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# DIRECT REPRESENTATION

TOWARDS A CONVERSATIONAL DEMOCRACY

STEPHEN COLEMAN

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## About the author

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# Foreword

## by Matthew Taylor

In this important pamphlet, Stephen Coleman addresses the problem of disconnection between representatives and represented in our political system.

There are many ways of responding to a failing relationship, most of them unlikely to make things better. We can blame each other. Plenty of this goes on; there is an easy and well-rehearsed populist attack on politicians. Conversely, while few politicians would be so unwise as to criticise the electorate, arguably, much modern political practice is predicated upon a pessimistic view of the electorate's intelligence and motivations. Another tactic is to avoid the difficult issues by thinking up some device that could breathe new life into the relationship. While innovations like all-postal ballots or electronic voting are important, ministers have been right not to claim they are a magic cure to tackling the underlying malaise

To get to the heart of the matter we must understand that both sides to the democratic relationship often feel undervalued. As Stephen's survey evidence shows, the expectations the electorate have of politicians are way out of kilter with what most politicians, especially those burdened with governance, feel able to offer. We are invited to explore the characteristics of the connection the public wants with its representatives: closeness, mutuality, coherence, empathy, and then to consider the challenge for a constituency MP in offering this quality of connection to eighty thousand very differing, very busy voters, all with high expectations and limited patience.

But the rebuilding of the relationship is not simply about politicians improving their performance. If MPs try to make the public happy as mere consumers, they are surely doomed to failure. Indeed, as the survey shows, voters differ one from another in the type of relationship they want. The people must be engaged in a way that allows them to move beyond being the resentful object of democratic decision, instead, becoming its active subject.

While not every politician can express the challenge they face in the elegant (only occasionally abstruse) language of this pamphlet, there are those who have already begun to adjust to the reality Stephen describes. Speak to many MPs, and certainly most of the Labour MPs elected in the last decade, and you will hear the many ways they have

sought to close the distance with their electorate. For some, it has been the shift from a reliance on surgeries and one-to-one canvassing to new forms of outreach, from coffee mornings to the careful building up of new networks among those least likely to be involved in traditional politics. Others have been highly innovative; the MP who uses mobile-phone-text polling to consult the voters on possible subjects for an Early Day Motion, and then sends them the extract from *Hansard* to show the result. Or the MP who has visited every school and college sixth form in his constituency to host policy workshops, and now, as a result of the interest generated, sponsors a newsletter on local and national political issues written, edited and distributed by the sixth formers themselves.

When the Labour Party launched the Big Conversation it was a novel experience for some of our senior politicians, but for many others it was merely scaling up existing good practice. What has been remarkable about the Big Conversation has been how such a simple format – members of the public sitting with experts and politicians to discuss issues in depth, before feeding back views and recommendations – can so transform the experience for both sides. Hear the cabinet minister who remarked with amazement 'two hours in a room with ordinary people discussing a difficult topic and nobody shouted at me!', or the factory worker expressing similar astonishment 'for the first time a politician was really asking me what I thought'.

The challenge of the Big Conversation is how to scale up a qualitative engagement with a small number of people, into a legitimate contribution to national policy-making. In part, this is a technical challenge. It is a mundane, but vital, truth of public engagement that great intentions must be matched by sound techniques. Stephen Coleman is right to urge a more sophisticated and ambitious use of ICT as a way of modernising and refreshing the representative relationship.

In a memorable line, Stephen writes that 'the challenge for democratic politicians is to be seen as ordinary enough to be representative, while extraordinary enough to be representatives'. Expressed in these terms it might seem that politicians are faced with demands that simply cannot be reconciled. But the message of this pamphlet is not one of despair or resignation. Think again of the analogy of a relationship in trouble: both partners feel that the other

wants more from them, it is only after calm reflection that an apparent problem about commitment turns out to be one of understanding.

What is revealed by the Big Conversation, and by similar deliberative forms, is that the public do not expect politicians simply to do what they are told – Coleman’s ‘ventriloquist’s dummy’. Nor do politicians want, or expect, a public that is simply acquiescent in the face of its elected representatives’ higher status or greater knowledge. Whatever they might want on any single issue, what the people feel they deserve from their representatives is to be listened to, to be understood, and to be treated with respect. Conversely, while politicians might wish that they were enthusiastically

supported or even loved, what they need is a public that is willing – in Coleman’s word – to ‘empathise’ with the tough choices, the compromises, the hard-won concessions and many frustrations that are the day-to-day grind of political representation. A political system that encourages respect and empathy, and through so doing reconnects representative and represented; idealistic it may sound, but Stephen Coleman points us to the right starting point for the long journey of democratic renewal.

*Matthew Taylor works in Downing Street but is writing in a personal capacity*

# Direct representation

## Introduction

The problem faced by contemporary democracy is horribly simple: governments have come to believe that the public don't know how to speak; the public has come to believe that governments don't know how to listen. Faced with apparently 'apathetic' citizens, the political class complains about the difficulty of governing in a vacuum. Convinced that the political class is not interested in them, the public is increasingly pursuing a conversation in which politicians are outsiders.

