most of the points that we have thus far raised, and turning the political process into a free-for-all of entrenched (and often incommensurable) political interests. In the following chapter, we briefly outline what we take direct democracy to mean and explain why it would not represent a useful or compelling alternative to the representative model. We then go on to build a case for the renewal and reinvigoration of representative democratic politics in Britain.

CHAPTER 3

Freedom, the Danger of Too Much Debate, and the Need for Representative Institutions

"Liberty doesn't work as well in practice as it does in speeches."

Will Rogers

3.1 Democracy, Freedom and Dealing with Diversity

Advocates of direct democracy tend to take the fact of increased political disengagement as proof that existing democratic institutions and mechanisms should be scrapped in favour of ones which are more accessible to the public as a whole and attract greater support from the citizen body. For example, in 2000–2002 there was a marked increase among certain – more technologically savvy – groups for the replacement of the parliamentary system with more direct forms of decision-making made possible by developments in online and mobile communications technologies. One writer, Howard Rheingold, for example, claimed that the internet represents a 'tool that could bring conviviality and understanding to our lives . . . The idea of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism' similar to the *agora* of ancient Greece. And Dick Morris, former strategic adviser to President Bill Clinton, claimed that '[t]he internet offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but our very form of government . . . Bypassing national representatives and [allowing citizens to speak] directly to one another.' New developments in ICT have suddenly made it possible to offer new, radical solutions to the problem of political disengagement like the creation of 'virtual' parliaments, the use of online voting, or direct consultation with the public on a range of issues.

What this view embodies is the idea that democracy is best served by the displacement or marginalisation of traditional institutions and the establishment of newer, more responsive, more interactive forums of debate capable of genuinely expressing the views of the people. In this sense, they actually share a basic conception of politics not unlike that advanced by anarchists like Maslow and Wolff: that decisions are best taken by 'the people', unmediated by political institutions or state mechanisms which only act to manipulate or undermine outcomes through the formal and informal exercise of power.

It is not difficult to see why direct democracy of this kind holds such appeal for so many people, especially in the US. Rheinhold is right: the philosophical vision lying behind statements like these tap into a fundamental set of claims about freedom and justice which have a long and illustrious pedigree. Indeed, when understood in their broadest terms they can be found in one way or another to be at the heart of many of the world's major political ideologies, from liberalism to Marxist socialism. The idea is that a person is only truly free when they live a life that they have genuinely chosen and endorsed, under laws that they have had a hand in creating. Democratic political systems therefore hold the promise of genuine freedom for their citizens by providing them with the ability to discuss, shape and determine the laws which constrain them and regulate their actions. In so doing, they place political sovereignty into the hands of the people themselves rather than an arbitrary or self-appointed ruler or majority. Consequently, democracy demands that citizens are able to take part in political debates and live under a set of political institutions which genuinely listen to and act upon the collective will of the whole political community.

Such sentiments can be found in one way or another in the work of a diverse range of thinkers like Aristotle, Rousseau, Montesquieu and de Tocqueville, and it can be found most explicitly in the work of republican (i.e. civic-republican) thinkers throughout history – from Cicero and Machiavelli to Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine, who shared a conception of participatory governance and freedom variously embodied in the *res publica* of Rome, the *demos* of Ancient Greece, the city states of Renaissance Italy, and the US republic. The legacy of the US founding fathers, in particular, lives on today in the constitution of the United States and the hearts of millions of American citizens. The American dream, built upon a strong notion of individual autonomy and self-reliance, is

one of political and economic freedom and the ability of everyone to fulfil their deepest aspirations through their own efforts and strength of will.

