



SMF FORESIGHT

DISCONNECTED CITIZENS:

Is Community Empowerment the Solution?

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SUMMARY

Community empowerment, and the largely participatory mechanisms which make it up, have been presented as a solution to many social ills ranging from anti-social behaviour and social exclusion to democratic disengagement and the disconnection of citizens from the state. Yet, evidence of concrete outcomes of community empowerment is patchy at best, as is evidence of a huge and unsated public appetite for engagement. In part this mismatch between evidence and enthusiasm reflects that the concept itself remains ill-defined – in language, aims and ambitions.

This paper argues that there exists a further mismatch between the Government's ambition to reinvigorate local democracy and the community empowerment mechanisms that it hopes will provide the solution, particularly in a context where citizens have only limited time and willingness to participate. The exponential rise in participatory opportunities in recent years has not been accompanied by an improvement in people's sense of connection to formal politics or the degree to which people feel empowered to influence decisions. A number of factors are explored which help to explain this mismatch, including: the evolution of a false dichotomy between representative and participatory democracy; a failure of initiatives to transfer power in a meaningful sense and; a lack of clarity and transparency in lines of accountability for decisions.

This paper argues that rejuvenated parish and town councils could provide the Government with a more appropriate solution to match its ambitions. By investing the most local representative tier of government with a specific and meaningful role to operate the participatory arm of local government – liaising with citizens and community organisations, providing a clear and direct link between them and higher-tier representatives, and offering a transparent forum for two-way communication and accountability - parish and town councils could become the bedrock of empowered communities and a reinvigorated local democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Almost universally across the political spectrum and policy world there is an acceptance that community empowerment measures are necessary and have an intrinsic as well as instrumental value. Indeed the community empowerment agenda, and the largely participatory mechanisms which purport to form part of it, have assumed an almost untouchable quality.

Community empowerment processes aim at enabling people to shape and choose how decisions are made and services delivered, at both a national and local level and include a wide range of innovations, such as:

- consultative mechanisms – written consultations, public meetings, citizens’ panels, community forums, focus groups, petitions, Planning for Real etc.;
- deliberative mechanisms – citizens’ juries, consensus conferences etc.;
- co-governance mechanisms – participatory budgeting, youth councils, citizen governance, partnership boards etc.; and
- direct democracy mechanisms – referenda, town meetings, citizens’ initiatives etc.¹

The ‘holy grail’ that is community empowerment has come to be seen as a panacea for many social ills, able, by involving people, to reduce crime, improve public health, tackle anti-social behaviour, regenerate communities, reduce exclusion, enhance cohesion, reinvigorate democracy, address apathy and disillusionment, increase accountability and enhance effective management. This essay considers the aims, opportunities and demand for community empowerment in the context, primarily, of democratic disengagement and asks whether the current policy initiatives have a realistic chance of meeting such high expectations.

It’s not hard to see why politicians are not vying to criticise or question an idea with such broad appeal. However this unquestioning nature of this enthusiasm has resulted not only in a reluctance to criticise the idea itself, but also in a certain degree of revisionism (blaming policy failures on the failure to engage)² and moral judgement (whereby for example, a failure to eagerly participate is taken to imply

1 For a comprehensive and detailed examination of the variety of new mechanisms that can be encompassed under the community empowerment banner see Graham Smith, *Beyond the Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World, A report for the Power Inquiry* (London: Power Inquiry, 2005).

2 Keith Jacobs, *The Dynamics of Local Housing Policy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), 173.

either apathy or exclusion).³ Yet, evidence of concrete outcomes of community empowerment is not easy to come by, nor is evidence of a huge and unsated appetite for participatory engagement amongst the general population.⁴ One of the reasons for this mismatch between evidence and enthusiasm is that the concept itself remains ill-defined – in language, aims and ambitions.

In writing about policy, the word *community* is variously replaced with both *user* and *citizen* or more specific segments of the population – *youth* or *tenant* for example.⁵ *Empowerment* is sometimes exchanged for *participation*, *engagement* or *involvement*. These linguistic variations are often used interchangeably, but belie the very different aims and outcomes which are implied and which relate to both who the target is of any policy initiative or intervention and what it is hoped such initiatives will achieve. In particular, *empowerment* clearly implies some genuine transfer of power but this is often not delivered in the accompanying initiatives; a theme to which I will return.

THE AIMS OF COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

In terms of ambitions for community empowerment, within political discourse there exist both presumed intrinsic benefits and more instrumental aims. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) for example, promotes community empowerment *with the aim of improving communities*.⁶ Community empowerment for DCLG therefore, at least in part, constitutes “a means to improve outcomes” – to make better places by encouraging people to take on “wider personal and community responsibilities”.⁷ Across the literature on community empowerment, such instrumental justifications can be generally divided into three main camps:

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- 3 Moira Riseborough, “More control and choice for users? Involving tenants in social housing management” in *Housing and Public Policy, Citizenship, Choice and Control*, ed. Alex Marsh and David Mullins (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998), 238.
 - 4 Jane Dudman, “The sound and fury...signifying nothing”, *Public*, May 1 2008, 26.
 - 5 Bochel et al. define user participation as a form of activity shared by both governmental and non-governmental actors, at least some of whom are ‘users’ in the sense of being directly involved in the processes and/or outcomes of the activity, as opposed to civil participation, where people participate in non-governmental organisations; and civic participation, where people participate in governmental decision-making bodies. Catherine Bochel et al., “Marginalised or Enabled Voices? ‘User Participation’ in Policy and Practice,” *Social Policy & Society* 7(2) (2008), 202.
 - 6 DCLG Website: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/aboutcommunityempowerment/whatiscommunity/>.
 - 7 Tessa Brannan, Peter John and Gerry Stoker, “Active Citizenship and Effective Public Services and Programmes: How Can We Know What Really Works?,” *Urban Studies* 43(5-6) (2006), 993 - 994.

- firstly, that it leads to better and more responsive services;
- secondly, that it builds human and social capital; and
- thirdly, that it tackles people's disengagement from democratic politics.⁸

Which, then, of these outcomes is the Government concerned to address with its community empowerment agenda? Has it clearly defined its problem? The announcement, in March 2008, by communities' secretary Hazel Blears MP, that a community empowerment white paper would be published in the summer focussed on two main elements: tackling *political disengagement* by encouraging active citizenship, reviving civic society and local democracy; and *improving public services* by involving local users and consumers. Both of these ambitions were linked to strengthening local accountability. (A final ambition around tackling worklessness seems to have been rather incongruously shoehorned into the launch document.⁹)

Further clarity about the Government's ambition was provided by the various policy ideas which were trailed in the accompanying press. These included: direct election to police authorities and NHS trusts; forms of compensation if local services fail to meet commitments on standards; the development of community contracts; the introduction of statutory responses for petitions; the extension of participatory budgeting, or 'community kitties' to use the Government's preferred phrase; and the placing of a statutory duty on councils to facilitate democratic engagement (an idea put forward by the Councillors Commission which reported in December 2007).¹⁰ Although weakly tied together, the general emphasis from these ideas appeared to be on a revival of local democracy and the re-engagement of the citizen with the state. This was not unexpected, coming as the impetus did from DCLG, from whom too much of a service user or customer agenda might seem misplaced.

