

Voting is not worthwhile—a voter’s plea for help

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1. Introduction.

The numbers of people not voting in our elections is worrying. Until now, I have been a committed voter. However, I will soon join their ranks.

Politicians have referred to this phenomenon as voter apathy. Why not voter abstention, frustration or despair? Many vote only to block what they view as the very worst of a range of evils, they are not voting for what they want. How can this situation possibly give us good representative government?

Might voter 'apathy' be largely related to people perceiving that it is simply not worth them voting? Even if they find their conviction hard to explain and articulate, what they see, time after time, is politicians not representing the views of the people.

I would like my vote to count for something. So, I suspect, would tens of millions of others. Please help us.

2. Executive summary

Essentially our politicians are beyond the reasonable control of the electorate. This may seem a ridiculous over-statement but its validity can clearly be demonstrated. In this paper I will discuss how our political process denies the British electorate democracy, and identify effective ways of correcting the shortcomings.

2.1 The problem – our political system does not represent the electorate's wishes

The British political system does not ask people to vote on individual topics, but for predetermined manifesto policies for a great range of disparate issues. However, voters do not have standardised views across wide ranges of issues. No single political party can accurately reflect all the views of everyone - not even its leading members. Furthermore, people vote, in advance, for general aims not the final, often very different, policies developed later in perhaps very changed circumstances.

British politicians are rewarded with election if they attract the most votes. This means that the votes of unrepresentative minorities can be courted because they are vital to winning elections, while even strongly held majority views can be effectively ignored, because the votes of 'left' or 'right' are already in the political bag. Policies can therefore evolve that are against the will of the majority. In other words, our political system can actually encourage politicians to be unrepresentative of the majority.

Our system does not attempt to establish accurately what the electorate wants done about individual issues. An effective way of 'electorally' rewarding politicians for accurately reflecting public opinion at the time of our elections has not been found. The best solution would appear to be one that exerted checks and balances, on elected politicians, during the time of policy making and implementation.

2.2 Establishing a Statutory Authority

A suitable mechanism for achieving this would be a Statutory Authority, empowered and obliged to both monitor public opinion and make the results of that monitoring public

knowledge. The Authority could request/demand political action reflecting the wishes of the electorate when trigger levels of public concern were reached. Public concern could be identified in varying ways to reflect the varying scale and nature of problems. Elected MPs would be involved with, and vital to, this process.

The Authority would have the power, and an obligation, to call referenda on issues if governments were seriously out of step with public feeling. However, the laws and regulations associated with this proposed Authority should be developed so that the need for it to actually call referenda would be rare.

The existence of such an Authority would serve to keep the outcomes of our existing governmental process more closely aligned to the wishes of the people - those the politicians were elected to represent. It would free politicians from the need to excessively satisfy unrepresentative minorities. It would provide a much more effective route for minorities to have their problems addressed. It would dramatically improve the ability of individual MPs to successfully campaign on behalf of their constituents.

A benefit of this add-on approach is that it avoids the inherent dangers of altering existing political systems.

2.3 Reporting on the state of the nation

An additional problem for the electorate is the lack of access to good quality data relating to our national well-being. This problem could be overcome by the introduction of an annual *State of the Nation Report*.

Probably produced under the auspices of the Audit Commission, data from all public bodies would be recorded in a format that automatically included it in such a report. All data would be presented graphically as far as possible, in as standardized and simple a format as possible. There would be sections on all aspects of our national life. Each section would start with national summaries and proceed to greater detail, right down to local levels. Data would be presented objectively and accurately. The report would be universally available and easily accessible.

The benefits of such a report would be limited in number but great in consequence. The voter would be in a better position to decide what was really going on and therefore to make political decisions. Knowing that the public had this advantage should encourage politicians and public servants to perform better. The report would be an invaluable source of information and illumination to help politicians and public servants with their work.

This ready availability of data would only be of use, however, if there was a mechanism in place to improve democratic processes.