The problem, of course, is that like many dreams it is fragile and not necessarily all that accurate as a picture of reality. Many American citizens suffer under crippling poverty, with no access to the kind of welfare state that many in Britain take for granted. And the sheer size and scale of contemporary mass societies like the US and Britain make it difficult for the noble aims of the likes of Paine and Madison to be realised. The democratic republican model was fine when the only views that needed to be united were among the generally like-minded, white men who constituted the Greek *demos*, or the propertied male members of Italian city-states or newly formed republics; however, the demands made by democracy for the widespread, inclusive and unanimous agreement on laws and policies by the citizen body have become difficult to meet in the crowded, complex, multicultural and shifting world of nation states that exists today.

Take Britain, for example. The sheer scale and diverse nature of British society exerts far greater pressures upon representative institutions than in the years when our parliamentary system was conceived. Since the Reform Act of 1832 – which extended the franchise (and hence, citizenship in its most formal sense) to one thirtieth of the population – the proportion of society considered eligible to contribute to the democratic process has grown enormously. In 1867, following the second Reform Act, the UK electorate stood at 2.5m. In 2003, it was just over 44m, and if proposals to lower the voting age to 16 go ahead, the number of people eligible to vote in UK local, European, and general elections could reach 47m, each of whom have their own unique aspirations, beliefs and needs.

This multiplicity of needs and aspirations is further complicated by the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity that now characterises modern British society. Across the world, people are more mobile than they once were, often chasing opportunities and markets created by a globalised economy. Borders are more fluid, and the labour market more changeable than it used to be. According to the 2001 Census, 12% of full-time students aged 16–25 in Britain are now from Asian and black communities. One in 10 school children do not have English as their first language. Britain is now home to just under a

million Muslims, half a million Hindus, and a quarter of a million Jews. Cultural, religious and ethnic diversity puts particular pressure on democratic institutions and law-making procedures at a local and national level to ensure equality and to respect not just individualised claims and opinions but orthodoxies and collective practices which fundamentally define people's world views and larger plans of life. It suggests that genuinely inclusive democratic forums must either be multi-lingual or in some way accessible by people whose first language is not English; and it suggests that the structure of British democracy (its institutions and practices) should be attentive to the religious and cultural sensitivities of the populations, and should seek to make room in democratic debates for these positions to be expressed and included. Indeed, it may be the apparent failure of existing institutions to do this that has contributed to the widespread rejection of formal democratic politics by an increasingly diverse society.

For many contemporary direct democrats, new technologies represent a real opportunity to establish a more inclusive democratic system in societies like Britain which have in the past been thought to be too diverse and too complex for such systems to work. Indeed, many believe that such a system should replace representative institutions which are themselves beginning to buckle under the weight and diversity of all the conflicting needs and opinions that they are charged with representing, in order to accommodate these diverse voices more effectively.

3.2 Who Decides? The Difference Between Talking and Acting

The complexity and diversity of modern liberal democracies does indeed pose difficult problems for representative institutions and representative democracy more generally. However, it is not entirely clear how direct democracy would provide a better or more coherent response than the representative system. Defenders argue that the issue would be solved because more people would be able to get their views heard. But it is not immediately obvious that opening up more channels of communication – either direct or indirect – would successfully engage more of the people than it does already. Recent research by MORI suggests that the majority of public policy debates and political activity in Britain is driven by around 6% of the population – whether it is in the

form of voting, marching, signing petitions, or whatever. The claim that direct democracy would automatically empower the 'silent majority' to contribute to political debates is therefore at best questionable.

But even if this were not the case – and we could be confident that opening up direct channels of communication between the British public and decision-making structures meant that people previously excluded from democratic debates would be welcomed into them – it does not address the major issue at the heart of this debate: namely, that the inclusion of diverse viewpoints into democratic debates – the ability to participate – is only one function that needs to be performed by a democratic system. For a system to be viable, it must do more than merely get people talking: it must *decide* and *do* things. Participation and inclusion are only meaningful if people's views can be seen to make a difference and to influence the development of policy. The problem with direct democracy is that its advocates seem so preoccupied with working out how to include as many voices as possible in democratic debates that they forget to explain exactly how these dialogues will produce actionable policies or *decisions*.