The thrust of the same department's *Community Empowerment Action Plan*, launched just a few months earlier, reinforced the focus on revitalising democracy (again alongside a service improvement agenda).¹¹ Underlining the democratic justification, Ms Blears' foreword concluded that through community empowerment "[l]ocal democracy...will be transformed and, with it, the lives and opportunities of

8 Paul Skidmore, Kirsten Bound and Hannah Lownsbrough, *Community Participation, who benefits?* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006), 3.

9 Communities and Local Government, *Unlocking the talent of our communities*, (London: DCLG, 2008).

10 Patrick Wintour, "Blears wants police, NHS and councils more locally accountable", *Guardian*, March 5, 2008.

11 Communities and Local Government, *An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success*, (London: DCLG, 2007).

millions of citizens.”¹² The core ambition of the community empowerment agenda then, for DCLG at least, is no less than the re-energization of local democracy. This rests on ideas of civic engagement, and suggests that increased participation and empowerment can overcome the apparent crisis of confidence in democratic politics by rejuvenating the relationship between the citizen and the state.¹³

However, there is failure here to adequately define the problem, not least because the extent and depth of the apparent crisis of democracy requires a much more nuanced analysis than much of the accompanying rhetoric would suggest. For example, we can bemoan the decline in turnouts at both national and local elections. We can point to surveys which reveal a consistent lack of trust in traditional political institutions, and even more so the general public and media derision for politicians.¹⁴ And we can comment on the severe decline in party political membership and affiliation. All of these factors can be, and often have been, interpreted as indicative of widespread disenchantment with politics and democracy.

But despite this apparent disenchantment, we also have to consider that levels of public interest in politics remain relatively steady with around half the population consistently responding to surveys that they are fairly or very interested.¹⁵ Similarly, there is little evidence of a decline in trust in public services,¹⁶ and trust in local councils has increased quite significantly in the past few years, from 52% in 2001 to 60% in 2007.¹⁷ A more careful consideration of the evidence suggests that despite the rhetoric, as Professor Gerry Stoker succinctly puts it, “people are not simply and overwhelmingly apathetic”.¹⁸

He argues that, rather than evidence of a decline in interest in politics, what is revealed is a decline in people’s faith in the formal practice of politics and widespread

12 Ibid., 3.

13 Brannan et al., “Active Citizenship and Effective Public Services and Programmes”, 994.

14 For example, the 2007 Audit of Political Engagement found that just 27% of the public trust politicians either a great deal or a fair amount (*Audit of Political Engagement 4*, London: Hansard Society, 2007). Similarly, a recent Ipsos MORI poll reveals politicians to be the least trusted of a list of professions, with 76% saying they did not trust politicians in general to tell the truth; the highest score in this category. (Ipsos MORI, “Doctors Still Top The Poll As Most Trusted Profession,” March 5, 2008, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/polls-07/doctors-still-top-the-poll-as-most-trusted-profess.ashx>, Base: 1,981 respondents aged 16+ across Great Britain).

15 Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 5 The 2008 Report with a special focus on the constitution* (London: Hansard Society, 2008).

16 Steven Van de Walle, Steven Van Roosbroek, and Geert Bruckaert, “Trust in the public sector: is there any evidence for a long-term decline?”, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 74(1) (2008).

17 Communities and Local Government, *Citizenship Survey: April - December 2007, England and Wales* (London: DCLG, 2008), 1.

18 Gerry Stoker, *The politics of mass democracies: a system destined to disappoint?*, Paper for the Hallsworth Conference, Opening up Governance 16-17 March, (2006), 7.

malaise, even disdain, about the way politics is practiced.¹⁹ Politics, he suggests, has come to be regarded as a “rather grubby and unpleasant feature of modern life”,²⁰ as “something you apologise for, rather than are proud of”.²¹ Echoing this, recent research with community activists about why they would not stand as councillors revealed disillusionment with politics to be a major stumbling block: “councillors are seen first and foremost as politicians (selfseeking, manipulative, evasive) rather than altruistic, caring community workers. Most activists have no desire to enter politics or to become in any way ‘like them’.”²² This perception is not just common amongst the public, but as Professor George Jones argues, is echoed in the language used by our national elites, which reveals their distrust of local government.²³ All this means that when the general public do engage, they seldom choose to do so via the traditional routes associated with political parties or formal politics.

In sum then, this Government’s key ambition for the community empowerment agenda, to be articulated in the forthcoming empowerment white paper, is that it can provide a solution to tackle people’s disengagement from democratic politics. That disengagement itself is more nuanced than often described, and in particular reflects disillusionment with formal structures of democracy, including party politics, rather than an ingrained apathy about politics per se. This is the challenge which community empowerment must overcome if it is to deliver the desired outcome of revitalised local democracy.

THE INCREASE IN PARTICIPATORY OPPORTUNITIES

The last couple of decades have seen a huge quantitative rise in opportunities for participation in forms of local decision-making.²⁴ Local government has poured many millions into initiatives designed to increase citizen involvement with public services and mainstreamed participation as part of the New Localism agenda. There has been a concurrent proliferation of new structures, partnerships and governance arrangements at the local level.²⁵ Indeed, “there has arguably never been a time when so many opportunities have been available for ‘the people’ to contribute to the democratic process.”²⁶ Whether it is responding to a council survey, taking

19 Ibid., 7

20 Ibid., 8

21 Ibid., 9

22 Dawn Hands et al., *Research Report 2 Understanding the barriers and incentives to becoming and remaining a councillor in England* (London: DCLG, 2007), 22.

23 George Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, Public Management and Policy Association Report (2008), 6-7.

24 Brannan et al., “Active Citizenship and Effective Public Services and Programmes”, 1000.

25 Kirsten Bound et al., *Mapping Governance at the Local Level*, (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005), 11.

26 Declan McHugh and Philip Parvin, *Neglecting democracy. Participation and representation in 21st Century Britain*, (London: Hansard Society, 2005), 7.

part in a citizens' jury, or taking on one of the estimated half a million citizen governance roles that now exist,²⁷ we are presented with numerous opportunities for involvement.

And we are taking them up. Figures from the government-commissioned Citizenship Survey reveal quite extensive active participation in local political life. Some 39% of adults have in the last year engaged in what are known as 'civic participation' activities – contacting an elected representative or public official, attending a public meeting or rally, taking part in a public demonstration or protest, or signing a petition.²⁸ This equates to about 17 million people, though signing a petition is by far the most popular activity of these – 10 million having done so. Equally however, 21% (9 million people) had engaged in civic consultation which refers to active engagement in consultation about local services or issues through activities such as attending a consultation group or completing a questionnaire about these services.

More impressively 10% of the adult population have in the last year taken part in 'civic activism', which includes being a member of a local decision-making group in one form or another, or taking on a role as a local councillor, school governor or other citizen governance position. This means, when translated into real numbers, that over four million people have in the past year given up their precious spare time in pursuit of community and political objectives and engagement. Peter John, of the University of Manchester, has undertaken more detailed analysis. He finds that if you add together the participants in direct involvement, co-production and consultation, without double counting, then 23.9% – near a full quarter of the adult population have got involved.²⁹ As he says, these activities are "not rare occurrences".³⁰

IS THERE DEMAND FOR MORE PARTICIPATION?