It is ironic. Two centuries ago, democracy was regarded as a subversive aspiration. The disenfranchised majority clamoured for the right to participate, and the political elite resisted their claims 'because their reason is weak; because when once aroused, their passions are ungoverned; because they want information; because the smallness of the property, which they individually possess, renders them less attentive to the measures they adopt in affairs of moment' (Burke, 1871). Now the roles are reversed. The demos are voting with their feet, bored and demoralised by the institutions and processes of 'politics as usual', while angst-ridden political elites are desperate to re-engage them. In the words of the then Leader of the House of Commons:

*We ... who constitute the 'political class' conduct politics in a way that turns off our voters, readers, listeners and viewers ... Too many people believe that government is something that is done to them. Westminster must stop giving the impression of being a private club and instead give the public a greater sense of ownership.*  
(Hain, 2003)

This pamphlet argues that the problem we have is, in great part, one of representation – people don't feel they are being properly represented – and that we need to move to a richer, more conversational form of representation: *direct representation*. As I shall put forward, democracy works best when voters and representatives connect: exchanging views, accounting for themselves to each other, and, ideally, sharing a common world. Textbook histories of democracy tend to draw a sharp contrast between modern representative democracy and the direct, or participatory, democracy of the ancient world, while contemporary, academic,

political theorists tend to equate representative democracy with formal mechanisms of representation – they are more interested in voting systems than in the way that citizens and representatives interact, or fail to interact. But modern representative democracy has always been shot through with 'direct' or participatory elements; the public has engaged, not just through voting, but at public meetings, in representatives' surgeries, through the postbag, on the doorstep, or in the many forums offered by, first, the printed press, and, later, radio and TV. As the public becomes less deferential, and new means of two-way electronic communication evolve, citizens want more of this sort of direct exchange with their representatives. They want to be heard by politicians and have opportunities to converse with them. They want to be understood by them and to understand them. Much of the current dissatisfaction with our political system can be traced to its failure to supply this sort of understanding.

## Democracy and the disappearing demos

The withdrawal of the public from the auditorium of democratic politics is a striking global trend, both in established and new democracies. The manifestations of disengagement can be seen both in people's political behaviour and attitudes.

The most conspicuous trend is the fall in the number of people choosing to cast a vote in elections. In the UK's 2001 and 2005 General Elections, four out of ten eligible electors, rising to over six out of ten of 18-25-year-olds, chose not to vote. In the UK's 2004 European and local elections, despite the use of all-postal voting across four regions of the UK, most eligible electors did not vote. Voting is a central and highly publicised moment of democratic participation, which, in the past, galvanised otherwise passive citizens on the basis of democratic duty and partisan loyalty. The decline in voter turnout, to the point where only a minority of eligible voters participate in many local and supranational elections, places at risk the legitimacy of government on the basis of majority authorisation. Rallings and Thrasher, in their study *Public Opinion and the 2004 Elections*, commented upon the public's 'deep-rooted and widespread scepticism and

about the impact of voting *per se* ... Most are not advocates for voting, and some even seem to regard their own propensity to vote as a strange personal quirk – a result of having the importance of voting drummed into them as a child.’ (Rallings and Thrasher, 2003)

As the principal mediating channels between citizens and governing institutions (Schattschneider 1942; Lawson 1980; Luther and Muller-Rommel 2002), political parties are haemorrhaging members and loyal supporters, and are increasingly looking like eccentric associations of the elderly and the obsessed. Only one per cent of UK citizens have actively supported a party’s general- or local-election campaign (Electoral Commission, 2004: p. 33). In 1964, almost one in two (forty-four per cent) UK voters identified with a political party; in 2003, only fourteen per cent identified with any party. Even the most passive act of the information-gathering citizen, watching political news and analysis on television, is in decline. In a speech to the Royal Television Society in 2001, Richard Sambrook, then Director of BBC News, observed that:

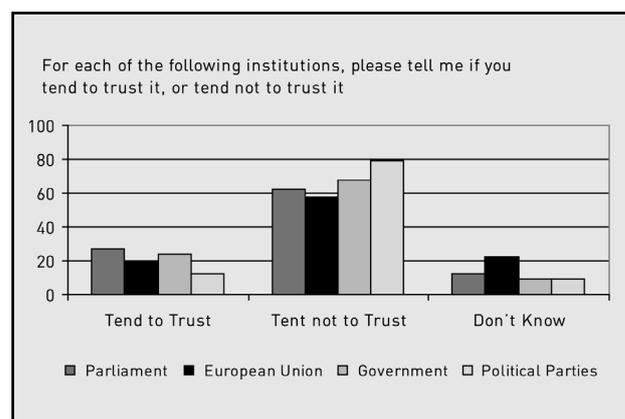
*News viewing – across all channels – is now down twenty-five per cent for the under-45s. There’s a generation growing older which just doesn’t sit down and watch news as their parents did. I see that as a time bomb. A demographic wave sweeping up through all of our audiences. If we don’t do something, in ten years it’ll be the under-55s, and then the under-65s, who don’t watch.*

This decline in public political engagement is best understood in the context of radical changes in public attitudes towards democratic institutions and actors, specifically attitudes of trust and efficacy.

In the past, most people deferred to governing institutions, giving them more or less unthinking allegiance in return for the state’s paternalistic benefaction. In the last half-century, however, the public has become better educated, more confident and less deferential to remote authorities. Seventy per cent of the UK population say that they do not trust politicians (Electoral Commission, p.63). Little more than a quarter (twenty-seven per cent) say that they tend to trust Parliament, while less than a quarter (twenty-four per cent) trust Government, and

only one in five (twenty per cent) trust the European Parliament. The UK population has particularly low levels of trust for political bodies and institutions compared to the EU average.

