

Briefing on ‘Power to the People’: the final report of the Power Inquiry into the state of British Democracy

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Introduction

After over a year of extensive research, the Power Inquiry report has finally been released. It should be read and its findings taken seriously by anyone interested in the health of our democracy. The Power Inquiry was an independent investigation, set up by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Limited, exploring the state of British democracy and the problem of increasing political disengagement in Britain. The aim of the Inquiry was to propose potential solutions that could help encourage the level of political interest and involvement throughout the UK. The report contains many voting-related conclusions and recommendations, including a specific one on electoral reform. This brief summary highlights the most interesting and relevant points of the report, in regards to the MVC campaign.

Although the Power Inquiry does not make any specific recommendations as to what kind of electoral system should replace the first-past-the-post system, **it looks favourably on the Single Transferable Vote system.** Overall, the report recognises the importance of electoral reform as part of a wider scheme of re-engaging the British public with politics:

‘Electoral reform is just one part of a wider ‘jigsaw ’of change required to re-engage the British people with their political system in as profound and sustainable a way as possible.’

Voting is a waste of time for a large proportion of the electorate

The report emphasises that beyond contemporary social and cultural factors that encourage voting apathy, we need to consider the **deeper, systemic problems** within the political system. As the report describes:

‘Our system of electing our parliamentary representatives is widely regarded as a positive obstacle to meaningful political involvement. For millions of citizens it seems, voting is simply regarded as a waste of time because the candidate or party you favour is either not standing or has no chance of victory while the candidate or party that does stand a chance of winning is positively disliked.’

As part of its public consultation, the Inquiry asked the question: *‘What changes would encourage a larger number of people to feel it is worth voting?’* The report describes how the key factor most identified as encouraging voting was an electoral system that treated all votes equally. These are a few examples of public responses as sited in the report:

“The merit of first-past-the-post is stable government. However, except for those living in marginal constituencies, it renders one’s vote virtually worthless. Many votes are wasted under the first-past-the-post system. The first-past-the-post system is one of the things that put people off.”

“As a Liberal Democrat voter in Westminster there really is no point me bothering to go to the polling station, it will make no difference. It takes a zealot to bother voting when the vote won’t count.”

The report notes that expert opinion is divided with regards to the exact potential impact of a more proportional voting system. However the overall conclusion was that first-past-the-post is not a beneficial election process. Crucially the report also highlights the fact that non-voters who were surveyed said they were more likely to vote if their vote counted more:

‘49 per cent of respondents said they were ‘very likely’ or ‘likely’ to vote if “my preferred party had a real chance to win power”’.

The report draws attention to the problem of disengagement and declining turnout that has been seen to occur across mature democracies, including in several countries that use proportional electoral systems. However:

‘Research by Professor Pippa Norris, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, suggests that those countries that do use proportional systems have had historically higher turnouts than Britain and have in most cases maintained higher turnouts despite a general decline. Her study in 2005 of 164 countries found that those with proportional representation had average turnouts of 70 per cent; 10 per cent higher than those achieved by Britain in the most recent general elections.’

Modernisation

As the report describes, the problem with our current political system is that it is outdated, and needs to be modernised in order to re-engage an emerging generation of (non-)voters. The problem is not that people are not interested in politics; on the contrary, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that people are becoming increasingly politically aware. But people do not see the point in voting. The report clearly highlights the need for the modernisation of British politics:

‘It has become clear to us that while British society has been fundamentally transformed in the last forty years, the political system has not. There has been no strategic or thoroughgoing rethink of the way politics is conducted in Britain despite the fact that our world is now immeasurably different to that which existed when our two-party, parliamentary system took shape.’

Choice

Perhaps most interesting was the report’s emphasis on the issue of ‘choice’, and the problem of the electoral and party systems needing to be more representative:

‘Most fundamentally, a more open approach to electing our representatives and governments needs to be developed. We currently have a situation where two political parties with severely declining appeal and relevance have managed to maintain their grip on politics purely by virtue of the fact that the electoral system exaggerates their support when votes are translated into seats and removes incentives for voters to support other parties or candidates. Instead, the electoral and party systems need to become truly responsive to the views and demands of British citizens. **This means offering voters a wider and more meaningful choice of parties and candidates, so that new political ideas and alliances can develop to represent and values and interests of the post-industrial era.**’

The reports describes how the lack of choice presented to individuals who are immersed in an individualistic consumer culture and are used to having real choice, inevitably leads to people not seeing voting as being worth while. As the report describes:

‘An electoral arrangement is needed that is sufficiently responsive to the much more fluid and diverse identities and values of the electorate. Such a change is necessary to ensure that large numbers of citizens feel there is something on offer to them at election time.’

The report even goes as far as to say:

‘With such options it is not surprising that many make the rational decision to do something more meaningful with their Thursday.’

The report acknowledges some of the implications of a more proportional electoral system that are often flagged up as being problematic.

‘We accept that such a system would probably lead to **parties being looser associations of representatives built around core values or interests.** But our evidence suggests that **this is precisely what citizens would prefer.** We do not, however, accept that it will lead to the loss of the party as a significant structuring feature of authority in Parliament or opinion in the country. This has not been the **experience of those assemblies in Australia, Malta, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland which use the Single Transferable Vote.**’

The response of the Inquiry to the problem of small parties gaining excessive amounts of power is also very interesting, highlighting the overall benefits changing from first-past-the-post.

‘However, given that we have specifically identified the need for a system that allows the emergence of new political alliances and approaches, using a method that might stifle the rise of small parties and independents may not be entirely appropriate. We admit there is therefore no easy answer to this, except to be extremely vigilant. We note, for example, recent research work on the British National Party carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.¹³⁰ This found that in areas where the BNP was building support it had done so because of its efforts to engage with local communities through face-to-face campaigning, unlike the main parties which had a low local profile. **This may suggest that a system which reduced the security of safe seats, and thus required all parties and candidates to campaign vigorously, could prevent some of the surges of support for the BNP that have taken place in local communities in recent years.**’