This level of involvement should lead us to question the degree to which society can really be regarded as disengaged. It also raises questions about whether it can really be the case, as Government supposes, that more people wish to be further involved in the choosing and running of public services. In respect of the most demanding active citizen roles – being a councillor, school governor, or undertaking other citizen governance roles, we do not see huge competition for places as citizens fight it out to be given decision-making power. In fact, quite the opposite, in local

27 Skidmore, Bound and Lownsbrough, *Community Participation, who benefits?*, 52.

28 Communities and Local Government, *Citizenship Survey: April - December 2007, England and Wales* (London: DCLG, 2008), 1.

29 Peter John, *Making representative democracy more representative. Can new forms of citizen governance in the UK open up democracy?* (2007), 12.

30 Ibid.

government for example, political parties often struggle to find candidates. It is tempting to blame this on the unappealing nature of party politics, of which people apparently want no part, but the same is true for school governors and for parish and town councillors, the vast majority of whom are not party political.

In fact, we have ample evidence that the general public does not have a huge amount of time to invest in citizen engagement – people, by and large, simply do not have the time to give proper and due consideration to most of the issues upon which representatives must spend their time.³¹ Indeed even in the context of relatively well-defined citizen governance roles, such as school or tenant governors, research has made clear that the number of board and committee structures creates heavy demands on volunteers to give time and energy to sit on them and that it can result in an excessive, and de-motivating burden on the few that are involved.³²

Of course, there is also an issue of access, and there undoubtedly needs to be a strong and concerted push to provide information about governance opportunities of all kinds to all kinds of people, not simply the already active. Research evidence makes it clear that information is a huge barrier that needs to be broken down, and local councils should undoubtedly take the lead in so doing.³³

But as these reports also make clear, there are many and interconnected barriers to citizen engagement and governance. It is important, in the face of such evidence, to challenge the assumption of significant latent demand for ever deeper public involvement in local decision-making. As Stoker has stated, “we should be cautious about our expectations about the extent and depth of demand”,³⁴ and recognise that “for most people politics is not their first choice of activity”.³⁵ He argues convincingly that we need to enable a “politics for amateurs because that is all most of us want to be when it comes to politics”.³⁶

31 See for example, Douglas Dalziel, Emma Hewitt and Lucy Evans, *Motivations and Barriers to Citizen Governance* (London: DCLG, 2007); Arianna Haberis and Jessica Prendergrast, *Research Report 1 - Incentives and Barriers to Becoming and Remaining a Councillor - A Review of the UK Literature* (London: DCLG, 2007); and Dawn Hands et al., *Research Report 2 Understanding the barriers and incentives to becoming and remaining a councillor in England* (London: DCLG, 2007).

32 Bound et al., *Mapping Governance at the Local Level*, 10; Dalziel, Hewitt and Evans, *Motivations and Barriers to Citizen Governance*; and Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*.

33 Dalziel, Hewitt and Evans, *Motivations and Barriers to Citizen Governance*.

34 Gerry Stoker, “Explaining Political Disenchantment: Finding Pathways to Democratic Renewal”, *The Political Quarterly* 77(2) (2006), 190.

35 Ibid.

36 Gerry Stoker, “The Politics of Mass Democracies: A System Destined to Disappoint?”, paper for the *Hallsworth Conference, Opening up Governance*, 16-17 March 2006, University of Manchester, 36.

IS THE INCREASE IN PARTICIPATION TACKLING DEMOCRATIC DISENGAGEMENT?

What is perhaps surprising, given the significant increase in opportunities and take-up of engagement possibilities, is the apparent lack of impact in relation to tackling political disconnection from formal politics. It is possible to identify improved outcomes from participation in terms of service-delivery and social capital, though the definitional debates and lack of robust evaluation makes even these questionable.³⁷ But increases in participatory opportunities appear not to have yet had any profound impact in terms of public trust or belief that politicians and policymakers will provide objective information, openly listen to views and genuinely respond to concerns. Despite having, and taking up, opportunities to participate, people do not feel any more empowered. In fact, according to the Government's figures, they feel less empowered than before: in 2001, 44% of people agreed they could influence decisions in their local area; the latest figures reveal this to have fallen to 38%.³⁸

Conversely, there has been a notable increase in public satisfaction for certain local services which coincides (perhaps, but not necessarily, causally) with the increase in opportunities to engage with, particularly, local government. Indeed, the recent report of the Councillors Commission notes that while "public approval for local government's services is increasing" and "often outstripping" the performance improvement of central government³⁹ there is a "worrying disparity between the reputation of council services and of councils themselves, with satisfaction with most councils lower than with the services they provide".⁴⁰ It concludes that this reflects that "it is the democratic heart of local government that has the weakest public image".⁴¹

This raises a serious question about whether greater participatory involvement in public services is actually a mechanism through which disconnection from, and discontent with, formal politics can be broken down. A number of factors offer some explanatory value in this conundrum, to which we now turn.

1) Participation versus representation: a false dichotomy

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the various and varying ambitions of the community empowerment agenda reflect the political context and historical

37 Involve, *The True Costs of Public Participation* (London: Involve, 2005).

38 DCLG, *Citizenship Survey: April - December 2007*.

39 Communities and Local Government, *Representing the Future, the report of the Councillors Commission*, (London: DCLG, 2007), 9.

40 *Ibid.*, 12.

41 *Ibid.*

trajectory from which it has developed. It is characterised by a tension, familiar to much debate about UK public services, between on the one hand, a model of the service user as a customer of public services and on the other, a model which envisages the user as a citizen.⁴²

An emphasis on user involvement first really gained a foothold with the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, which saw a marked shift in emphasis in welfare provision from the state sector to the market and quasi-market sectors, and coincided with the development of user participation and consumerist perspectives within the private sector. Against these consumerist, market and choice-orientated standards, public services were criticised for being backward, bureaucratic, unresponsive and inefficient, and dominated by an unhealthy paternalism and emphasis on the producer interest.⁴³ In this context, public involvement policies (early efforts being particularly related to tenant participation)⁴⁴ became part of broader efforts to control local government, forcing them to adopt a service-orientated approach in the face of private sector competition and concentrating on increasing efficiency by meeting the legitimate demands of the public, now re-conceptualised as consumers.⁴⁵

The conceptualisation of the public as consumers of public services had become almost universal by the mid 1990s with a heavy focus on user satisfaction, and remains firmly intact over a decade later under Gordon Brown. Despite the continuing preoccupation with choice however, under New Labour consumer perspectives on participation have been joined in rhetoric by more communitarian ideals such as community building and social responsibility. From this citizen perspective, the value of participation stems not just from advantages in service improvement and management efficiency but from other positive, but less tangible, outcomes for both individual participants and the broader community. Enthusiasm for such goals is seen in the 'active citizenship' and social capital agendas: boosting personal achievement, enhancing individual self-confidence and skills, encouraging democratic involvement, increasing social cohesion, and fostering community relations and civic responsibility.

42 Paul Richter and James Cornford, "Customer Relationship Management and Citizenship: Technologies and Identities in Public Services", *Social Policy & Society* 7(2) (2008), 211-220.

43 John Clarke, "New Labour's citizens: activated, empowered, responsabilized, abandoned?," *Critical Social Policy* 25(4) (2005), 449.

