

Voting Reform: the experts' opinions, as heard in evidence to Power Inquiry

(excerpts from evidence sessions published on www.powerinquiry.org)

Robin Cook – in evidence given to Power Inquiry:

“I put at the top of my list a system of voting which actually resulted in a parliament that properly represented the way the nation voted instead of the present way.”

“In a way you have to say that the public are quite rational when they respond to the present system, not turning out in large numbers. In the 67% of public in Liverpool Riverside who didn't vote [in 2001 election] – in a sense I could understand their position because even if they voted they were going to get one Labour MP and however often they voted they were still going to get one Labour MP.”

“There is another feature of the electoral system which I find even more insidious, and I think in turn depresses turnout. And that is that the first-past-the-post system makes it rational to hunt for the centre ground because that 's the dividing line between Labour and Conservative. And so we put enormous energy, imagination, creativity and money into tracking down the floating voter in the centre ground in the marginal seats. Probably less than 5% of the total electorate and if you look at the message that comes out, it 's tailored to that. It 's never actually addressing what you might describe as our core vote or indeed the other 90% of the electorate.”

Councillor Barbara Janke (Liberal Democrat) – in evidence given to Power Inquiry:

“I think that the proportional representation argument is a good one because I think that systems like that favour competition and, in my opinion, the most active political parties are the ones who feel they're in with a chance of winning something. If you've got competition then I think you'll get party membership levels up.”

Professor Pippa Norris – in evidence given to Power Inquiry:

“The first thing to ask is 'what are the incentives to vote?', 'What are the ways in which we're going to get people out?' One thing which matters is proportional representation of electoral systems, we can compare those in many countries, Europe and other established democracies and they always have normally a higher level of turnout than a majoritarian first-past-the-post system quite simply because you get fewer wasted votes. The second factor, party competition, and again that's related; so if you have more competitive elections, if you have in particular closer elections as you run up, then we know that again we get higher levels of turnout.”

“Parliament needs to change how it conducts its business, how it opens itself to the public. Because the citizens have changed and you're never going to, as it were, put the genie back into the bottle and make citizens continue to be deferential, loyal and interested in parliament if parliament doesn't alter the way it does its business.”

Professor Paul Whiteley (Professor of Politics at Essex University) – in evidence given to Power Inquiry:

“The problem is that voting is crucial to democracy; you can’t conceive of democracy surviving if large numbers of people don’t vote.”

Professor Philippe Schmitter (Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the European University Institute in Florence)

“We know that the decline in voting turnout is associated not with a disinterest in politics but with dissatisfaction in politics.”

The Power Inquiry Citizens’ Commission - Newcastle and Gateshead - 1st meeting

“Voting is seen as a slightly different sort of activity than other ways of getting involved. It almost stands as a category on its own.”

“Attitudes towards voting also reflect the alienation that people feel towards the political existing system.”

“People are sometimes unable to differentiate between candidates, particularly when policies seem similar or when there are too many policies to consider all together.”

“More fundamentally, however, many people feel that their vote does not empower them at all and that it will not make any difference to service delivery or policy making or politics in any case.”