Figure 1



Compared with others who are commonly encountered by the public, trust in politicians to tell the truth is particularly low:

Figure 2

Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth, or not?

| Base: All (2,004)                    | Tell the truth % | Not tell the truth % | Don't know % |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Doctors                              | 92               | 5                    | 3            |
| Teachers                             | 89               | 7                    | 5            |
| Television newsreaders               | 70               | 20                   | 10           |
| Professors                           | 80               | 9                    | 11           |
| Judges                               | 75               | 16                   | 8            |
| Clergyman/priests                    | 75               | 17                   | 8            |
| Scientists                           | 69               | 19                   | 12           |
| The police                           | 63               | 28                   | 10           |
| The ordinary man/woman in the street | 55               | 29                   | 17           |
| Pollsters                            | 49               | 30                   | 21           |
| Civil servants                       | 51               | 37                   | 13           |
| Trades union officials               | 39               | 44                   | 17           |
| Business leaders                     | 30               | 58                   | 13           |
| Journalists                          | 20               | 72                   | 8            |
| Politicians generally                | 22               | 71                   | 7            |
| Government ministers                 | 23               | 70                   | 8            |

The most serious attitudinal deficit relates to efficacy: people's sense of how much they can, or cannot, influence the world around them. Although most UK citizens (seventy-five per cent) want to have a say in how the country is run, forty per cent disagree that 'when people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run' (Electoral Commission, p. 61). In my 2003 study of *Big Brother* viewers and non-viewers, sixty-nine per cent of both groups agreed that 'Any views I express will make little difference to how Britain is governed', and seventy per cent agreed that 'The people who govern this country are not likely to be interested in my opinions.' (Coleman 2003) Similarly, a 1999 survey by the US Council for Excellence in Government found that almost two thirds (sixty-four per cent) of Americans agreed with the statement, 'I feel distant and disconnected from government.' ( Council for Excellence in Government, 1999)

## Rethinking representation

What is driving this decline of confidence in our political system and active political engagement? A number of causes are often cited: the relative decline in the power of political institutions (contemporary government, as is often said, is too small to control big events, too big to control small ones); the emergence of a less ideological, more consensual form of politics, meaning that political disputes are less engaging and their outcomes less momentous than they used to be; and the development of a more individualist, consumerist culture, which has eroded collective political identities – or what political scientists call the 'salience' of political issues in most people's lives. And there is no doubt that these are real causes that help explain citizenship disengagement. But might not one, important driver of decline be the failure of our representative system to forge meaningful connections between politicians and citizens – to make people feel properly represented?<sup>1</sup>

To answer the question, an online survey was commissioned from the online polling organisation yougov, of a representative sample of 2,273 UK citizens.<sup>2</sup>

We began by asking our representative sample how connected they felt to Parliament. Bearing out our suspicions about the poor state of the representative relationship, seventy-two per cent of the sample reported feeling 'disconnected' from Parliament, with nearly half (forty-six per cent) feeling 'very disconnected'. Over half of 35-44-year-olds (fifty-two per cent) and nearly half of 45-64-year-olds felt 'very disconnected' from Parliament.

When asked about the kinds of contact they had had with their MP in the past year, nearly half (forty-eight per cent) claimed that they had read a letter or leaflet from their MP. A quarter claimed to have seen their MP on television, twenty per cent to have written to their MP, sixteen per cent to have visited their MP's web site, twelve per cent to have met their MP face-to-face and eleven per cent to have listened to their MP making a speech. Almost four out of ten respondents (thirty-nine per cent) claimed to have had no contact of any kind with their MP.

In an order to put these findings into perspective, we also asked respondents how 'in touch' they felt with their local doctor and next-door neighbour, as well as with their local councillor and MPs. Councillors and, to an even greater extent, MPs, came well below the others. On a scale of zero to ten, with zero indicating total disconnection and ten indicating intimate connection, over half (fifty-four per cent) rated their level of connection to their next-door neighbour at a point of seven or above. Perceptions of connection to local GPs were not far behind, with fifty-two per cent reaching seven-plus. But only eleven per cent felt connected to councillors, and a pathetic seven per cent felt connected to their MP. Looking at the bottom end of the scale, taking zero to three to indicate a perception of significant disconnection, next-door neighbours were so evaluated by eighteen per cent of the sample, GPs by almost one in four (twenty-four per cent), councillors by seventy-seven per cent and MPs by seventy-nine per cent.

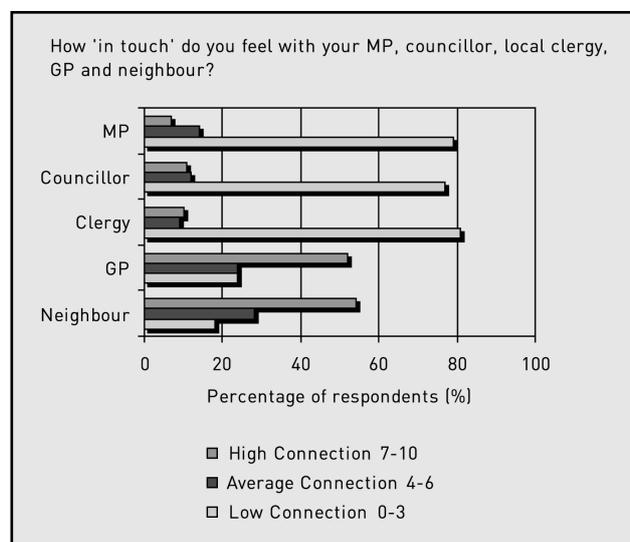
<sup>1</sup> Representation is a much-neglected concept; there is surprisingly little investigation of it, of either a theoretical or empirical kind. There is no entry for 'representation' in either of the following: Blakeley and Bryson, *Contemporary Political Concepts*; Bellamy and Mason *Political Concepts*.