It would seem on the face of it obvious that an important function of any democratic decision-making process is that it is capable of making *decisions* which are democratic and fair. But this important point is often neglected by those who fail to make any real distinction between what makes for a fair democratic *debate*, and what makes for a fair democratic *decision-making process*.

This last point is absolutely crucial and represents one of the most fundamental differences between direct and representative democracy. Given what we have already said about the social, political, cultural and religious diversity which exists in contemporary liberal democracies like Britain, it would be naïve in the extreme to assume that public debate and participation would always achieve a clear consensus on answers to political problems and that it is the role of state institutions simply to put this consensus into action on the people's behalf. If the modern world has shown us anything, it is that consensus and unanimity on political issues is often impossible, and while democrats might strive for as much consensus and agreement as possible, it is simply a fact of political debate that certain values and ways of life will remain incompatible with one

another, as will the political positions they embody. It is difficult to see how any amount of democratic debate is likely to resolve deep disagreements between 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' supporters over laws governing abortion, for example, or between religious groups and animal welfare activists about methods of slaughtering animals, or gays and evangelical Christians about laws governing homosexuality. In conflicts such as these, democracy requires that strong, legitimate institutions – empowered by the popular and collective consent of the people – weigh the arguments and make difficult decisions on behalf of the citizen body. These decisions will not always be popular and will rarely carry the endorsement of everyone involved. This is inevitable given the incompatibility of many of the values which will be at stake. But it highlights a crucial role that independent representative institutions play in the democratic system: given the fundamental plurality of values which will exist in a diverse society like Britain, and given also the commitment to individual freedom and self-legislation built into the foundations of democracy (that we discussed earlier), there is a crucial need for institutions which can make difficult choices among competing claims, none of which (from a political point of view) are specifically 'right' and none of which are exactly 'wrong' on any given issue.

Some would reject this, of course, claiming that democracy is in fact best served by leaving decision-making power up to the political community as a whole through the widespread use of referendums or some form of online or computerised ballot. Those that have argued for this believe that it is the purest and most defensible model of democracy, where decision-making power is taken out of the hands of institutions altogether and shared equally among the population. Far from improving and purifying democracy, however, such a system would simply enshrine the vested interests of the powerful and replace truly democratic, reflective, decision-making with what John Stuart Mill called the 'tyranny of the majority', where the interests of minorities are systematically over-ridden and marginalised by the voting power of the groups who happen to compose the largest or most powerful group in society. It would protect vested interests by placing enormous power in the hands of those in a position to influence political opinion on a large scale. Big business, the mass media, and other influential groups would wield far greater power than they do under the current system and, more than ever, public policy would be shaped and determined by those able to pay for the lobbyists, public relations executives and advertisers to

communicate their messages effectively and dominate the democratic arena through the brute forces of money and influence. As Thomas Jefferson pointed out long before the advent of spin doctors and PR executives, democracy – when understood in this way – is 'nothing more than mob rule, where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49'. For Jefferson, a just political system does not simply convert the will of the majority into political action – it ensures the representation of all views and all groups no matter how small a minority.

It cannot be right that democracy is best served by a system which allows power to be concentrated in a powerful elite or majority at the expense of all those other, smaller, often more nuanced minority views which exist in society. Indeed, the measure of a democratic system is not its ability to enshrine a majoritarian hegemony but its ability to stand up for the rights and needs of minority groups even in the face of overwhelming public opinion to the contrary. As the writer Ayn Rand put it, 'individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority; the political function of rights is to protect minorities from oppression by majorities (and the smallest minority on Earth is the individual)'. Or, in Larry Flynt's rather more succinct words, '[m]ajority rule only works if you are also considering individual rights . . . you can't have five wolves and one sheep voting on what to have for supper'.