44 For example, as early as 1987, government intervention and legislation had stimulated some 90% of Councils to operate some form of tenant participation scheme, although these often constituted no more than information provision. The 1989 Local Government and Housing Act incorporated tenant participation performance indicators and in 1992 the Housing Corporation established a Tenant Participation Strategy for local authorities that aimed to incentivise and monitor what was increasingly becoming a tenant participation 'industry'. See Riseborough, "More control and choice for users?", 226.

45 Liz Cairncross, David Clapham and Robina Goodlad, *Housing Management, Consumers and Citizens* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 3-9; Riseborough, "More control and choice for users?", 228.

New Labour's enthusiasm for public participation borrows therefore, much from the Conservative consumerist agenda (as seen for example in the Best Value focus on service management and user satisfaction data in local government services) but has been qualified by the introduction of a 'more meaningful' agenda focused on citizen and 'stakeholder' interests to be represented in decision-making processes. This has resulted in the evolution of a kind of hybrid perspective conflating the two ideas, which seeks to tackle citizen-focused concerns - democratic disengagement – by utilising participatory mechanisms and processes which have developed from a service improvement agenda.

In this context, the decline in wide party membership coincided with the rise in participatory mechanisms, run primarily by officials and officers at local level and aimed at improving services via consumer engagement. Whether these same mechanisms can also serve to enhance people's feelings of democratic engagement rather than just the delivery of services is however unclear. The engagement mechanisms had, and still often do, primarily reflected upward pressures around accountability for service delivery and user satisfaction rather than democratic pressures. With the introduction of a citizen-focused agenda to these processes, the two aims of service improvement and tackling disengagement have been lumped together and given one all-encompassing solution – community empowerment, largely conceived in participatory terms. In truth however, they remain distinct and very different problems and predictably there exists a tension because each problem implies different forms of engagement with decision-making. In short, the relationship between the mechanisms and the aims has not been clearly articulated or established; it has just happened.⁴⁶

The danger of the conflation is that without some clear thinking "initiatives that are not clear [...], or which have one or more purposes, may create confusion and undermine the ability to produce successful outcomes".⁴⁷ Despite widespread and cross-party support for empowerment initiatives, as Beresford and Croft had warned long before the current crescendo of enthusiasm for community empowerment: "[w]e shouldn't assume that widespread support for people's involvement means there is any consensus about it. We may not all mean the same. Different aims, interests and ideologies are involved. Overlapping rhetoric may disguise real differences".⁴⁸

46 Janet Newman, *Modernising Governance: New Labour, Policy and Society*, (London: SAGE, 2001), 141.

47 Bochel et al., "Marginalised or Enabled Voices?", 202.

48 Peter Beresford and Suzy Croft, *Citizen Involvement. A Participatory Guide for Change* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 7.

Over time nonetheless a participatory community empowerment agenda has been widely advanced as a way to overcome the 'democratic deficit' of the orthodox representative model. By opening up governance, it is posited, and giving citizens more say in decisions that affect them, the rise in discontent can be countered. This argument has been clearly articulated by the Power Inquiry, which was established by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to investigate why there has been a decline in participation in formal politics and to make proposals to reverse this trend.⁴⁹ Myriad means and mechanisms for involving people in decision-making between elections have been promoted, from deliberative events such as citizens' juries, to direct democratic tools such as binding referenda.

In essence, participatory democracy seeks to offer a solution to the apparent malaise of representative democracy by proposing alternative structures. This theme is taken up in the Prime Minister's articulation of the need for a 'new politics' as laid out in the Governance of Britain green paper published in July 2007, which seeks to "enhance democracy by devolving more power directly to the people", by finding new ways to enable people and communities to engage and influence local decision-making.⁵⁰ These themes recur in policy pronouncements of the Government and look set to form a central plank of the forthcoming empowerment white paper.

II) A failure to transfer power

A second factor which helps to explain the continuing disconnection of people from politics, despite the increase in opportunities, is the central issue of power. Confusion about aims, objectives and mechanisms has often led to power relationships being overlooked and initiatives consequently exhibit a lack of clarity about power transfer. Participation without any degree of power-sharing is usually regarded as being "tokenistic and ultimately futile".⁵¹ As Sherry Arnstein highlighted some forty years ago, it is important not to dress something up as empowerment if what is meant is consultation or engagement. The danger is that "participation remains just a window-dressing ritual. [...] What citizens achieve in all this activity is that they have 'participated in participation.' And what powerholders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving 'those people.'"⁵²

49 Power Commission, *Power to the people: the report of Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy* (London: Power Commission, 2006).

50 Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, *The Governance of Britain* (London: TSO, 2007), 49.

51 Anthony B. L. Cheung and N. M. Yip, "Customerizing the tenants, empowering the managers: Impact of public housing governance reform in Hong Kong," *Housing, Theory and Society* 20 (2003), 105.

52 Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", *JAIIP* 35(4) (1969).

Equally, an instrumental service delivery focus has been criticised for being less than ‘meaningful’, or even damaging, since some evidence suggests that the ‘customerisation’ of users actually further empowers managers *at the expense* of users whose interests are subsumed or manipulated by initiatives.⁵³ Similarly, in citizen-orientated models, increasing the opportunities for public participation may not necessarily have increased the influence of people on the decision-making process.⁵⁴ For example, citizens may remain largely unable to control the agenda so as to determine the issues that appear, and as such may be unable to overcome ingrained structural barriers and power relations. Moreover, traditional democratic methods of holding authorities to account by, for example, protest may have been subsumed to some degree by the top-down agenda (as perhaps have the associated ‘empowering’ benefits of such self-organised involvement).⁵⁵ Official efforts to increase participation have been sometimes seen as attacks on bottom-up participation by those already actively involved.⁵⁶

Excepting those community empowerment initiatives which actually involve a transfer of control for decision-making direct to a small number of active citizens, for example asset transfer or some variants of participatory budgeting, too many (particularly larger scale) participatory initiatives leave power where it always was: in the hands of local elected representatives or appointed, and often remote and unaccountable, quango members. What results is the now common phenomenon of consultation and/or participatory fatigue and extensive possibilities for disappointment, alienation and unmet expectations.⁵⁷ Participants complain that they have wasted their time; expectations are raised and then dashed, and there is, unsurprisingly, no accompanying improvement in people’s sense of political efficacy or subjective empowerment.⁵⁸

A study of local democracy in Burnley and Harrogate, for example, identified little evidence that local people feel “personally empowered” by a participatory process which recast them as consumers.⁵⁹ It suggests that central government’s requirement that local public bodies ascertain, and respond to, the views of local

53 Riseborough, “More control and choice for users?”, 228; Cheung and Yip, “Customerizing the tenants”, 99.

54 Robina Goodlad, “Developments in tenant participation: accounting for growth” in *Two Steps Forward, Housing policy into the new millennium*, eds. David Cowan and Alex Marsh (Bristol, The Policy Press, 2001), 188-9.

55 Helen Carr, Dorothy Sefton-Green and Damien Tissier, “Tenant Participation: Two steps forward for tenants?” in eds. Cowan and Marsh, *Two Steps Forward*, 163.