<sup>2</sup> The value of using an online survey is that secondary questions could be asked of respondents, seeking qualitative explanations for their initial responses. The first, quantitative survey, comprising seven questions, was conducted between 11 and 13 September 2003.

In sum, only three out of forty respondents felt well connected to their MPs, while thirty-two out of forty felt significantly disconnected.

We also asked respondents how connected they felt to their local religious representatives. It is a sad reflection of the state of relations between the public and their political representatives that, even in our very secular, non-church-going society, people reported feeling about as connected to their MPs and councillors as they did to the clergy in their local church, synagogue, temple or mosque. Only one in ten felt connected to a clergyman at seven-plus, slightly behind councillors (eleven per cent), but ahead of MPs, at seven per cent. Where seventy-nine per cent felt significantly disconnected from their MP (scoring lower than four on the connectedness scale), and fifty per cent felt zero connection, the figures were eighty-one per cent low connection and sixty-two per cent zero connection with local clergy.

Figure 3



### Reasons for disconnection

What is driving these widely held, negative perceptions of citizen-representative connection? To answer this, we went back to survey respondents and asked them to complete two sentences: 'I

don't feel connected to my political representative because ...' and 'A connected political representative should ...'<sup>3</sup>

Respondents chose between eight broad traits that they reported made them feel disconnected from their representatives. We have translated these into eight types of disconnected representative.

#### The unknown representative

A significant minority (about one in five respondents) did not know who their MP was. Considering that thirty-nine per cent of respondents had had no contact with their MP (mediated or otherwise) in the previous year, it is not surprising that about half of that number could not identify their MP:

*I don't know who they are and they make no attempt to rectify this.*

*I don't even know who he/she is! We have only lived here four months, but we have not had any newsletters or correspondence from any political representative.*

#### The invisible representative

Some respondents complained about their MP's lack of visible presence: 'He isn't very "visible", hardly hear anything about him.' Respondents seemed to perceive unseen representatives as being ephemeral, faceless, ghostly figures, who could not be trusted:

*Even though he only lives up the road, I have never ever seen him.*

*I don't even know who is representing me politically and I don't know anyone who does. They don't seem to want to be known.*

*After the election and its promises, nothing's changed. I voted, but have actually forgotten his name, as I haven't seen nor heard of him since.*

#### The distant representative

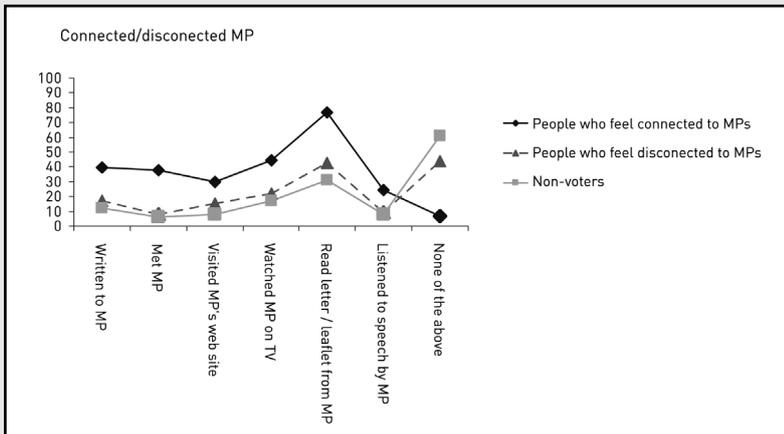
Many respondents used the language of remoteness or distance to explain why they felt discon-

<sup>3</sup> The 2,273 respondents to the initial survey were contacted by email. 1,783 responded to the invitation and posted a total of 23,642 words to complete the first sentence and 25,821 to complete the second sentence.

## Connectedness and contact

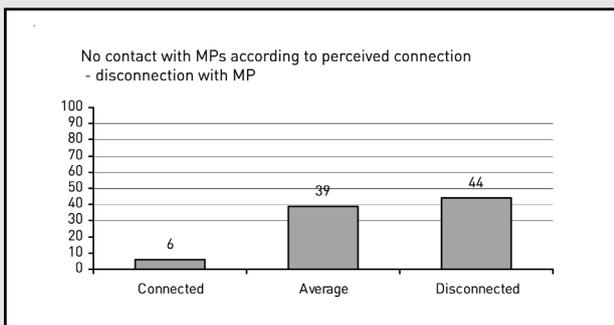
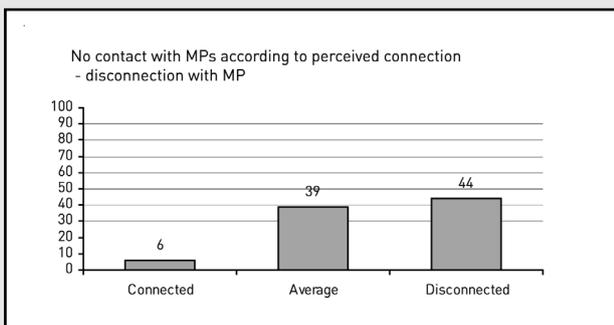
Confirming the findings of other surveys, our poll showed a significant correspondence between having had contact with MPs and feeling connected to them. People who had met their MP in person were five times more likely to feel connected to them than those who had not; those who had visited their MP's website were nearly three times as likely to feel connected. Ninety-four per cent of respondents who had no contact with their MP in the past year felt disconnected, compared with sixty-one per cent of the overall sample.

