

# Reconnecting the Political Class

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Published by Open Democracy 2 October 2013

How can the political class reconnect with voters before it becomes irrelevant? How can our institutions reform themselves to bring them closer to people? Ted Cantle has some ideas...



The falling level of trust in our politicians, declining membership of mainstream political parties, low voter turnout, and the growth of populist and extremist parties and groups, should all be regarded as dangerous warning signs of democracy under threat.

Yet little thought seems to have been given to the idea of 'reconnecting our political class' and whether they can re-build confidence in their abilities, enthuse citizens and offer convincing evidence that the democratic process can represent their views and respond to their aspirations.

## **Support and trust for mainstream politics is reaching a dangerously low point**

Voter participation in elections is declining and moreover, many people do not even bother to put their names on the electoral register (and some that do often only do so in order to register for credit and mobile phone contracts). The latest Hansard Society report, *Audit of Political Engagement*, shows that only 41% of people would be certain to vote in a general election, but amongst young people it is only 12% - down from 30% just two years ago and younger people are far less likely to register to vote in the first instance. In many local elections, turnouts are much lower and the electorate have shown no appetite for an extension of the traditional democratic process - fewer than 15% of voters turned out in the 41 English and Welsh areas of the new Police and Crime Commissioners.

Meanwhile, the Far Right and popular extremist parties (PEPs) are doing rather well. Whether or not their supporters are signed up to their agenda is not always clear, but

they certainly are prepared to lend them their vote, if for no other reason than giving mainstream politicians 'a bloody nose'. There is now a high level of frustration with old style party politics and what is seen as a lack of action to address real concerns. The main beneficiary in the UK has been UKIP who are desperately trying to hang on to their 'not mainstream, tell it like it is' image and know that if they become too respectable they will lose support! In most other European countries, PEPs have done even better, from the relatively new parties like the *True Finns* in Finland, to the well established *Front National* in France and the more individualistic groups like *Italy's Five Star Movement*, founded by the charismatic comedian Beppe Grillo.

The decline in trust in politicians is at an all-time low, partly because of corruption – the devastating MP's expenses scandal in the UK, alleged payments to politicians personal bank accounts in Spain, or sex for money allegations in Italy, alleged bribery through company directorships, and many more, has fuelled the idea that politicians are more motivated by their own interests than by the public good. In the UK, an Ipsos MORI poll in 2013 revealed deep levels of cynicism towards politicians among the British public. Half (52%) of Britons believed MPs put their own interests first and three in ten (31%) thought MPs put their party's interest first. And just one in twelve (8%) believed that MPs put the interests of their constituents first.

Politicians are themselves frustrated by their lack of support and declining esteem. However, they tend to blame the press and media, or put it down to apathy - arguing that people are simply 'not interested in politics'. The truth is that people are interested in politics, just not their party brands, hence the growth in single issue groups – and the non-mainstream PEPs. Their solution to the declining fortunes of political parties – with less paying members and fewer sponsors – is to demand that the public purse bail them out and thereby prop up a failing party system. As their popularity declines, they seek to be compensated for their 'very demanding job' and compare their role with that of senior executives in the public and private sectors, rather than their electors as a whole. It is now possible that they will contrive to pay themselves more, despite the clear evidence that this would make them even more unpopular and detached.

In fact, one of the most serious problems that politicians face is that they have become a closed professional group who mostly relate to themselves and their media and policy advisers within their 'Westminster Bubble'. Most new politicians are recruited from that same small coterie and expect to stay there for life. Being surrounded by a like-minded - and often a sycophantic and set of wannabes - is a recipe for retrenchment, not renewal. And whatever happened to the notion of representativeness?

However, our political parties and politicians face a much more profound problem. Political parties are based on a set of ideas which the parties still seem to think offer a current and coherent philosophy but only reflects an outdated (often class-based) view of the world. They seem unable to rise to the urgent and difficult issues of climate change, the regulation of global markets and companies, the unprecedented scale of people movement, resource depletion and a rapidly changing balance of economic powers. If the electorate are not convinced that their politicians can really affect these issues, why should they bother to engage? Traditional politics is played out almost entirely on the national stage, without meaningful engagement of ordinary

citizens in international debate, but nor has it enabled any serious devolution of local decision making. This requires new collaborative and plural political structures that can both engage people at a more localised level and reach across national boundaries. The failure to adapt political systems has meant that national politicians have reinforced the view that they simply wish to protect their own power bases.

### **Solutions will not be easy – especially for politicians themselves**

We need to change both the institutional arrangements and the culture of politics. Technology has transformed communications, even to the point of enabling new and different forms of protest. Politicians have not come to terms with this in the West and even less in developing countries. The rise of viral social media campaigns, e-petitions, bystander photo-journalism, hacked official files and emails, use of global databases and more besides, rather puts trudging off to a dreary polling station once every few years in the shade! Moreover, it has challenged the omnipotence of the political class and their control of information flows. However, rather than recognise the change and try to use emerging technology to engage more people in different ways, politicians have tended to cling to traditional methods and lament the passing of their established practices.

Re-connecting the political class will not be easy, especially if they attempt to cling to past political paradigms. In an increasingly globalised and interdependent world they will also need to come to terms with the reality of political plurality and work in a much more collaborative way.