56 Beresford and Croft, *Citizen Involvement*, 7.

57 Bochel et al., “Marginalised or Enabled Voices?”, 208.

58 See for example, Dalziel, Hewitt and Evans, *Motivations and Barriers to Citizen Governance*; Linda Nicholson, *Civic Participation in Public Policy-Making: A Literature Review* (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2005).

59 Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Steve Clayton, *Whose Town is it Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns - summary* (York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 2005), 3.

people, has resulted in a “plethora of consultation and engagement processes [that] is inherently flawed. Citizens’ expectations are raised, while the capacity of local agencies to respond is tightly restricted”.⁶⁰ Yet, time and again the literature stresses that people will only become and remain involved if they feel it is worthwhile, that their energies will make a discernable difference to the outcome.

The literature also stresses that poorly executed participation can lead to disengagement and disenchantment; reinforcing feelings of disempowerment amongst citizens who had been prepared to give things a go. As Stoker argues, alongside the general disengaged exist “swathes of disappointed activists, at national and local level”, who have attempted to have an influence on decision-making and had their efforts frustrated, garnering a scepticism going forward. There exists the clear danger that “engaging users’ views, and particularly those of activists and everyday makers, within the policy process, may in fact exaggerate feelings of exclusion and disempowerment”.⁶¹

The concern is that there is no clear line from participation to power. In most instances in local government, ultimately decision-making accountability lies with elected members rather than the people who have participated or the officers who have conducted such exercises. The problem is that elected members are too often not engaged in the participatory mechanisms and will often fail to take account of them and the views expressed through them, and often in a context of suspicion about the undermining of their representative role by participatory means. For participants, expectations have been raised but without accompanying linkages to those who are actually taking decisions, current enthusiastic moves towards more direct and participatory forms of democratic engagement may be even adding to the problem rather than being part of the solution.

III) Unclear lines of accountability

It is tempting to conclude that what is needed in response to the above concern is simply to ensure that power really is handed over to the participants. This seems to have been the general conclusion of the Power Inquiry panel and in some cases this will be possible and potentially effective – participatory budgeting being the most high profile example. But in the main the problems of such an approach are two-fold: complexity and accountability. As Stoker argues, politics is an extremely complex process, which exists to manage difficult conflicts.⁶² The process of decision-making takes real time and consideration and for many, perhaps most, decisions, even at the

60 Ibid., 2.

61 Bochel et al., “Marginalised or Enabled Voices?”, 204.

62 Gerry Stoker, *Why politics matters. Making democracy work.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

local level, a direct participatory approach will simply not be suitable. Even where participants are able and willing to commit their time to direct decision-making, there are obvious concerns about representativeness, exclusion of marginalised or hard-to-reach groups, and in more practical terms, value for money: done properly, direct participatory decision-making costs money.

Even where direct approaches to decision-making are possible, we should not forget that “in governing, accountability is crucial”.⁶³ If power is handed to a small group of self-selected, or appointed individuals, what mechanisms are there for holding them to account if they do not act in the best interests or according to the wishes of the wider public or community who are to have decisions made on their behalf? In representative models the public are able to exercise accountability, however imperfectly, by exercising their vote. Neither should we forget that more people still participate in general and local elections by exercising their vote than in any combination of participatory mechanisms. In direct power models, there is often no accountability mechanism for the many not granted the privileged rights to be part of the decision-making body. As Sarah Teather MP has put it: “devolution without democracy is just tyranny at a local scale”.⁶⁴ Such important concerns appear in danger of being swept under the carpet in the flurry of policymaker enthusiasm for all things participatory and community empowerment.

Ironically perhaps, a debate about the lack of accountability which comes with unelected decision-makers accompanied the launch of the white paper itself, when government officials trailed the idea of directly electing members of police authority boards and NHS trusts to enhance the apparent lack of public accountability therein. Notwithstanding the fact that in police authorities at least, the majority of members are elected local councillors, and the worryingly low turnout rates in direct elections for citizens and patient governors of foundation hospitals,⁶⁵ the debate made clear the importance of public electoral accountability for those exercising public roles. Similar concerns have been raised about accountability for other public spending bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships where accountability lines to both the public and to elected members are unclear. The implication for new direct models, without electoral legitimacy, is obvious and one can just imagine that a decade or so from now, after unelected groups of citizens have been handed control in the name of community empowerment, how the next generation of politicians will set about introducing new measures to make them accountable again. Direct elections will no doubt be an idea near the top of the list.

63 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 12.

64 Sarah Teather, “Devolution without democracy”, *Guardian*, February 22, 2006.

65 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 12.

Adding to accountability woes is the now extraordinary complexity of the local governance landscape which is generally “more complex, multilayered and interconnected than would have been the case, say, 20 years ago”.⁶⁶ As we have seen, this has certainly increased the “range of methods and gateways through which citizens can influence local services” offering the *potential* for more democratic, legitimate and effective governance.⁶⁷ However, local governance has also become ‘more opaque’ bringing with it the risk that “the complexity of the new local governance landscape simply becomes a source of confusion, misunderstanding and distrust”.⁶⁸

The aforementioned study of local governance in Burnley and Harrogate found, for example, that over 30 different organisations, many of them quangos, had some role in governing these localities, and that understandably, residents were often confused about which agencies were responsible for which services and who should be held accountable.⁶⁹ Likewise, confusion about which tier of government is responsible for what is a recurring theme in the research findings of both the Councillors Commission and the recent Commission for Rural Communities Inquiry.⁷⁰ Jones has also recently argued persuasively that within the local governance network of appointed and nominated boards, “problems of accountability arise” and that the current landscape does “not meet the first requirement of accountability – that citizens should know by whom they are governed. Few citizens understand who is responsible for what in this maze of local governance, and how the various bodies can be held accountable by local people on whose behalf they are supposed to act”.⁷¹ This concern was also identified in Michael Lyons’ review of local government which argued both that “clear lines of accountability are...essential to allow people and communities to engage with, understand and challenge the decisions that affect their lives” and that “confused accountability is...one of the major factors limiting trust at present.”⁷²

66 Bound et al., *Mapping Governance at the Local Level*, 9.

67 Ibid., 10.

68 Ibid.

69 Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, *Whose Town is it Anyway?*

70 Commission for Rural Communities, *Participation inquiry: strengthening the role of local councillors* (London: CRC, 2008), 4. In February 2007 the Commission for Rural Communities began a national inquiry into the role of rural councillors. It explored the opportunities and challenges for rural councillors in bringing decision-making closer to their communities, and focused primarily, though not exclusively on the role of parish and town councillors. Its final report and recommendations were delivered in January 2008.

71 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 5.

72 HM Treasury, *Place-shaping: a shared ambition for the future of local government – Final Report*, by Sir Michael Lyons (London: HMSO, 2007), 5-6.

All these issues help to explain why, despite a context of more opportunity and widespread take-up, people continue to feel disengaged from formal politics, and distant from democratic institutions. It serves to highlight reasons why the community empowerment solution envisaged in predominantly participatory terms has not succeeded in re-invigorating local democracy. Ultimately, the fundamental problem “that the vital link that connected citizens to the state and the formal democratic process has been broken” remains.⁷³ This is because the solution, participatory democracy, is too often conceptualised as offering an alternative to representative democracy that seeks to circumvent rather than to fix the problem. Thus despite the rise in participatory opportunities, representative structures and decision-making remain, as do the attendant reasons for people’s disconnection from and distrust of representatives. The spreading of influence amongst citizens and other, often unaccountable bodies, distracts from, but does not alleviate that problem.