3. Fundamental flaws in our political process

Despite regular elections and a long parliamentary history, our allegedly ‘democratic’ system is not. Our version of democracy consists of a small number of main political parties, with a first-past-the-post approach to elections. In parallel, we have evolved an electorate that for many years has split into two primary groups - commonly referred to as left and right wing.

Many on the left or right would not countenance voting for the 'other lot' under any circumstances, even if they agree with a few of their policies.

The electorate has to choose between two or three alternative baskets of policies (manifestos) - take the lot or none. I would suggest that it is rare for large numbers of voters from any political camp to agree with all that their preferred party propounds.

For example, many who are pigeon-holed as working class and as politically left wing might want very well funded and effective armed services, despite some influential left wing politicians not wanting this. Many generally right wing voters might think it crucial that we have world class state education and public health care. They could easily not be the slightest bit interested in the private options so dear to some influential right wing politicians.

It could be that of your preferred party's manifesto pledges, you vehemently disagree with one or more of them, but the rest, to a great extent, concur with your own view. The other parties may have one or two you largely agree with (even if you would never admit to it), but for the most part you disagree greatly with the rest.

The consequence is that political parties may be voted into power even when potentially huge numbers of their own supporters disagree strongly with some of their key policies. In such cases, when the rest of the electorate is also considered, there could be a vast majority of the citizenship that is totally against a key policy of any given government.

Despite this, politicians can still railroad that policy through and even claim that they have a mandate to do so. Politicians can go against the majority will of the electorate or even their own supporters, and as long as they do not do this on too many issues, the effect is ballot box neutral. Even if they have extensively misrepresented the feelings of the nation on major issues whilst in government, politicians can quite easily be re-elected because voters are faced with the same 'all-or-nothing' manifesto conundrum and left/right divide as before. Surely this presents a major problem in a supposedly democratic society.

A further flaw is that voters are asked to make a decision about manifesto pledges (aims and intentions) at the time of an election. These can be generalised and couched in attractive terms. Eventual real policies and regulations will have developed in response to the intervening influences of time and events. Actual policies can look very different to manifesto pledges. Some pledges are not translated into policies at all and policies develop that may not have been in manifestos. By the time policies hit the statute books voters may have changed their views on the original general aim let alone the potentially very different eventual legal reality. Voting for something before we know what it really is cannot be regarded as an ideal state of affairs.

Our political process traps huge numbers of voters in overly generalised groupings. It asks people to vote on wish lists, not actual policies. It asks people to decide on issues that often will not be addressed for some time, when circumstances might have changed. It never seeks the detail of what the electorate actually wants done.

4. Consequences of these flaws

4.1 Not serving the many in order to court the electorally-vital few

If we assume politicians to be, by and large, reasonable people, we would not expect them to be totally insensitive to majority views. But is it that simple?

Consider the following: politicians not addressing 'Issue A', which the majority wants it to, might not influence the ballot box as far as the majority are concerned. They are ensnared by the job lot manifesto/left or right wing election format.

However, doing the majority's will on Issue A might pose the very real risk of offending a small but electorally significant interest group of floating voters. When elections hang on the odd percentage here and there, politicians (in such circumstances) may well ignore 'Issue A' and thus not do what the majority want. The system encourages or even forces politicians into following a course that will help them survive politically. They are, after all, only human.

A further example: addressing a grumble by the majority which is ballot box neutral might cause a politician serious problems by offending power bases abroad. For politicians, going against the majority (if it has no net effect at the ballot box), might be the lesser of two evils when compared to upsetting a foreign interest.

Is a system that can allow or even encourage such action fair to our electorate? Would a different system, with politicians unable to deviate substantially from the electorate's wishes, free them up to do a better, more representative and responsive job?

4.2 Serving the few, even if it offends the many

A small group of volatile, floating, but active voters, with concerns about a peripheral matter, might well be feted and their grievance addressed with real political gusto. They might only comprise 0.5 percent of the population, but their one percent of the actual votes cast in an election could be critical to getting politicians re-elected. If a party successfully adopted a policy to win their votes, the gain of that party might arguably amount to the creation of a two percent differential, a potentially enormous effect in an election.