A key finding was that the vast majority (eighty per cent) of people who felt disconnected from Parliament reported that they had not voted in the previous general election. Ninety-eight per cent of those who felt very connected, and eighty-nine per cent of those who felt slightly connected, reported voting, whereas over half (fifty-two per cent) of the very disconnected had not voted. Non-voters were far less likely to have had contact with their MPs than voters.



Having found such a strong correlation between contact and connectedness, it is hard to establish what, if any, causal forces are at work. Does having contact lead to a sense of connection, or does having a sense of connection lead to making contact? Or are they both expressions of something else? It seems likely that there is a two-

way process at work. While people who feel connected to their representatives are more likely to make contact with them, or make themselves available for contact, having had contact with representatives will probably make people feel more connected and improve their confidence in them. This would be in keeping with research showing that confidence in a public service tends to increase after people have had contact with it, such as people who have been in hospital or attended government training schemes. It seems likely then, that if representatives could make greater contact with the people they are meant to represent, people's confidence in them would increase.



nected from their representatives. Representatives are expected to be rooted, reachable and touchable:

*He never walks around our town. We have to go somewhere once every month for a surgery of about two hours.*

*They are not seen very often round here. They don't seem to like mixing with the public.*

*They have no local presence, and make no obvious effort to communicate with their constituents.*

*A London politician, not a local politician.*

#### The alien representative

Respondents repeatedly complained that their MPs came from a different world – an alien planet. The prevalence of this metaphor was striking, perhaps reflecting a perception of representatives as ‘outsiders’ – a class apart – with life histories that made them incapable of registering and reflecting everyday experiences:

*They live in a totally different world to the man on the street.*

*They are disconnected from the real world.*

*He lives in a different world from me.*

*He is too remote and not on the same wavelength as the people generally.*

*They haven't a clue about the real world. They say they do, but I feel it is just lip service.*

*I don't think they are on the same planet. They have no idea about normal life.*

#### The partisan representative

Respondents commonly complained that their representatives were more attached to their parties than those they represent. In the minds of many respondents, there seemed to be a split between the work of representing and the rituals of high politics. Respondents wanted to be consulted and heard, rather than simply regarded as voting fodder:

*He is a party loyalist, a careerist who toes the party line, irrespective of whether it is appropriate to his constituency.*

*He does not refer to me for my opinion on any question. Mainly he follows the party line.*

#### The untrustworthy representative

In general, respondents distrusted the process of representation, rather than the character of representatives. But there were strongly expressed exceptions:

*I regard my MP as a self-serving opportunist, who is interested in power for power's sake, and will do and say anything to secure his position.*

*I can't trust any politician/party to treat me like an adult, and tell me the truth. There is so much secrecy and behind-the-scenes trade-offs.*

*He is a publicity machine – not a politician.*

*I do not trust politicians in general, even those who entered politics for the best of motives.*

#### The arrogant representative

A widespread complaint from respondents was that their MPs did not care about who they really were and how or what they thought – they were disrespectful and overweening.

*I have been seduced with the belief/idea that what I think and feel will have an influence over decision-making when it doesn't. My views have been canvassed so many times, yet no regard is taken of them at all.*

*She seems more at home in the Today programme studio than the constituency. She has a huge majority, and I suspect she takes us for granted.*

*They treat us as if we were invisible, and do what they want, not what the people they represent want.*

*The MP for here looks down his nose at us lower mortals.*

### The irrelevant representative

Finally, a significant minority of respondents considered their MP to have little or no relevance to their lives. Unlike the respondents who did not know who their MP was, these knew their MP in the way that a childless couple might know the local school, or a vegetarian might know the local butcher shop. They were unconvinced that they had any need to be represented politically.

*They don't play a part in my life.*

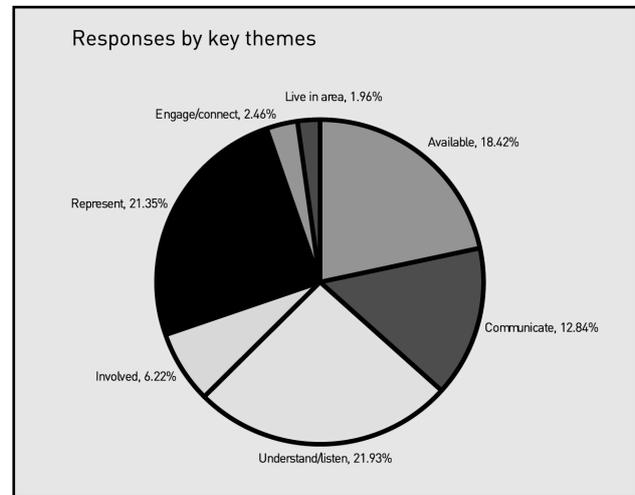
*I have never had any reason to ask the assistance or advice from my MP or councillor.*

Looking at these reasons for feeling disconnected, a number of points stand out. First, scarcely any of our citizens appear hostile to representation, as such, and want to see it replaced by direct democracy – they seem to accept it as a fact of life. They also respect representatives' independence; hardly any respondent criticised their representative for failing to reflect, precisely, the policies he, or she, favoured. Second, respondents complained about failures of 'connection' rather than failures of 'delivery': about representatives' refusal to listen, communicate or care, rather than their inability to produce better outcomes.