Majorities may not always be right, and it is possible to think of many examples from history where deciding against the will of the majority was the most justifiable and 'democratic' thing to do. Such a notion is again firmly rooted in the history of democratic theory and political thought. The republican thinkers we mentioned earlier unite with Enlightenment philosophers like Hobbes and Locke and contemporary liberals like Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls in arguing that freedom is only legitimate when its exercise is consistent with the equal freedom of everyone else, and that 'democratic' power is only legitimate when it respects the rights of those over whom it is held. No-one can legitimately use their own freedom to harm another or to limit or take away the similar freedom of others, and – given that we can only be free if we live under laws that we have endorsed and helped create – this means that no-one can exercise political power over another in a way which prevents them from participating meaningfully in the political process.

Put bluntly: if the majority of society is racist, homophobic, or prejudiced in some other way then we should not assume that democracy is best served by automatically assuming that this majority has the right to determine policy for the whole of society. And on a more everyday level it is only now, as a result of our democratic system being more open to, for example, minority religious claims that many cultural practices and religious holidays are being recognised in schools and other organisations throughout Britain. Where the traditional Christian majority once determined policy, now other groups are making their voices heard and influencing the policy agenda. Democracy is strengthened by institutions which carry sufficient strength and authority to stand up to the majority and to afford a disproportionate political voice to those groups who experience greater difficulty in getting their views heard in order that they might contribute to debates on an equal playing field – groups like the poor, the disabled and members of religious minorities. Hence the consociational power sharing arrangements set up in Northern Ireland to ensure that both Catholics and Protestants have guaranteed representation on the ruling executive.

It is a crucial and ironic flaw at the heart of direct democracy, therefore, that by seeking to devolve decision-making power down to the political community as a whole (in the interests of making the process fairer and more representative of minority interests), it in fact condemns many people who are outside the political mainstream to the whims of elites and majorities. This, as we said earlier, is down to the fact that 'democratic debate' and 'democratic decision-making' are distinct and separable things: while direct democracy might well ensure that minority voices have a presence in political *debate* it also ensures – paradoxically – that they will not have any such presence in *decision-making*. Fairness in one does not necessarily entail fairness in the other – and the problem with direct democracy is that it simply does not adequately address the question of how debates are turned into decisions and, in doing so, it advocates a strategy for decision-making which would make the position of the groups it tries to represent much worse than it would be under a more representative system.

Representative democracy, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes between participation and decision-making, and applies different rules to each. The role of the political community in a representative democracy like ours is to confer

genuine authority upon political institutions through open and inclusive political debate and a popular vote. This requires that people know about politics and understand the role of political institutions in their lives – in short, that their votes and views are informed; it suggests that people are educated about politics and political issues, and encouraged to express their views in many different forums and arenas; and it suggests that decision-makers should be able to draw upon the collective, informed wisdom of all groups in society, confident that the information they get comes from a genuine cross section of the population and not simply from the majority, or from certain powerful sections of the community.

But it does not suggest that the decision-making process should be given over entirely to the political community, and neither does it confuse the notion of fair consultation and participation with fair decision-making procedures. It recognises the need for an independent arbiter in complex political debates, and acknowledges that political decisions need to be rooted in and informed by the democratic will of the whole community but not carried out by this community in its entirety. It is therefore important that we have representative institutions which do in fact represent the needs of everyone in society, and which have been given the requisite information to make informed, reflective and responsible decisions on behalf of the people to whom they are accountable. When representative institutions become separated from the people – when the 'chain of command' between citizens and institutions breaks down – the authority of representative institutions to legislate on behalf of the people is weakened, and the decisions made in Parliament become estranged from the people affected by them. Formal politics becomes something that 'other people do', and not an active process of debate and engagement relevant to all. It is for this reason that strong participatory mechanisms and structures capable of linking decision-making institutions with the citizenry are crucial. So, as someone with an acute interest in systems of governance once famously asked, what is to be done?

CHAPTER 4

An Agenda for Re-Engagement

"It is hard to feel individually responsible with respect to the invisible processes of a huge and distant government."

