

“I voted for Big Brother, but I didn’t vote the Prime Minister in.”

Political Apathy, Voting Systems and the future of Democracy.

by Jason Kitcat

The Turnout Time-bomb

59.2% of the British people voted for their government in the 2001 general election. This was the lowest turnout on record for a fully democratic British ballot. This figure alone has certainly appeared to have made many UK politicians stop and think, but for how long, it remains to be seen.

Perhaps more interesting is the wider context of this figure, globally turnout figures are dropping, with the US leading the way on this trend as it has done on so many others. It’s hard to draw solid conclusions, but most agree that this isn’t a good trend. If we step back from the global figures to understand just the British trend, it is hard to separate out conflicting statistics.

Clearly the Tory party misjudged their campaign strategy and became unelectable to a large portion of the population. Labour remained most ‘on message’ with regards to the general political opinion, though the Liberal Democrats were clearly connecting but suffer from the difficulty of winning seats in a First Past the Post vote.

However Labour had failed to deliver on the euphoria and wild promises of their first victory resulting in many cautious or disinterested voters who saw no alternative to Labour and no reason to vote Labour. Thus we saw reduced turnout due to the result being widely, and correctly, anticipated. In certain constituencies with special interests (such as the Independent Pro-Hospital candidate, Dr Richard Taylor) or controversial new candidates (such as the Independent Anti-Sleaze candidate, Martin Bell) turnout didn’t fall so dramatically as voters connected with the local issues and candidates.

The 2001 General Election marked a new progressiveness in terms of electoral legislation. It has never been so easy to vote thanks to the introduction of rolling electoral roll registration and postal ballots open to almost anyone. It is hard to judge if these initiatives made any material difference to the turnout, but surveys by organisations such as the BBC suggest that generally citizens choose not to vote because they don’t feel their vote makes a difference, or they don’t feel they know enough to make an informed choice, not because it’s too inconvenient to vote. Now undoubtedly some people leading particularly busy and mobile lifestyles benefit from liberalised voting legislation, but they are a small subset of the voting populace. To focus on issues that affect them would be to miss the deeper motivations for the dramatic drop in turnout.

A Parliament nobody notices

Thankfully many back-benchers raised this vital and glaring issue. Parliament's importance has fallen with the turnout. Ministers spend fewer hours in parliament, speeches and debates are covered less prominently (if at all) by the media. And committees are become less and less able to properly keep government in check. This is partly due to the lack of a written constitution, as Larry Siedentop has pointed out, our unwritten constitution depending on 'common sense', cultural cues and politeness along with a certain political aristocratic class. These have gone but the constitution has not changed and thus we have no fundamental rights on which to base arguments against centralisation or other negative changes to the state.

As Noreena Hertz wrote in the Guardian, 67 per cent of the population now believe that big international companies have more influence in their daily lives than their own government; and more worryingly 71 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds feel that, whoever they vote for, it will make no difference to their lives. There is a general disconnect. Her Majesty's Government appears to be unaccountable and too closely tied with corporate interests.

Correction: HMG is too closely entwined with large corporate interests, as vividly illustrated in George Monbiot's *Captive State*. As trans-nationals, who are only accountable to their shareholders, have become more overbearing we have been encouraged by pressure groups to engage in consumer activism. While choosing not to buy Nescafe may have some impact, the idea of consumerism in wider politics is, I believe, a dangerous one. It reduces the political *process* to a simple consumerist transaction.

Thus we get MPs feeling exasperated and citizens protesting at the lack of accountability and accessibility. MPs have a lot of work to do in terms of openness and trust, but citizens need to work too. The cancer of consumerism has resulted in voters feeling that their job is done once they have voted. But this cannot be the case if the political process is to continue. Citizens need to engage with the politicians and civil servants at every opportunity to ensure that their views are properly represented. We can all write letters, visit MPs' surgeries and submit opinions to consultation exercises, but how many of us actually do?

Every stakeholder in the political process, the media, politicians, party strategists, lobbyists and ordinary citizens to sit up and take note of the parlous state of our democracy before working together to improve it. Pointing the finger at each other won't help and certainly won't be very constructive as the finger will probably come around and to end up pointing at you!

We need a mechanic

So the political culture and process clearly need rejuvenation but some mechanical improvements are also needed. It is evident that the House of Lords needs to be properly reformed. The arguments for having hereditary peers were lost long ago, but I wouldn't be surprised to continue seeing some selected peers making appearances in the Lords for some time to come. While not democratic in the strict sense of the term, selecting eminent scientists, businessmen, philosophers and other overachievers helps to bring in needed diversity. Furthermore such characters may well not be naturally political and would balk at entering an election to contribute to their nation.

Either way the majority, if not all, of the Lords should be democratically elected – no more fudges can be accepted. If modernised along those lines then the Lords could provide a powerful incentive for the reform and re-empowering of the House of Commons.