Let us go further. What if addressing the concerns of this few actually offended the views of the many, even perhaps the majority of the governing political party's own supporters, let alone the wider nation? The minority give their votes in response to the political bribe. However, the effect on the majority, plus the furious and disbelieving party supporters, is ballot box neutral because they still feel obliged to vote for a manifesto package that, for them, is still the best of the limited bunch on offer. Politicians are rewarded with power for doing the opposite of what the majority of the population, or even their own supporters, want on one or two issues.

Taken to its extreme, this provides the opportunity for mob rule. A minority group, potentially with views alien to large sections of the community, can organise itself and lobby publicly for the policies of its choice. It may seriously annoy huge numbers of everyday citizens who hold diametrically opposed views, but who have neither the time nor inclination to shout loudly about them.

Our political system encourages politicians to prioritise minority views at the expense of the majority. Our political system can make what are important issues to the many, of little or even negative interest to politicians.

To be democratic we need a system where disgruntled minorities can be heard in the knowledge that their case will be attended to and will be treated democratically. A system within which people do not have to resort to dramatic measures simply to have their case heard. A system within which political groups cannot gain political advantage simply by shouting the longest and the loudest, but only if they can persuade the majority to agree with them.

4.3 Effectively ignoring issues

Issues from the fundamental to the minor are ignored by politicians. Immigration and our European Community membership are examples of fundamental issues. They are fundamental to the way the electorate wants its society to be and country to go. No one should make major decisions about these issues other than the electorate, or politicians who are accurately reflecting the electorate's views.

Immigration is allegedly a major concern to 74 percent of the electorate. This is a huge figure in relation to the 50 odd percent of the population who bother to vote and the 40 odd percent of that 50 odd who actually vote a party into power. Over 40 million people compared with perhaps the low teens of millions? Surely the politicians must react to public opinion? Yet not once in 50 years have the politicians, despite the magnitude of the issue, asked: 'Right people, what do you want us to do?'

Your view on immigration in the political spectrum is irrelevant. The crucial point is that if something this big can happen and politicians either choose not to act or are unable to act effectively in response to the people, then our version of democracy fails. We do not have an effective and robust democracy.

How can more normal scale issues, those of interest to fewer people but still causing very substantial problems for many, ever hope to get attention? Occasionally issues arise that make so many individuals feel so badly oppressed that a few take direct action. Our divorce laws are a case in point. In the rare cases where the tip of the complaining iceberg does actually succeed in changing government policy, it is often after years of sustained and enormous effort by groups of individuals who may be suffering grievously. It is also achieved when many, who understand the issues involved, regard change as long overdue or the laws and/or regulations at fault from the word go.

If people with legitimate grievances still have to resort to this sort of action to get our political representatives to even consider that there may be a problem worth looking at then how can we claim to have a responsive and caring democracy? Did the suffragettes teach us nothing?

4.4 Ignoring issues despite clearly expressed public opinion

Some while ago Radio 4's 'Today' program ran a competition asking its listeners to propose a 'People's Law'. MPs of varying persuasions promised to take this to parliament and a clear run to enactment was alluded to. The clear winner, 'being able to defend oneself, one's loved

ones and one's home from intruders - without being treated as a criminal', was shunned by politicians.

Now an election is looming, the politicians have (with characteristic manipulative, self-interested cynicism), 'looked at it', having utterly dismissed it before. They have dismissed it again and said that what the people want is unworkable. One is left with the impression that they have simply waffled for a while, knowing that interest in that specific issue will die and be forgotten. It might (?), but the impression this and other matters gives of politicians and politics will not.

What is worthy of note is that the politicians have all said: 'Fear not, the current law gives you what you want anyway'. Well if that is the case why not simply rewrite the law from the other stand-point, that of the honest citizen, even if it amounts to exactly the same thing in the end? If giving a defending householder the reassuring benefit of assumed innocence instead of possibly assumed guilt would be such a relief to so many, making people so much happier, then what on earth gives the supposed representatives of those same honest citizens the arrogant right to insist on their way of doing things?