SOLUTIONS TO DISENGAGEMENT: RE-CONCEPTUALISING A PARTICIPATORY-REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The concept of ‘double devolution’ and equating it with participatory mechanisms has, understandably, raised concerns amongst elected representatives because “its emphasis on devolution to communities below local government seemed to threaten representative democracy. To many elected councillors, elected local authorities looked like being bypassed by the fashionable techniques of participatory democracy”.⁷⁴ And whatever the reality, the “potential for conflict”, or at least an “uneasy relationship”, between the role of elected representatives as decision-makers and the possibilities for a shift in power frequently implied by participatory initiatives, must be recognised.⁷⁵ To a significant degree, however, the tension is not inevitable but results from the historical trajectory from which such mechanisms developed, and the consequent failure by government to articulate and consider the competing and different ambitions of participatory mechanisms.

73 McHugh and Parvin, *Neglecting democracy*, 14.

74 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 17.

75 Bochel et al., “Marginalised or Enabled Voices?”, 203.

Democratic models: ideal types

Representative democracy: Citizens periodically elect representatives who are invested with decision-making power on their behalf.

Participatory democracy: Citizens take part in the decision-making process but as influencers rather than decision-makers - for example in citizens' juries and participatory budgeting exercises.

Direct democracy: Citizens take decisions directly – for example in binding referenda or where direct control has been devolved, i.e. in community asset transfer models.

It is entirely possible however to imagine a framework of local governance which integrates participatory means to representative structures and in so doing re-connects the citizen to representative democracy. But it must be grounded in the recognition that representative democracy is to be fixed, rather than circumvented. Indeed, as Jones has noted, Ms Blears herself articulates the case for participatory mechanisms to help rather than undermine local government – to “supplement rather than destroy representative democracy”.⁷⁶ Most recently, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation (SMF), Blears has argued that “participatory democracy is the best way to shore up and enhance representative democracy...[making elected politicians]...better able to do their job.”⁷⁷ The political rhetoric and the practice, however, too often diverge – at both local and national level - fuelling scepticism and disengagement rather than empowerment.

For a host of reasons - from the extent of demand, to the complexity of governing, to the location of power - the representative model should remain the bedrock of democracy in Britain at the local level. This is not to argue that the traditional model of representative democracy is always sufficient and will make the right decision but that direct and participatory mechanisms also exhibit some key weaknesses, and ultimately that elected representatives have a legitimacy that cannot be claimed by more participatory means.

It is also clear that public participation in formal politics can play a central role in the necessary re-invigoration of representative institutions. But what is missing are

76 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 17.

77 Hazel Blears MP, “A New Politics”, Speech to the Social Market Foundation, May 13, 2008.

meaningful linkages and lines of accountability between participatory mechanisms and the representative structures in which political power, to a significant degree, still lies.

A good place to start would be to abandon the language which juxtaposes the two concepts, as well as often confusing direct and participatory democratic models. We should refer instead to a more accurate conception of participatory-representative democracy. In truth, and contrary to the portrayal of British representative government as one which entails that individual political involvement be forfeited and placed in the hands of elected representatives (accompanied by electoral accountability mechanisms), representative democracy has always involved extensive communication and contact between representatives and the electorate between election times. As Coleman has stated “modern representative democracy has always been shot through with ‘direct’ or participatory elements.”⁷⁸

The idea that democracy requires interaction between elections is not new and certainly not novel to participatory democracy. What has changed is not the fundamental nature of representative democracy but the mechanism which connects citizens to their representatives and through them to the state – in this sense participatory mechanisms can simply be conceptualised as being a replacement for mass party memberships, which used to provide much of the connectedness as the principal mediating channel between the citizen and the state, but no longer do so. As many, if not more, people have shown themselves to be willing to be involved in participatory structures as were ever members of political parties.⁷⁹ The next stage must be to integrate the efforts of these participants into representative structures, in a way that ensures that representatives can access public views, and the public can seek to influence and hold to account their representatives. This is missing at present.

IMAGINING A REVIVED MODEL OF PARTICIPATORY-REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

What might revitalised representative institutions actually look like? This section seeks to imagine a model of a participatory-representative democracy that is workable. It needs to link up participatory mechanisms with representative institutions, and exhibit clarity of structure and lines of accountability. It needs to help to address the

78 Stephen Coleman, *Direct Representation, towards a conversational democracy* (London: IPPR Exchange, 2005), 1.

79 Mass membership of parties peaked in the 1950s, with around 3 million members between the Conservative and Labour parties; this compares to the approximately 4 million people who have participated in civic activism in the past year.

problems of fragmentation and opaqueness in local governance.⁸⁰ And it needs to be as easy as possible on the public purse and on citizen participants.⁸¹

This essay unapologetically argues that if local democracy is to flourish, elected councillors will need to take the lead, because they possess legitimacy garnered by the fact of their being elected.⁸² But they must lead in becoming re-connected with the public: making it clear to the public who their councillors are, what they do and how they are accountable. Indeed this aspiration was strongly articulated by Sir Michael Lyons in his inquiry into local government, in the 2006 Local Government White Paper,⁸³ and reinforced by research undertaken for both the Councillors Commission and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC).

The latter showed how those aspiring to become more engaged with local decision-making commonly highlighted that a route to this would be to see more consultative and proactive councillors. "Participants felt that councils and councillors at all levels were not sufficiently proactive about involving and engaging with local people".⁸⁴ The report of the Councillors Commission recognised explicitly that councillors should not "be by-passed in council's community empowerment activities [...] but must instead be given the tools to support this work and strengthen the connections between representative and participatory democracy, for example by leading local participatory activities, consultations and community engagement activities".⁸⁵ Although there is much enthusiasm at present for technological and web-based mechanisms of participation and connection, it should also be recognised that people value personal contact and research has highlighted the great importance of direct and face-to-face contact between representatives and communities in improving trust and perceptions of politicians.⁸⁶

It must also be recognised however that the scale of local government in England and Wales is such that the degree to which an individual principal-tier councillor can directly interact with and connect with individuals without the intermediary structure of a thriving political party is severely limited. Even if councillors' positions were taken up as full-time posts with appropriate salaries it would be a substantial challenge: principal-tier councillors in England have over 2,800 constituents on

80 Bound et al., *Mapping Governance at the Local Level*.

81 Stoker, "The Politics of Mass Democracies", 36, has argued for mechanisms for empowerment that are not too onerous.

82 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 13.