John W Gardener

To repair the broken chain of command it is necessary to begin by fixing the first fractured link – the loop that forms the most immediate connection between the citizenry and the state: local government. This was the principal demand of the Norwegian *Study*, which concluded that local government was the one aspect of Norway's democratic structure that could truly be described as being in 'crisis'. Deprived of power but left with the official responsibility of delivering local services, the *Study* found that the task of local politicians had simply become one of administering decisions imposed by central government. A similar situation may be said to have developed in Britain, where local government has been subjected over several decades to a process of change so great and relentless that some have likened it to a state of permanent revolution. The net effect of all the upheaval – in particular, the imposition of financial restraints and the pressure to privatise financial services – has been to substantially reduce the power and autonomy of local councils. As a result, according to Peter Kellner, it has been an important causal factor in creating the 'culture of detachment' from which he believes Britain now suffers. The declining power and status of local government has reduced incentives for people to enter local politics. With a smaller 'gene pool' from which to draw, he argues, the quality of local councillors and officers has declined. This, in turn, has encouraged national politicians and civil servants to further restrict the power of local government, thus creating a vicious circle which has had a wider debilitating effect on civil society.

Previously, one important reason for becoming involved in local party politics was to influence decisions at the local level. But with the scope to do so substantially reduced, fewer people are motivated to become politically active. Party membership and activism have thus declined and, concomitantly, local campaigning, which is critical in engaging electors with the political process on a year-round basis. Deprived of that immediate interface with the political process, the only form of political communication that electors receive is either filtered through the national and regional media, or delivered direct from party headquarters via new and impersonal modes of contact such as text messaging, email alerts and telephone canvassing. The days of door to door canvassing appear to be nearing an end. But the absence of that personal contact is partly responsible for the psychological divorce between national decision-making and local action which appears to have taken place in the public mind. Many people no longer recognise the relationship between process and outcomes, contributing to a decline in the public's perceived efficacy of electoral participation which has severely weakened a central link in the 'causal chain' that connects citizens to their national legislature: the vote. Restoring the power and status of local government and, crucially, reforming local government finance so that elections decide differentially how much money will be spent on local services, would go some way towards addressing this problem by rejuvenating party membership and political activism.

But there are other weaknesses in the democratic structure that require attention. The Westminster Parliament, like local town halls, has been undermined by the centralising tendencies of successive governments and the shifting nature of power in the modern world. Still operating on the basis of a convention of ministerial responsibility forged as the principal constitutional buckle back in the 19th century when government was small and parties were weak, Parliament has lost power while the executive has grown stronger, bigger, more amorphous and less accountable. Moreover, parliamentarians have continued to practice politics in an exaggeratedly adversarial fashion despite the fact that ideological divisions have substantially narrowed; making the institution and its inhabitants appear increasingly remote to a public acutely aware that politics is today more a managerial contest than a clash of grand narratives. In consequence, Parliament is now ignored by the public and fails to interest most of the media.

This is bad for the health of democracy. To address the problem Parliament needs to be more assertive as an institution *vis a vis* the executive and MPs need to act more like elected representatives and less like parliamentary party delegates. Moreover, Parliament needs to explore ways of stimulating public interest in its work, by experimenting with new methods of directly involving them in the decision-making process. This is not to say that everyday decision-making should be handed over to 'the people'. MPs must still decide upon laws – but they should be encouraged to listen more to what the public has to say, particularly in a time when politics is more concerned with the management of specific matters than overarching ideological questions. It is in this vein that new technologies could be usefully employed to engage the public more immediately in decision-making, albeit without undermining the basic representative model.