But firstly, changing politicians working arrangements could make an immediate impact and would better reflect the everyday reality of most people. Measures could include:

- Limiting the term of office of politicians to 10 years without a substantial break and ensuring a constant infusion of new blood
- Providing each MP with a local High Street office, with the expectation that they will work from there at least 50% of the time, using on-line access (most of us now work remotely) rather than disappear into the Westminster bubble.
- Require each MP to job share, work part-time and take sabbaticals. These more flexible working arrangements will also promote representativeness, especially in terms of gender. (This proposal contrasts with Ed Miliband's view to limit MPs other interests; the problem however, is one of conflict of interests, not having other interests!)
- Grasp the chance to elect the House of Lords through an electoral college system with constituencies from every section of the community rather than replicating the unrepresentative nature of the Commons through the party system of direct elections (see below)

- Experiment with 'hustings' for candidates, and a form of primaries (physical and virtual, using social media) like the US system, to get beyond the party labels. Funding should be made available to support candidates, but not for political parties who simply tend to act like old fashioned shop stewards and squeeze out alternative viewpoints.

- Change the archaic practices of the parliamentary system to streamline legislative processes and voting, with simple office hours and more family friendly working arrangements
- Remove formalised governmental and oppositional positions and develop more collegiate style of decision taking

Secondly, our political system also needs to better reflect the modern reality of politics in an interdependent world:

- Political parties are generally organised on a national basis and their ideas simply follow this pattern. They need to recognise, however, that the nation state is no longer the right level for all decision making processes. National boundaries are not respected by corporations, environmental threats, criminals, faith disaporas and social media.
- At one end of the spectrum, we need to devolve decision making to the City level to foster new levels of engagement, based on the reality of place. This can offer more localised democratic participation and also dilute the 'identity politics' that has bedevilled so much of the political system and created partisan 'them and us' divisions in which politicians rely on their 'core support' (usually just a minority) of voters to get them into power.
- But we need a more active political process – people should be able to take responsibility for their own lives, be less dependent on remote public services or private monopolies and run their own bank (as in the [Burnley 'Bank on Dave'](#) example), set up their own water or energy company, or even run their own welfare benefits systems. Isn't this exactly what the 'big society' should have been about?
- At the same time, we need to develop new collaborative arrangements across international boundaries and instead of pretending that nations can repatriate powers, politicians need to engage the electorate more and create new structures to end the remoteness of international bodies. The reality of political plurality must be embraced.
- In order that politicians become less preoccupied with their own agenda and move on to the wider politics of globalisation, climate change, international regulation of finance which determine so much of our daily lives, they will need a new set of advisers who are not drawn from their own political backgrounds and come from organisations that have a world view and support international collaboration, rather than pretend that we are each some sort of special or island race. This is a real change of focus - a recent report by the University of

Nottingham for example, revealed that, as least as far as Twitter use by politicians, they have little interest in international issues.

- Advisers should also be appointed on a time limited basis, perhaps with a continuously changing international group of younger people who constantly remind politicians of the need to see the world how it should be, the principles upon which decisions should be made and the limitations of the idea of 'core' supporters and identity politics.
- Perhaps the political culture is more responsible than any institution for driving people away – the refusal to answer straight questions, or to say what they really mean – or even to answer with 'I don't know'. The dependence on focus groups rather than on commitment and leadership also alienates people. The constant striving to create a competitive and combative approach in which collaboration is seen as a weakness rather than a strength, has to be the first change.

### **House of Lords Reform – an opportunity to create new politics**

The reform of the House of Lords provides a once in a generation opportunity to create a new form of representative politics – and to begin to break down the isolation and exclusivity of the political class.

The present system is of course very unsatisfactory with most new peers appointed through political party nominations – perhaps just because they are party donors. In some cases, membership remains inherited or is reserved for particular religious representatives. Despite this, the House of Lords is actually more representative in some respects, with a greater variety of independent and professional experts.

Little innovation has been offered through the changes proffered by the political class themselves. Most simply wish to make the Lords into another version of the Commons by way of open elections, in which the present political parties will no doubt continue to predominate. This is despite the fact that the Lords is meant to be a revising chamber based upon wise and expert counsel, rather than based on a competing mandate.

House of Lords reform could reinvigorate the political class, better connect them to the wider public and develop representativeness:

- An electoral college system would ensure all walks of life are represented, with 50% by gender, and by faith (and non-faith), ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, social class, regionalism and so on - a truly representative basis. The electoral college could either indirectly elect, or use merit appointments, for example where part of a professional body
- This would entail a complex matrix of groups, which would constantly change to reflect the dynamics of society, but overseen by a commission to ensure a high degree of representative democracy.

- The process of appointment within the electoral colleges could be highly participative, fostering debate and ownership of the political process.
- Again, limiting appointments to a number of years.
- More clearly defining the role as a revising chamber, based upon longer term constitutional protection, challenging the evidential basis of decisions and drawing upon both professional and non-professional experience, rather than shorter term party political objectives

Care would need to be taken to ensure that the 'usual suspects' do not tick most of the boxes and leave large sections of the community outside. The use of social class, occupation and regional factors would ensure a genuine level of representativeness.

These ideas are not intended as any sort of definitive answer, but they will hopefully contribute to a debate about the way politics – and politicians – need to change if they are to win back peoples' support and trust, and respond to the pressing challenges the world now faces.

Without change, we are likely to see an even more profound decline in support for mainstream politics and politicians and yet more growth in populist and extremist organisations and groups - the dangers of which are clearly evident.

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Ted Cantle's latest book is - **Interculturalism: The New Era of Cohesion and Diversity** published by Palgrave Macmillan