83 Communities and Local Government, *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper* (London: DCLG, 2006).

84 Commission for Rural Communities, *Participation inquiry*, 30.

85 Communities and Local Government, *Representing the Future*, 30.

86 *Ibid.*, 32.

average.⁸⁷ With firm resistance to the idea of full-time councillors across much of the local government community however, the options seem to be more councillors, or better definition (and some restriction) of the role and responsibilities of councillors. The Local Government Information Unit's (LGIU) advocacy of a 'frontline' councillor model goes some way to conceptualising a clearer community-focused role but fails to acknowledge the true scale of the challenge for, particularly, part-time councillors who must also continue in their strategic and oversight roles.⁸⁸

It is possible to envisage a model with both more community-based councillors, and more clearly defined roles, allowing principal-tier councillors to remain grounded in their communities, whilst playing a primarily strategic role in decision-making. This could be provided by reviving the often forgotten tier of neighbourhood, parish and town councils, as a way to fulfil the role once owned by vibrant local political parties. Such organisations could be given a clearly defined role to operate the 'participatory arm' of local government, and in so doing embody an institutional marrying of participatory empowerment and representative government structures, as conduits for involvement closest to the people.⁸⁹ Neighbourhood, parish and town councils (collectively referred to herein as community councils) have a number of features that make them particularly suitable to such a role.

l) Proximity to the people

First, they are in line with the Government's stated aim to devolve power to the tier of local government that is closest to the people they represent, a feature that has resulted in intermittent attention being directed at them and other neighbourhood structures by policymakers under New Labour. There is evidence nationally and internationally that local democratic participation tends to be higher where smaller units of local government are retained.⁹⁰ In part in recognition of this, the neighbourhoods' agenda has been linked in Government statements to the community empowerment agenda, and has clear linkages to a series of New Labour policies.⁹¹ These have included the Neighbourhood and Civil Renewal agendas, the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (in the form of enthusiasm for area forums and committees), and policies associated with New Localism and the emphasis on 'double devolution'.⁹² Indeed, the New Localism agenda draws on civic,

87 David Wilson and Chris Game, *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 4th ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 263.

88 See for example, Ed Cox, *Frontline Councillor 2017: Empowering a new generation* (London: LGIU, 2007).

89 Vivien Lowndes and Helen Sullivan discuss four ideal types of neighbourhood governance: neighbourhood empowerment, neighbourhood government, neighbourhood partnership and neighbourhood management in "How local can you go? Rationales and challenges for neighbourhood governance", *Public Administration* 86(1) (2008).

90 Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, *Whose Town is it Anyway?*, 4.

91 Lowndes and Sullivan, "How local can you go?", 53.

92 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

social, political and economic rationales in support of neighbourhood governance and “gets close” to specifying a comprehensive case for it.⁹³

II) Representative electoral legitimacy

Second, as the Transforming Neighbourhoods research programme of the Young Foundation has acknowledged and championed, neighbourhood structures such as community councils provide an ideal mechanism for bottom-up empowerment on the basis of natural neighbourhood and community boundaries. However, at present local community councils do not exist anywhere near uniformly across England – only about one-third of the population lives in parished areas and most urban areas are not parished. The Young Foundation advocates that alternative neighbourhood structures might be formally established to play a similar role and achieve a recognised status from local government and its partners.⁹⁴ A similar multi-options model of neighbourhood governance has been promoted by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU).⁹⁵ The appeal of such an idea is obvious, in recognition that ‘no-one-size-fits-all’ in local government.

However, unlike other community structures, community councils are grounded in representative structures in terms of both democratic legitimacy and statute.⁹⁶ The strength of community councils is that they have the potential to exhibit the kind of democratic representative legitimacy that other mechanisms of local governance, such as forums or committees, do not, and consequently it is important from the perspective of re-invigorating democracy to advocate strongly for the establishment of elected community councils across England. Other neighbourhood and community bodies can of course “be a valuable supplement to representative democracy” but they should not be considered a “substitute for the elected council”.⁹⁷ Forms, sizes and workings of community council may differ, but a requirement for elected representatives does not seem too much a standardisation when the goal is to reinvigorate democracy.⁹⁸ Equally, of course, this is not to suggest that other structures of community empowerment should not continue to exist and thrive (not least in pursuit of service improvement and social capital outcomes), but

93 Ibid., 62.

94 Young Foundation, *Local Democracy and Neighbourhood Governance* (London: Young Foundation, 2006), 6.

95 Ed Cox, *Empowering Neighbourhoods: Going Beyond the Double Devolution Deal* (London: LGIU, 2006).

96 See for example, Young Foundation, *Local Democracy and Neighbourhood Governance*, 5; 8, available at: http://www.youngfoundation.org/work/neighbourhoods/projects/consortiums/tranforming_neighbourhoods/research

97 Jones, *The future of local government: has it one?*, 6.

98 However, the Young Foundation has also provided government with a half-way solution, in the form of selection by lot for one or two individuals to sit on councils, and which has recently been enacted in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. As community councils are set up and begin to bed in to their new roles, there will be a case for including non-elected members in this way, as a way of encouraging buy-in by alternative participatory bodies. Such members should however be required to stand for election in a second term.

that where the goal is reinvigorated representative democracy then community councils should be advocated as a structure which, unlike many other participatory and civil society mechanisms, provide a clear and strong route for representative involvement and democracy.

As an aside, to reinforce the link through representative structures, further consideration could be given to the interesting idea that the new second chamber at a national level be constituted of indirectly elected representatives from town and parish councils as a way to reinvigorate the grassroots of local democracy further, and coherently tie the most remote tier of government to the most local.⁹⁹

III) Limited party politics

Third, despite their elected status and because of their small-scale, in the main local community councils are not dominated by political parties. They operate as representative structures but de-linked from political parties, in a way which is not viable (nor perhaps desirable) in higher tiers of government. Qualitative evidence indicates that most parish and town councillors feel strongly that their role should be 'non-political'.¹⁰⁰ Research has shown that parish councillors are often involved in other community activities, making little distinction between this work and their 'official' role, and are keen to stress what they have in common with other community activists and volunteers (i.e. that they had no political affiliation and acted in a voluntary capacity).¹⁰¹ Estimates suggest that between 80% and 90% of local community councillors do not stand on a party political ticket and less than 5% of community councils are run on party lines.¹⁰² This lack of party-political affiliation is crucial to their potential for success as community-based structures in a context of general dislike for 'politicians' and 'party politics' that we have earlier noted, is a central element in the disillusionment of people from much of formal representative politics.

IV) Clarity of purpose and accountability

Fourth, in the fragmented world of local governance, existing community councils often lack a clear role and direction. There is some anecdotal and qualitative evidence that both the general public and parish councillors themselves lack clarity about their role in relation to other tiers of government or alternative governance

99 Laurie Howes, "Local Councils: What can we learn from France?", *Local Governance* 24 (4) (1998) cited in Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*, 72.

100 Michael Woods et al., *Participation, Power and Rural Community Governance in England and Wales – full report of research activities and results* (2002) cited in Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*, 76.

101 Clare Steel et al., *A Broader Parish, working together, improving rural communities* (London: Steel et al. (2006) cited in Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*, 78.