In this example, even when the electorate made it abundantly clear what it wanted done about a very specific issue – it was ignored.

4.5 Political parties could mislead the voter

A political party's manifesto pledge can, for valid reasons, be very different to the corresponding final policy. Political parties want to make their manifesto pledges appeal to as many voters as possible. If they know that the final policy can be justifiably different then could they not, in today's terminology, be tempted to 'sex up' the manifesto?

If politicians can go so far as to take us to war by grievously manipulating the information the people are given, and furthermore, do this in the full glare of public scrutiny while many people are protesting on the streets, how on earth can we ever expect mere manifesto pledges to be reliable?

The electorate's only chance to choose which party's policies it wants is at elections. If there is a chance that the manifesto pledges are deliberately attractive, but written in the full knowledge that they will not happen, then what guide are they for the voter? Other parties may say that specific pledges are rubbish, but can we believe them either?

4.6 Vast numbers of society can be made unhappy

If politicians stop an electorate having its say on issues it is called repression. Repressed peoples rise up eventually if the repression is bad enough. They pull down the Berlin Wall. Repressing the political will of our electorate could not last indefinitely if it became extreme and something brought matters to a head. But, if the dissatisfaction within the electorate can be kept down to levels where people do not react then repression can go on indefinitely.

There are three possible outcomes:

- Option one: the public can be pushed so far that they react violently in political terms.
- Option two: the lid can be kept on the situation. The people are managed so that the effort of political reaction is too great in relation to the pain they currently have to suffer—they are kept subdued.
- Option three: government recognises the problems and does something about it—it represents the people. However, that may weaken its grip on power. Don't hold your breath!

Option one is patently dangerous. I hope we are not going down that route and I do not believe we are.

Option two is not dangerous in that it will not lead to armed revolt but it involves widespread and unavoidable dissatisfaction. Does our political system give us policies that can in fact easily make the vast majority unhappy? Are millions of people miserable because they are being forced to put up with laws, regulations and social emphases or directions that cause them frustration, dissatisfaction and anger?

Our political system appears nicely evolved to conform to Option two. When this and Option one involve widespread and unavoidable dissatisfaction for all, why can we not go quickly to Option three?

In our society the steam is taken from our anger because we are allowed to stand up and say what we like. We have elections. But if, in practice, the people's wishes are ignored, either by error or design, then our apparent freedom and democracy is an illusion at worst or a very bad version of democracy at best. People might not revolt—but they could very well stop voting.

4.7 The danger of extreme political reaction

A truly horrifying statistic I heard on the radio the other day was that 25 percent of the population would consider voting for the National Front. My understanding is that that is a similar proportion to those that voted the Blair and Thatcher governments into power. My horror would be just as great if it was the British Communist Party (I presume there is one). What is the cause of my horror? Quite simply it is that our mainstream politicians are so abusing the population of this country that they are pushing so many people to the point where their only way out is toward extremism.

4.8 Justifying unwanted policies

Politicians sometimes seem bent on justifying (even with untruths) policies they force on the electorate without either asking for their views on them or for their consent. In relation to the war on Iraq, a supreme amount of effort went into putting forward some very plausible arguments to justify it. No effort is ever made to ask what the electorate really wants to happen about immigration, but much effort goes into telling voters how good it is for them.

In the 1950's and 1960's, forcing policies on the people and 'explaining' how good they were for them was allegedly the preserve of the communist dictatorships. Is the leadership of North Korea really doing anything different to our politicians—or is it just less subtle?

4.9 Restraining progress.

If the electorate’s views are not acted on with some key issues, those issues are not ‘put to bed’. Arguments rumble on and on interminably. Politicians of all persuasions spend valuable time going over old ground again and again. Not only is there the obvious problem of poor representation but there is the secondary problem of political time and effort being wasted. If we could arrange, in the first instance, for these contentious issues to be resolved in line with the actual wishes of the electorate, thus finalising the matter, imagine what political time and effort could be released to get on with other things. Think what we could achieve—if we were not so politically inefficient.