Indeed, as Stephen Coleman and John Gotze, both champions of e-democracy, have noted: 'Engaging the public in policy-making is not a means of diminishing the representative relationship, but of strengthening it. Even in an age when vast distances separated the represented from the centres of decision-making, Burke favoured the "closest correspondence" and "most unreserved communication" between electors and their representatives. ICTs provide new opportunities to connect citizens to their representatives, resulting in a less remote system of democratic governance'. For example, the use of public consultations through citizens' juries or on-line forums could enable people to have a greater input into the policy-making process. Notably, political parties are beginning to employ such measures – witness Labour's recent 'Big Conversation' – but there are also signs that Parliament is demonstrating an interest in making use of such innovations. Mechanisms such as online consultations have been profitably used by some parliamentary committees to involve the public directly in their inquiries. For example, a Joint Committee of both Houses set up to scrutinise the Communications Bill posted evidence on the web and held an online discussion which subsequently led to two new clauses being included in the Bill. The expanded use of pre-legislative scrutiny – the consideration of legislation in draft form – to which the Government is committed, will increase the potential for further such public consultation. In addition to these devices, Westminster would do well to look at the activity of the Scottish Parliament, and in particular its petitions committee. In 2002-03, the Parliament received 620 petitions, many of which prompted inquiries, debates

and influenced laws. Direct outcomes ranged from changes to the law on the siting of telecoms masts to the protection of Roman burial grounds. As Peter Riddell has noted, these actions 'are not earth-shattering perhaps, but they are the kind of issues that worry voters'. Thus, there are measures that could easily be introduced that would strengthen the connection between Parliament and the public by enabling citizens to have a closer involvement in the decision-making process, without undermining the mediating role of representatives.

However, if the ties that bind the Westminster Parliament to the British populace have grown weak, then the connection with the supranational tier of European governance is even more fragile. The originator of over 60% of all legislation enacted in the UK today, the European Union suffers from an enormous democratic deficit. The European Parliament may be elected, but the body that has primacy – albeit under the observation of national governments – is the unelected European Commission. However, as Professor Ringen has pointed out, 'the real problem is not so much in decision-making as such, as in the virtual impossibility of unmaking a law once made, in particular treaty law. This gives the European Court near unlimited power to impose on and above national legislatures its view of what European law bids nations to do or not do…[Thus the] final democratic deficit in the European Union is not in the power of the Commission but in the absence of a democratic legislature to balance the power of the Court.' Hence, it is imperative that the institutions of the European Union generally are made more democratic and more accountable to their electorates. Of course, there are those who argue that rather than struggling to achieve such reforms, Britain should simply withdraw from the EU. Such a position is simplistic and mistaken. Interestingly, Norway is not a member of the EU but, recognising its dependence on being inside the economic system of free trade, nonetheless implements and complies with EU law. The lesson from this, according to Simon Jenkins, is that, 'All European states are *de facto* "within Europe". Withdrawal is not meaningful.' There is no choice but to try and reform the institutions of the EU as part of a wider effort to rebuild the chain of command that must extend from citizens, through local government, to the national Parliament and beyond.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

At the beginning of this pamphlet we asked what democracy means in the 21st Century and identified a rough cluster of defining principles. When measured against them, it seems fair to say that democracy in Britain is alive and well. We have a constitution rooted in the rule of law, free and fair elections, people are not oppressed, state power is constrained by appropriate democratic checks and balances, and basic human rights are respected and encouraged. People are free to vote or not to vote, to pursue their lives according to their own deeply held beliefs, and to change their minds about these beliefs regardless of who might prefer otherwise: nothing is true merely because those in positions of power say it is, and no government is automatically right merely because it is in power; truth and falsehood, right and wrong, are decided in a context of free debate and discussion involving all those with an interest in the outcome. No-one is imprisoned for political dissent – indeed, political debate is encouraged in schools, universities and town halls across the country. In all these things, Britain distinguishes itself from a range of nations whose states systematically oppress, torture, and terrorise their members for no reason other than that they hold views that the Government discourages. In such a world, worries among the political class about the supposed 'crisis' of British democracy appear trifling and self-indulgent. Should we not be more concerned about the position of people in nations which are undemocratic, instead of wringing our hands about whether our democratic institutions are democratic *enough*, or whether citizens feel engaged *enough*?