102 Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*, 76.

bodies.¹⁰³ The CRC Inquiry found that public opinion at present is largely cynical about the role and function of parish councils, and other research has identified that even councillors themselves are unsure of their roles vis-à-vis other tiers of local government.¹⁰⁴ The CRC Inquiry found that communities often feel a sense of powerlessness at the most local level of democratic representation, because their local council is presently very removed from real decision-making or influence. As a result, parish councils are regarded in a poor light by their communities, and seen as not generally engaged with their constituents, which may go some way to explaining the low take-up of such roles.¹⁰⁵

This can and should alter. What is needed is a clear purpose and priority for community councils – both those that already exist and those that are newly created. They should be explicitly granted the specific role to operate the ‘participatory arm’ for local government – planning and operating participatory exercises, engaging with voluntary and community sector bodies, and gathering and communicating the views of their communities to representatives in higher tiers. Wherever possible, engagement activities that would have been undertaken by the officers of a higher-tier should be undertaken by the network of community councils, allowing local councillors to build and maintain links to their communities. Community councils should be given the specific role of coordinating participatory mechanisms, with the newly established *duty to involve* owned and managed by community councils in explicit conjunction with their counterparts in principal tiers.¹⁰⁶ Crucially, community councillors should also take on the task of holding higher-tier representatives to account for decisions made in the light of such engagement activities, with principal-tier councillors given a clear duty to attend and respond to lower-tier questioning. Community councils should be required to report back to communities and participants on how the outcomes of their efforts influence, or indeed did not influence, higher-tier representatives.

In this way it may be possible to reduce time burdens on principal-tier councillors, to provide clear points of contact for communities, and clear lines of accountability between them and representatives, whilst also tying participatory activities to representative structures. Different tiers can be allocated different roles and responsibilities and clear lines of accountability and feedback elucidated from the

103 Ibid., 71.

104 Ibid.

105 Commission for Rural Communities, *Participation inquiry*, 23.

106 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduces a new duty on best value authorities to involve local people, strengthening accountability and ensuring that assessment and inspection are more reflective of and responsive to, local citizens’ and services users’ views. This duty is expected to be implemented from April 2009.

most local level to higher-tier representatives. Both the new unitary authorities and new eco-towns offer good opportunities for piloting of such structures.

The potential for community councils to play this reaching out role is seen in the effective development by such bodies of parish and town plan appraisals, which are tools by which local people have been enabled to come together and articulate local needs and priorities. Such plans have been particularly effective in formalising local needs into a form that can be fed into decision-making processes in higher tiers of local government. "Participants noted that community planning activities generate a good deal of community interest around improving the local area. This in turn encourages more communication and interaction between communities and their local parish councils. More generally, community planning initiatives have good potential to highlight open and transparent ways for communities and their local councillors to engage well around common interest issues."¹⁰⁷ Moreover, case study research suggests that enhanced community participation and involvement with the parish council through parish planning exercises brought a new dynamism to parish councils, noting examples where the composition of the parish council changed significantly following widespread community engagement (and the average age of councillors reduced).¹⁰⁸

The small size of many parish and town councils (often serving populations of less than 500) has raised concerns about the capacity, willingness and ability of the smaller councils to take on enhanced responsibilities.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, the resource and time requirements of a fully fledged empowerment model of direct self-government would be far greater still. The resource intensity of many participatory mechanisms (currently undertaken by higher-tier councils) does clearly indicate the necessity of providing officer support to community councils if they are to take on meaningful role as the conduits and coordinators of participatory means. The CRC Inquiry identified the particular benefits in terms of linking-up authorities played by parish or ward liaison officers who help advise and support the work of parish council clerks and advise, inform and support councillors of all tiers.¹¹⁰

Work by Involve, an organisation which aims to encourage greater participation, estimates that each local authority may spend somewhere in the region of £2m annually on community engagement.¹¹¹ Some of this money should be re-directed

107 Commission for Rural Communities, *Participation inquiry*, 41.

108 Steel et al., *A Broader Parish*, cited in Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*, 76.

109 Haberis and Prendergrast, *Research Report 1*, 72.

110 Commission for Rural Communities, *Participation inquiry*, 43.

111 Involve, *The true costs of public participation* (London: Involve, 2005).

and all principal-tier councils required to fund initiatives and provide officer support to community councils to equip them in their role as participatory coordinators for their local areas. For most, this would not imply an additional burden in terms of cost but rather the relocation of existing resources to the most local tier as the most appropriate interface for participatory-representative democracy.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is not clear how the problem of democratic disillusionment will be solved by the largely participatory community empowerment mechanisms that are offered as the answer. The dominant mechanisms of community empowerment have been implemented, as a result of historical context, in a way which seems to be better suited to service improvement outcomes, than to the goal of a reinvigorated local democracy. Indeed too often representative structures continue to be pitted against participatory democracy and may consequently even undermine efforts to empower people. Citizens have heavy demands placed on them to participate, and have their hopes raised then dashed by power inequalities that remain as they always were.

It is possible however, as we have here, to imagine an alternative conception of community empowerment, better targeted at reinvigorating democracy, and grounded in a participatory-representative model. Local community councils offer a structure well-suited to take on the participatory coordinating role held formerly by mass-membership political parties, and now too often played by council officers with divergent aims. Community councils can, with support from both higher-tier councillors and local authorities themselves, be given the primary role in gauging public opinion and facilitating political debate in their localities, with a view to communicating with, and holding to account, principal-tier councillors. They can offer transparent and effective mechanisms for engaging with citizens in a clear-cut, uncomplicated way that is tied into representative institutions. In contrast to many current participatory mechanisms, they do not require too onerous a burden to be placed on most participants, and can offer easy routes in and out of engagement with local decision-making; all of which better befits the modern empowered citizen than what we have now.


RECOMMENDATIONS

In pursuit of a revitalised democracy central and local government should:

- Recognise the lack of clarity in the community empowerment agenda and the problems created by ill-definition.
- Abandon the language which perpetuates a false dichotomy between representative and participatory models of democracy.
- Separate service improvement ambitions from those related to democratic disengagement, and recognise that the conflation of agendas may be unhelpful, even damaging, to the achievement of outcomes.
- Champion the primacy of representatives and electoral legitimacy at the local as well as the national level.
- Acknowledge that governing is complex and demanding and that the appetite for deeper forms of participation is limited, and not rest hopes on a participatory model that requires too great a burden of commitment by the citizen.
- Integrate participatory mechanisms into representative structures to reconnect representatives with constituents in place of the mass party memberships of old.
- Promote the widespread creation of community councils as the focus for local empowerment and participation.
- Give community councils a new and explicit role to operate the 'participatory arm' of local government to provide the link between communities and higher-tier representatives, both in communicating views and holding to account.
- Ensure that sufficient resources, particularly in terms of staffing, are available to community councils to enable them to fulfill their role effectively.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Community empowerment is a defining agenda of the Brown Government, and likely to feature heavily in the manifestos of all the three main parties at the next election. The Communities and Local Government White Paper on the same topic, which is due for launch in July 2008, is therefore eagerly anticipated, by the local government community at least. In this context, this essay discusses how, despite community empowerment being presented as a panacea for many social ills, the evidence in relation to some outcomes is relatively patchy.

The dramatic rise in participatory opportunities of recent years has not been accompanied by an improvement in people's sense of connection to formal politics. Nor do people feel more empowered to influence decisions. The author asks whether there is a mismatch between the Government's ambition to reinvigorate local democracy, and its proposition that participatory empowerment mechanisms can provide the solution.

A number of explanatory factors are explored, including: the evolution of a false dichotomy between representative and participatory democracy; a failure of initiatives to transfer power in a meaningful sense and; a lack of clarity and transparency in lines of accountability for decision-making. This essay considers the implications of these issues in designing a model of empowerment which can reinvigorate democracy.

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