5. How could the electorate be better served and represented?

Given the inherent problems, what are the options for improvement?

5.1 Voting for individual aspects of manifestos at general elections

Voting for individual aspects of manifestos at general elections is possible, but manifesto pledges can often only really be aims, and generalised ones at that. Events after the election and before these policy issues are addressed, could dramatically alter both our view of the issue, and the way a government chooses to treat it. There is even the possibility that manifestos might be made deliberately over-attractive. We may like the general impression of the proposed treatment (we are meant to), but will we like the actual medicine when it eventually turns up?

It is arguably much better to say yes or no when one knows exactly what one is saying yes or no to. Additionally, this approach would not address the problem of governments avoiding issues of public concern, even if they have made election pledges to do otherwise. So although a possibility, and better than what we have now, it does not solve the problems.

5.2 Proportional representation

As a naïve youth I often wondered why we did not have such a wonderfully fair system. Later I realised that one finished up with the bulk of the votes going to the major parties and the balance going to single issue or extreme political parties who then, catastrophically for the vast majority, might have casting votes and wield totally disproportionate power. Combine this with all-or-nothing manifesto baskets, and the electorate would be well and truly stuffed.

5.3 Better selection of political candidates.

Applicants for government jobs will often see in the job description the rider that the applicant must be able to fully grasp and understand the matters relating to the work. There is no equivalent restriction on prospective politicians. Having a system where anyone can choose to be a politician and local party activists nominate one of their own, is perhaps democratic—but does it give good candidates? Does it provide ones that are representative of the majority?

Perhaps people could be barred from holding office if they fall below various thresholds of ability—but what would these thresholds be and who would set them? Voting for candidates chosen randomly from a conscripted group of accomplished individuals who were

representative of our nation and its various disciplines, views and inclinations might be an option. But again, who would set the parameters for the 'random' choice?

Another point, of course, is that we can only judge MPs on what they are able to achieve within our political system. Occasionally one comes across organisations that are utterly useless, yet, if you talk to the individuals within that organisation they can be very sensible, capable people. With a little prompting they will also admit to being in despair about the organisation that they are a part of. Is our system of government like this?

Mike Weir MP (Scottish Nationalist) recently put forward a Private Members Bill relating to climate change and use of renewable energy sources. It was supported by nearly 200 cross party MPs and organisations as diverse as Friends of the Earth and the National Farmers Union—a wide spread of support for what must have been a reasonable proposal. The government blocked it. Is the quality of MPs less of a problem than their ability to be effective within government? Should we change our systems within government so that MPs can achieve more?

With small issues raised by constituents, I do wonder if individual MPs actually have any real power to achieve much. Perhaps what is really needed is a means to permit MPs to be more effective. The concept of having some means of better selecting political candidates has certain attractions but I cannot see such an approach having an acceptable form in our society.

5.4 A body to provide checks and balances on elected MPs

We have one, the House of Lords. Many dislike it, many love it. Could the electorate agree on a better form for it (or an equivalent body) even if we had the chance? Because of the Parliament Act, it has little power anyway. At present it appears to be the best or only thing we have between MPs and their potential for partisan and unrepresentative excess.

There is another very major problem. The House of Lords can only look at what the Commons proposes. It does not even come into play when politicians deliberately avoid addressing topics that are generally known to be of significant concern to large parts of the electorate.

The electorate's defences on one front are weak – on the other they are none existent.

5.5 More politicians

This may seem a heretical thing to suggest based on our past experience, but it is a possibility. Is the problem that politicians are so overworked they do not have time to get around to everything? The faults identified above are, however, not to do with how much work they do, but what they don't do, or are not able to do, because of the system.

A recent government campaign to give people more power regionally sought to give us more ('different') politicians. It was a rare occasion when the people were asked for their view on one issue in isolation. However, the people's views were totally opposite to those of the politicians.