### Connectedness – the ingredients

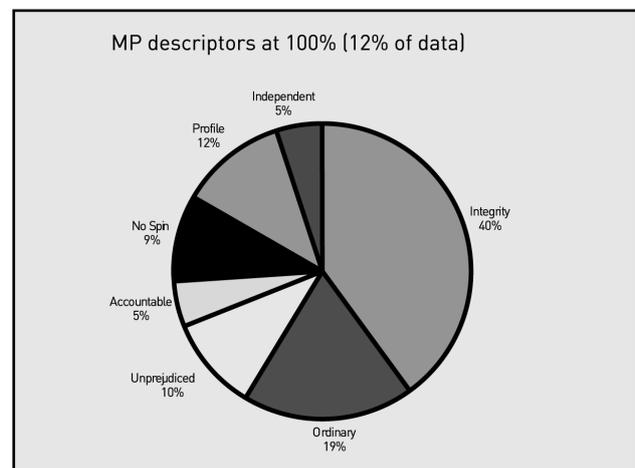
So much for the anatomy of disconnection; but what does the public want from representatives? In order to find out, we used semantic analysis software to track the key words and phrases used when our respondents completed the statement, 'A connected political representative should ...'. The findings mirror the reasons the public gave for feeling disconnected.<sup>4</sup> Very few respondents expected representatives simply to mirror their views, and most wanted their representatives to 'understand/listen', 'be available' and 'communicate'.

Figure 4



Similarly, an analysis of terms used to describe the desired qualities of representatives revealed that integrity was by far the most desired characteristic, followed by ordinariness. These soft, personal or 'affective' virtues were rated as 'much more important' than more formal or procedural virtues of accountability, and fairness or lack of prejudice.

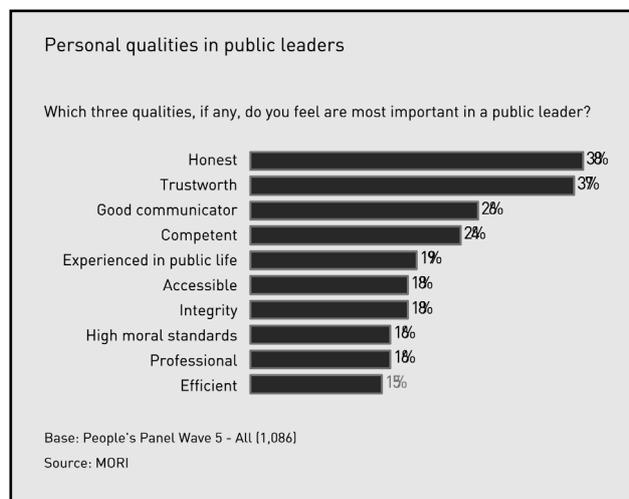
Figure 5



These findings are very much in keeping with those of the UK People's Panel (fifth wave, 2002), where the public also said that honesty, trustworthiness and ability to communicate were more important than competence or efficiency in a public leader.

<sup>4</sup> Altogether, we analysed 25,821 words from 1,783 responses.

Figure 6



## Rethinking representation – the case for ‘direct representation’

What should we make of these findings? Most obviously, they bear out the suggestion that the representative political relationship in Britain today is in trouble. It is probably unrealistic to hope that politicians will ever rank with neighbours or GPs on the connectedness ratings, but they should be able to do much better than at present. The public does not feel well represented. At the same time, the findings offer grounds for hope, for they clearly indicate that the public has no quarrel with the representative relationship as such, and suggest that citizens have a realistic view of what can be expected from it: voters don't expect their representatives to simply parrot their opinions and attitudes, or to be omnipotent and omniscient – to deliver miracles. The media might hold all politicians to superhuman standards, but voters do not. They want them to listen, and to show that they have listened, to behave with integrity and account for themselves.

But if our findings suggest that the basis for a successful representative relationship exists, they also suggest profound alterations are required in the way it works. The marriage is not over, but representatives need to change if they want to save it.

Most importantly, our survey suggests that we need to pay much greater attention to the communicative dimension of representation. Citizens of a mature democracy want to be part of an ongoing

conversation – and not just a formal exchange of views either, but something that speaks to their emotional needs to be respected and treated as equals.

But paying more attention to the communicative element of representation won't be easy, for it goes against deep-seated ways of understanding representation – ways that, in turn, shape the representative relationship itself. It challenges, in particular, two dominant approaches to representation: first, the approach that pits direct democracy against representative democracy; and, second, the approach that sees representation as mimetic representativeness.

## Direct and representative democracy

Thinking about representation tends to revolve around two apparently opposed versions of democracy – ancient and modern, direct and indirect, participatory and representative, Burkean and Rousseauian. Of course, none of these terms is exactly synonymous with any other, but the outlines of the contrast are clear enough. On the one hand, democracy as empowering people directly, and on the other, democracy as investing power in professional governors or politicians who represent the people. The history that goes with this is as familiar as the contrast itself. Ancient democracy offered direct rule by the people. But the emergence of large, pluralistic nation states, along with a liberal, negative conception of freedom, resulted in a transition to representative forms of democracy. Direct rule was replaced by indirect governance (Dahl, 1989). This transition ushered in an enduring quarrel between those who sought to recover direct democracy by giving power back to the people, or at least closely circumscribing the initiative of representatives, and those who argued that representatives should be left to govern as their judgement dictates.