The answer is yes and no. As a democratic nation we do have a responsibility to aid the spread of democratic ideals in other nations, but we should not be so complacent about our own democracy as to ignore its weaknesses and

failings. As we have tried to show in this pamphlet, democracy cannot be defined merely in terms of broad, abstract principle. It must be evaluated in terms of how it is implemented in the real and complex world of human conflict, interaction and tension. The question for Britain is not whether we live in a democracy but whether the practice of democratic politics in Britain lives up to the noble ideas which inform our constitution and system of government. Are our political institutions up to the job of representing the vast and diverse range of views, beliefs and aspirations in modern society? Should we expect them to? And, if so, how might we reform them in order to make them perform more effectively?

These questions strike at the heart of what it means to be a British citizen and a member of a democratic polity. If the public stop voting and disengage from the formal political process – if the vital link between voters, representatives and decisions is severed – then formal political institutions (and the decisions they make) really do belong to a different world, alienated and divorced from the rest of society, and shorn of their legitimacy. The answer is not to replace our institutions with ones which afford greater decision-making power to the citizen body at large. Such efforts, embodied in the views of many well meaning and responsible democrats, would in fact undermine democracy further by placing power in the hands of those who are – by luck or accident – in the majority on any given issue. Politics would stagnate further; despite finding it easier to contribute to political debates, minority groups would find it harder and harder to influence political decisions, as more and more issues would be decided by a vote, carried through by the moral and political majority from which they are excluded. As a result, direct democracy actually sows the seeds of greater disengagement among disillusioned citizens, and it sows too the seeds of inequality, oppression and the systematic marginalisation of those whose views are not of the mainstream.

The answer therefore lies not in diminishing the role of representative institutions, but strengthening them and making sure that the chain of command between citizens, local and national institutions, and supranational institutions like the European Union is resilient and visible. This places a significant burden upon our institutions to improve the ways in which they communicate with citizens – both directly and through the media: it requires them to be accessible to citizens and responsive to their concerns; it suggests

that formal institutions need to appear more relevant to the lives of individual citizens and not bound up in antiquated traditions and processes which serve to alienate people; and it suggests that different political institutions have a responsibility to work constructively together rather than in competition with, or ignorance of, one another.

But a healthy democracy also requires citizens to engage with the formal democratic process. It requires people to take an interest in politics, to communicate effectively with decision-makers, and to make use of the formal mechanisms which exist to give them a voice and provide legitimacy to British parliamentary democracy and the decisions arising out of it. Reform must be pro-active and it must come from citizens and institutions alike. If it does not, then the gap between the public and those who make decisions in their name will widen, further estranging the British people from those who wield power, and fundamentally undermining democratic governance in Britain.

CHAPTER 6

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NOTES

Neglecting Democracy

Participation and representation in 21st Century Britain

Declan McHugh & Philip Parvin

Representative democracy is in decline. Fewer people are joining political parties; fewer people are participating in general elections; and mass protest has never been more popular. The link between the public and its political institutions is stretched to breaking point: MPs are seen as distant and uncaring while Parliament is perceived to be antiquated, remote and increasingly powerless.

Declan McHugh and Philip Parvin chart the profound social, economic and cultural changes of recent years that have left increasing numbers of people feeling estranged from the formal political process. The authors present a wide ranging defence of the representative system from its philosophical roots to its application in 21st Century mass societies like the UK, aimed primarily at those who believe that the present system should be replaced by more direct democracy.

Analysing the complex relationship between citizens and the state, Parvin and McHugh argue that the continued neglect of formal politics among British people threatens British democracy, erodes Parliament, and destroys the link between the people and their elected representatives. This report proposes reforms to democratic goverance in Britain aimed at breathing new life into British democracy and reversing the slide into widespread disengagement and disaffection.

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