For many, the infuriating outcome was how politicians said that the people didn't understand or didn't know what the politicians really wanted to achieve. Why didn't politicians consider

that although many people can individually be described as foolish, as a body politic, they usually have a lot of sense? Why didn’t politicians think: ‘Hang on, have I got something wrong here, is it me that doesn’t understand?’

What the people want first, before they have more or different politicians, are politicians who actually represent the views of the people. If our system could be more responsive to the needs and wishes of the public, this option may have a role in the future.

5.6 Regular referendums

The concept of regular referendums may sound appealing, but there could be dangers, especially if politicians set the questions. Past experience shows that they would probably not ask voters about separate issues, giving a range of options for each, but would tend to ask single questions that impact on more than one issue and doubtless phrased in a leading way.

The electorate would probably be unable to adequately express its actual views. Governments would doubtless claim to be responding to the wishes of the people, despite most people seeing that this was not true. The public’s opinion of politics and politicians would fall further—justifiably.

What exactly would the electorate actually vote on? Voting on every change of every law would be ridiculous. If we were asked to vote on the 57 amendments to the ‘Legal Constitution of Mutual Societies’ Act, how would we? Would we vote for the changes clause by clause? If not, would an important fault get through the net? Obviously we cannot have referendums about every act that parliament wants to pass. That is why we have politicians.

If the electorate was only asked to sanction general principles, not fine detail, might that work? We could vote on issues that the electorate was really interested in, but we still face this issue of who decides there is sufficient interest within the electorate? And we still have the problem of who sets the question(s).

The timing of referendums would be an issue, with the potential that urgent legislation could be held up for months until the next referendum. People might become fed up if they voted too often, and may feel unable to give a considered opinion.

The difficulties with this option are many—I believe it isn’t a viable one.

5.7 Establishing a Referendum Authority to monitor public opinion and call referendums

To ensure democracy prevails there could be a point at which, if a government cannot persuade voters to change their opinions, and still they do not respond to the electorate’s wishes, that the issue is put before the electorate for a decision to be made.

One option to achieve this is a Referendum Authority, independent of any party political interest, operating as a watch-dog for the electorate. It could monitor the electorate’s views on issues, with its activities being in the public domain.

An example: if the Referendum Authority (RA) discovered that a pre-determined trigger level (say 40 percent?) of people were very annoyed that they could not find a plumber, then they

would go away and investigate. If the authority found that for the last ten years the nation had been training 5,000 plumbers per year but 20,000 a year had been retiring, it would make this public knowledge, and point out the problem to the politicians.

If politicians then worked on correcting the problem, this would be a good outcome. To identify the cause of the problem would be even better. However, if, after a bit of a slating in the press and a few calls to explain themselves, the politicians did not react to correct the matter, the RA would be empowered, and obliged, to call a national referendum.

The first stage, with any given issue, would be to use surveys to identify a broad spread of options that covered the bulk of apparent public opinion. This done, questions would be set that offered voters a full range of options. A major problem with referendums is the wording of the question(s). The RA would have an expert committee that would, by law, be charged to set fair and unbiased questions. The separation of issues into different questions would be critical in order to avoid mixing up matters upon which voters may have very different opinions. A possible option might be to ask people to rank the choices in their order of preference. This might give the RA and politicians a better feel for what the latter had to arrange within the constraints of what was possible.

Some issues are of vital importance to the whole population but are specialist in nature. For example, the press has reported lately that we have a decline in university places for physics students. There are equivalent reductions in other science and technical subject places at universities that are less well known. Large proportions of the electorate are never going to get up a head of steam about these no matter how vital they may be to our long term future.

The RA could be set up so that if a representative sample of any specialist group (physics lecturers, say) was able to enlist the support of a predetermined number of MPs, the concerns of these specialists could be put to the RA by these MPs. The RA would be both obliged and empowered to investigate fully. The results of its investigations would be made public and if there was a genuine problem and the government didn't respond, then the matter would be put to the voters.