A striking feature of this quarrel is that the two sides tend to share an understanding of representative democracy itself. They disagree about the value of the thing, but not about its empirical attributes. So both tend to understand representative democracy as a, democratically, very etiolated affair: the right to depose or re-elect a

leader every several years or so. As Joseph Schumpeter, a famous defender of indirect democracy, put it:

*Democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms 'people' and 'rule.' Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them. (Schumpeter, 1976)*

### The ventriloquist and his dummy

Advocates of 'direct' and 'representative' government have very different views as to where power should lie.

The partisans of direct democracy see the representative as the ventriloquist's dummy: an aggregate channel for all the collective voices being represented. As democratically represented citizens, our task is to control the representative dummy and slap it when it assumes to talk on its own. We are represented because our representative speaks as if we were speaking ourselves.

The advocates of 'representative democracy' see the representative as the ventriloquist and the people as the dummy. The representative speaks, but in the people's name. We are represented because our representatives speak for us, on our behalf. They are the trustees of our collective interests. We do not elect them to do what we might do ourselves; we elect them because we do not have the time – or maybe the competence – to make policy decisions for ourselves constantly. The notion that it is the people who speak is something of a pretence – just as the notion that the dummy speaks is a pretence. It is the representative, like the ventriloquist, who is really in charge.

Direct democrats, quoting Rousseau, contend that contemporary representative democracy is only a

parody of self-rule. Democracy is direct or it is nothing. The Burkeans and the Shumpetarians reply that representative democracy might not be very democratic, but it is the closest approximation we can get in the modern world to the real thing – and has some crucial advantages over it. It ensures that well-educated specialists, rather than the mob, are really in charge.

Yet for all its pedigree, the scheme that pits direct democracy against lofty representation is hardly compelling. It ignores the possibility of the options in between, of systems that, while preserving the representative framework, ensure that, through dialogue, debate and argument, the public retains a degree of authority over representatives, even between elections.

In fact, the Rousseauesque characterisation of modern representative government as no more than the chance to elect a master every four years was always a caricature. A range of channels have given representatives and the represented opportunities to connect with each other.

Demonstrations, petitions, letters and pamphlets have allowed the public to express their view to representatives. Press conferences, TV and newspaper interviews, phone-ins, speeches and parliamentary debates have allowed representatives to express their views to the public. Public meetings, political parties, and MPs' surgeries have allowed citizens and representatives to exchange views with each other.

But it can't be denied that the relationship has never been anything like an easy, equal one. The public has generally be spoken at, rather than with. They weren't simply ignored, but they weren't invited to join the club either. They were patronised. Anyway, the old terms of exchange, while never satisfactory, have become increasingly unacceptable. As people have become less deferential, as society has become more diverse, and as new means of two-way communication have developed, so citizens are coming to demand a less distant, more direct, conversational form of representation. Representative techniques, based on the broadcast-megaphone model, won't provide the requisite depth and richness of interactive communication in the age of the internet. The public wants something closer to the full-blooded, two-way relationship we are calling direct representation.

### Hanna Pitkin on representation

The two-way, communicative relationship that the public increasingly wants is, arguably, an essential feature of political representation, properly understood. As Hanna Pitkin argued in a magisterial survey, *The Concept of Representation* – one of the few notable works on representation to have been written in modern times:

representing ... means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them. The representative must act independently; his action must involve discretion and judgment; he must be the one who acts. The represented must also be (conceived as) capable of independent action and judgment, not merely being taken care of. And, despite the resulting potential for conflict between representative and represented about what is to be done, the conflict must not normally take place. The representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs, an explanation is called for. He must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest. (Pitkin 1967)

### Representation, not just representativeness

This same disregard for the communicative aspect of representation is evident in another way of thinking too: one that sees representation as an essentially mimetic relationship.

When academics, policy-makers and politicians concern themselves with representation, they tend to be preoccupied by the formal or practical characteristics of this or that representative system.

They debate which type of representative system (PR; alternative vote; single, transferable vote; first past the post) is fairest or most 'representative', and if, and how, representativeness should be traded off against other goods – stability say, or a smaller likelihood of corruption. They quarrel about whether this or that boundary change, voting process or counting technique is fair – or about the right way of ensuring that representatives 'match' the population they are meant to serve. These concerns are important, but the preoccupation with them tends to obscure the centrality of the communicative, affective dimension of representation. As our survey suggests, the public appreciate what the experts and the politicians often forget: that a system that scores high on qualities of formal representativeness might, nevertheless, fail to represent, precisely because citizens and politicians fail to connect. The academics, policy-makers and politicians are from Mars. The public are from Venus.

### Direct representation in practice

I have argued that sharp distinctions between direct and representative democracy, and emphases upon mechanistic, mimetic representativeness, are unhelpful if we are to achieve a democracy that is representative, but not remote – in which representatives listen to and acknowledge the authority of the people they represent, and account openly for their own beliefs and actions. What, though, would a closer, more conversational democratic relationship mean in practice? Here, drawing on our survey, I suggest five things that the public want from their representatives.

**First**, the public wants to be heard. Recognising the bankruptcy of paternalistic modes of governing, associated with the post-war welfare state, government now professes its commitment to 'consulting' the public about issues and policies. Alongside established polling and survey techniques, many have made use of new democratic procedures, such as citizens' juries, standing citizens' panels, online consultations, electronically facilitated open-space events and town-hall meetings. On the whole, local government has a better record on this than central government (Clark, 2002). Parliament is only just beginning to make

### Consulting but not listening

Governments that consult, it is sometimes argued, are more likely to be governments that listen to, and learn from, the public. Although this might be true in theory, the historical record of governments consulting the public is not promising.