One other reform is, I believe, absolutely vital for the continued success of the Commons. Our First Past the Post voting system is archaic, unrepresentative and positively backward. It should be replaced as soon as possible with Single Transferable vote, the most proportional system. More proportional systems, such as those introduced in Scotland and Wales result in a more diverse ecology of parties and representatives. Generally the introduction of a proportional system delivers more ethnic and women representatives and also results in less confrontational debate in parliament.

I believe such reforms would inevitably lead to the creation of a written British constitution, which is vital to the continued evolution of not only the UK, but also the European Union.

Global world, global politics

Reforming our own political structures is a vital first step and key to rejuvenating British people's faith in politics. But we live in a deeply interconnected world and due to our Commonwealth, EU, G7, NATO and WTO connections we are particularly embroiled in international matters.

These international dependencies can play on local politics as well as foreign policy. Take for example, the Skye Bridge project (the first PFI initiative) which ended up being owned by the Bank of America. In fact the PFI (aka PPP) policy started by the Tory government and unabashedly championed by the Labour government has thrown up many thorny issues. Firstly the idea that once public services will not only be effectively be privatised and owned by non-British companies has concerned many citizens. There is also a risk that some WTO rules could force government to privatise or to at least offer contracts to private

tender (with a public bid entered too) even it is against our own government's wishes.

But organisations like the WTO and European Union aren't directly accountable to UK citizens. Thus only if our own government becomes truly representative of its citizens can these issues be presented and acted upon by the supra-national organisations which have become the target of so much protest.

Casting the net wider: Europe and the UN

Any discussion of British politics is fatally flawed without looking at the impact of the European movement. Europe is an extremely emotive issue among British citizens, for an extraordinary number of reasons.

Whether Europe succeeds is down to veracity with which its political leaders reform the institutions that have made up the EU in the past. Clearly the EU's and in particular Maastricht's guiding principles are economic and in fact it was leading European CEOs that masterminded much of what we now refer to as the EU. Yet as Europe's remit broadens into military, social and environmental roles we can clearly see how unrepresentative its institutions are – and how an economic liberalism alone is unable to guide us in such matters.

Take the rapid reaction force: Ireland treasures its neutral status and thus when campaigning on the Nice Treaty referendum (which was sold by the EU as purely being about expansion) 'No' activists pointed out that Nice would allow for the EU to become a militarily active state, the Irish voted it down. However EU leaders ignored this vote and stated that the Irish were "mistaken" and would have to vote again soon. But the unspoken truth is that if most European countries had been asked to vote they too would have voted no.

Furthermore many are beginning to realise that with or without a broadened remit, the frenzied expansion of the EU will render most decision-making procedures unworkable.

In *Democracy in Europe* Larry Siedentop lucidly points out that without a constitution Europe will never function as a truly democratic institution and its citizens will never feel truly represented on a European scale. Not only does the writing of a constitution encourage the level of debate on Europe that so far has been so profoundly lacking, but it will provide the core principles to guide an institution which is essential rudderless and purely economically motivated.

The problem for many who have attempted to raise this issue is that European citizens, and especially the British, somehow equate the writing of a constitution with the dreaded 'federalist Europe'. Yet the fear of a federalist Europe is based on a basic misunderstanding of what federations are – they shouldn't be

centralised dictatorships by bureaucracy. But this is exactly what discussions of Europe revolve around – losing control to Brussels. Federalising does not equate centralising!

Study a real federation like Canada or the United States and we see that in fact as little as possible is done centrally. If something can be done closer to the issue at hand then it is. This concept, subsidiarity, is strongly embedded in US law and is already evident in some European countries, particularly Spain and Germany whose regional governments are particularly empowered.

Thus in many respects a truly federal Europe would be good news for those in Britain who bemoan the loss of power at local council and parish council levels. In fact even after devolution in Scotland and Wales the UK is still one of the most centralised countries in the Western world and probably the most centralised nation in Europe.

So the challenge is to effectively communicate these realities and benefits with current EU leaders as well as the average citizens so that we can have informed and intelligent debate on the real issues and not one side-lined by red herrings. By informing both ends of the debate we can aim for a pincer action from the top and grass-roots of Europe that results in truly radical reform.

Conclusion

The challenge is there for those who wish to take it on. Considered, intelligent debate paired with passionate activism should see real and effective reform not only with the United Kingdom but in the European Union. Reforming our political culture, systems and debate is a tall order but if we can make it work then perhaps we can begin to cast loftier goals and open the debate on how to make the UN more representative and effective. But that's best left aside for the moment... it would be too much to ask to turn the EU and UK from centralised bureaucracies to vibrant representative democracies and reform one of the most complex and diplomatically mired institutions of our time. Let us work on today to improve our chances for the tests we will face tomorrow.

*"What you can do, or dream you can do, begin it/
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."*

Attributed to Goethe

Jason Kitcat is creator and co-ordinator of the FREE e-democracy project (<http://www.thecouch.org/free/>) and also a founding partner of Swing Digital (<http://www.swingdigital.com>), a digital consultancy.