The electorate as a body is unlikely to exhibit a groundswell of discontent if one person, or a limited number of people, are suffering some real problem but one which only affects a very few. This does not diminish society's responsibility to put right the wrong. The RA could have a statutory duty to investigate particular cases. In relevant cases, the RA could bring the matter to the attention of government in the hope that they would do something speedily.

The RA would police the progress of the politicians, ensuring that they didn't use the 'what was possible' argument as an escape route and that they actually took some action. The aim of such an authority should NOT be to organise frequent referendums. The main point is that having such a power in the land would act as a discipline on governments and politicians as a body. The purpose of the RA would be to make politicians respond to the wishes and needs of the electorate far better. Hopefully the need for an actual referendum would be quite rare in practice.

An important advantage of this proposal is that the current political process would be left untouched. The work of government and of MPs could go on just as it does now. The House of Lords, or its equivalent, could go on casting its sage eye over the proposals of our MPs. Nothing revolutionary would happen, there is no risk of us having a major breakdown of the

political system. The only difference is the electorate would have the security of having a mechanism for stopping its elected representatives getting too far away from what the people want or find acceptable. Hopefully its existence alone would, most of the time, be sufficient for the electorate's needs to be met. Not a big change to the system, but one with huge potential benefits—for the electorate.

5.8 A *State of the Nation* report.

The information that the electorate has readily available in order to judge the state of our nation and our politicians (primarily the media), is grossly inadequate.

A huge amount of pertinent data exists and much is in the public domain, contained in myriads of reports on and by councils, government departments and public bodies of all types. There is now the Freedom of Information Act, but that appears to be a messy and overly bureaucratic approach to the problem. Also, there is the danger of political misuse with governing parties releasing unflattering data on other political parties just prior to elections - 'for the public good'.

What if every public body simply presented all its data in a format that permitted automatic inclusion in a national report? This report could contain information from those organisations that is already in the public domain. It would cover everything from our national self sufficiency in energy or steel to our local school or town council's electricity bill. Information could be presented as graphs and bar charts, to convey what is going on quickly and easily. Each section could contain a summary and then include more detail.

It could be freely available in libraries, on the internet, at council offices or to buy (as a whole or in part, in hard copy or on CD). Everyone could get information they want quickly and easily because, crucially, all voters would know where the information was.

For example, if they wished to, voters could look up how the spending on National Health Service salaries for doctors and nurses had changed in relation to that on administrators. The electorate could see the facts and ignore the spin. Politicians would have to start forgoing the simplistic 'sound bite' and argue their case: that more administrators helped medics to be more effective, or didn't—and why.

Some relevant analysis could be built in to clarify the data for the public. For example, expenditure on road or rail maintenance may have increased but if the costs per mile of work done had soared simply because of new government regulations, how would voters know what was really going on? A further analysis showing the number of miles repaired per year, over recent years, would help. When governments change the manner in which some data is collected or compiled, such as numbers of unemployed, the old data might be re-worked on the new system, or the old system of data collection might continue in parallel for a time.

Such a report would not be perfect, especially at first. Its analyses would be argued over and developed over time. However, it would be vastly better than what we have now: a mass of public data, located in more places than anyone knows about or can possibly find or, crucially, use.

Much of the data for such a report already exists and the Audit Commission is already dedicated to checking and collating it. It would, therefore, not be a major leap for this body to bring all this data together into such an annual *State of the Nation* report.

6 Can the electorate achieve improved democracy?

The monitoring of public opinion by a Referendum Authority (as described in 5.7 above) and the establishment of a *State of the Nation* report (as described in 5.8) are two possible innovations that appear to offer enormous benefits for the electorate by greatly improving the democracy of our political system. If these, and/or better options, were felt by many to be good ways to improve our political system, how, in practice, could they be brought into existence?

The leading politicians are looking at ways to ‘sex up’ voting. They need to get more of the electorate engaged as a means to secure what can be presented by them as a mandate from the people. It is possible, therefore, that the current rulers of our society may be persuaded. I do not however, think the chances of this happening are high. Rarely in history have ruling classes surrendered or restricted their power voluntarily.

Minor political parties may offer a route, if one, or a few working in conjunction, could be persuaded to:

1. Go to the electorate on the basis that their only policies involving significant change were those to implement initiatives aimed at solving our democratic ills—perhaps the ones outlined above.
2. Bind themselves to doing little or nothing else apart from day to day parliamentary necessities, until the process to achieve these changes and solve these ills is set irrevocably in train.
3. Bow out and hold fresh elections when the process to achieve these changes and solve these ills is set irrevocably in train.
4. Only address unexpected and unavoidable issues that happened to crop up in their period in power after full and very effective consultation with the electorate.

Then, possibly, very large numbers of the electorate might be persuaded to vote for them and put them into power. If the minor parties held to their word, their long term electoral pay-off would be more trusting voters and perhaps vastly improved chances of their prospective MPs being successful in future elections.

A second option would be for the electorate to abstain from voting. This would need a campaign that brought the problems and the proposed solutions directly to the electorate. Even if a significant number of voters did this, I do not think it would work. The dominant politicians would simply claim this was merely the speeding up of an established trend and that it would have happened without the foregoing campaign.

The final option that I can think of is to link the campaign discussed above with a request to all voters, including those who have stopped voting or even never voted, to go and deliberately spoil their ballot paper with a cross drawn across the whole of it. This would be a positive form of action which politicians could not ignore if it were done by a large enough section of the electorate.

This action would need to be linked to a very precise demand: that politicians should set in motion the establishment of the RA and *State of the Nation* report (or relevant alternatives)

immediately and hold elections as soon as this was done, doing nothing else dramatic in policy terms. The aim would be that whatever mix of major party MPs were elected they would have received very few actual votes and that many 'votes' would be made indirectly by deliberately spoiling voting papers. Hopefully these indirect 'votes' would be on such a scale that the elected politicians would not have a clear electoral mandate to do anything other than implement the new innovations as a matter of urgency and hold elections once that was done.

These are suggestions. Wiser and more knowledgeable people need to contribute to the debate. However, nothing can happen without your help.

7 Conclusions

Examples of politicians being totally out of step with society and/or reacting far too slowly to the electorate, are well documented. Our periodic General Elections have fundamental flaws which do not correct these ills.

Somehow society has to:

- Break the link between electing Brand X political party and having irrevocably condemned itself to accepting every piece of major legislation or policy direction without the option of a final veto.
- Establish a means of better evaluating what the electorate actually wants done about individual issues.
- Set up a mechanism to encourage politicians to better represent the electorate. A mechanism that has the power, if need be, to intervene on behalf of the electorate, to achieve this.
- Ensure it is well informed, without the distortions of information gaps, bias and deceit.

Establishing an independent authority, responsible to the electorate rather than parliament, with statutory powers to monitor public opinion and be a clearing house, via MPs, for the concerns of specialist groups and individuals, which is able (if need be) to call national referendums, would appear to have the potential to achieve the first three of these aims.

An annual *State of the Nation* report, generated independently, would appear to achieve the fourth. It offers considerable benefits for the people, enabling them to be better and more accurately informed and better able to identify the truth. It would give them information in order to make choices between individual political proposals and provide significant checks and balances on what politicians told the electorate.

What is proposed are two developments/add-ons to our existing political structure. This approach has the enormous advantage of not interfering with the core political structures and processes which, although flawed, are proven and working. We would not, therefore, be risking disaster by implementing them, yet could still realise enormous benefits.

These are simple ideas but their potential benefits could be huge. As with many simple ideas, they might not be simple to convert into reality. Power bases might be ranged against them as well as natural human inertia. But it can be done—with your help.

I have no political training and read far less of the thoughtful parts of the press than I should. My discussion and proposals may be limited in number, restricted in scope and badly

presented but I hope that you can see past such limitations. If you judge the problems with our political system to be as far reaching in consequence and debilitating in effect as I do, then it is my earnest hope that you find yourself willing and able to further the consideration of their solution further.

Many thanks for your time,

Kim Parkinson
March 2005.