Evidence to the House of Commons Public Administration Committee inquiry into new forms of public participation, based on a survey of 332 UK local authorities, found that twenty per cent considered that the consultations they had run had very little impact on decisions, and twenty per cent that they merely confirmed decisions that were already made (Lowndes et al, 2001). In a 2002 survey of local authorities by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, one in four authorities reported that exercises in public participation were only 'occasional influential' upon decision-making (ODPM 2002 p.45). In the NHS, despite the extensive efforts to establish patient and public involvement (PPI), a report by the Commission for Health Improvement found that 'PPI is not yet having a major impact on policy and practice. This is despite a plethora of PPI initiatives. It is almost as if there is a brick wall between the activities going on and any changes on the ground that happen as a result.' (Commission for Health Improvement, 2003, p..11) In the first six months after its formation at the beginning of 2004, Ofcom completed thirty-three consultations, which attracted an average of thirty-five responses to each. A recent DTI consultation on 'managing the nuclear legacy' received sixty-three responses, including several from environmental pressure groups and several that referred to 'consultation fatigue and expressed scepticism about the value of consultation, which can involve a lot of effort for little result. Many consultees made the point that the value of participation in the first phase will be judged against evidence that their views are being taken properly into account. (D (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003), As the public increasingly experiences consultation-fatigue and frustration with the futility of being consulted to no effect, consultative governance risks being regarded as little more than a participatory ritual.

any kind of systematic effort to consult and engage the people it is supposed to represent. Too often, such consultations are undertaken for form's sake, with government consulting, but not listening (see box below). Representatives have a crucial role here: in promoting and encouraging consultation; in mediating between the consulted and government; and in accounting for themselves or for government when it fails to act in line with the recommendations of those consulted.

**Second**, the public want a conversation, not a just consultation. I suggested above that people want to be heard. Government generally interprets this as meaning that they want to be consulted. But consultation does not go far enough. 'Consulting the public' tends to mean inviting them to respond to pre-established policy agendas, when the public want to be engaged in a two-way conversation in which the public and representatives steer the content between them. On an every-

day level, the most common act of political participation is talk about politics. According to the Oxford Internet Survey, most British people (sixty-one per cent) say that they frequently (twenty-two per cent) or every so often (thirty-nine per cent) discuss politics with friends or family. The BBCi political-discussion forums receive tens of thousands of messages each month; in the month of the Iraq war the BBCi news site received 350,000 emails and postings from people wishing to express their views. But very few of these political talkers ever have a discussion with the people they elect to represent their interests and preferences. It is as if there are two democracies: one operating informally and conversationally in homes, workplaces, pubs and streets, and another deliberating on behalf of everyone else in parliaments, councils and government departments. There is remarkably little interaction or translation between these two discourses. Representatives need to develop ways

of joining these conversations up. Sometimes this does occur. It can happen on the doorstep, during canvassing, in MPs' surgeries, or in open-space events, citizens' panels, 'Question Time'-style public meetings and when representatives take part in e-facilitated conversations. But, too often, the public feels that such political discussion is stage-managed. Some topics can be talked about, some can't. Mobilising, listening to, learning from, mapping and responding to public talk are all underdeveloped skills among contemporary representatives. As well as leading and reflecting public opinion, contemporary politicians need to be skilled facilitators, capable of recognising, encouraging and summarising the diverse and disparate voices of the increasingly confident and articulate public.

**Third**, the public wants an ongoing, rather than episodic, conversation. Of course, the public understands that politicians are going to pay more attention to what they have to say at election time, but it is clear from our survey that people resent the perceived absence of politicians between elections. Modern government is, of necessity, a large, remote and faceless machine. A key function of representatives is to humanise governance, representing it to people, and people to it, in humane and accessible terms.

**Fourth**, the public don't want to have to endure partisan, adversarial argument on every issue. They want to join a conversation, not take part in a rhetorical version of *Gladiators*. There are real tensions here. The pressures of electoral politics compel politicians to claim more for their own policies than they merit, and to traduce those of their opponents. At the same time, the public is increasingly turned off by yah-boo politics. They want their representatives to be honest, admit to faults in themselves, acknowledge where they have been proved wrong, and be honest about the challenges that we all face.

**Fifth**, and finally, the public want representatives who account for themselves. They don't, as we have seen, expect representatives simply to play the role of delegate or ventriloquist's dummy. They appreciate that representing an electorate entails compromise and trade-offs, and that representatives need room to exercise their own judgement and, on occasion, follow their own conscience. But they do want representatives, as far as possible, to abide by their promises, meet their commitments,

and explain why they conduct themselves in the way that they do. The dominant academic model of representation regards elections as the defining aspect of accountability, but from the perspective of direct representation, the representative has an ongoing obligation to give account and hear accounts.

## New technologies of democratic connection

I have been arguing for the need to promote a closer, more conversational relationship between citizens and their representatives. This raises practical questions: how should this be done?; what sort of channels or forums would be most effective in bringing voters and politicians together and boosting the former's confidence in the latter? The answer, of course, is that there is no one, magic recipe. No one technique or technology will suffice. All the evidence suggests that people value personal contact: voters who have been canvassed personally are more likely to vote, just as citizens who have been invited, by a letter addressed specifically to them, to attend public meetings are more likely to attend. Governments need to become much better at listening to, supporting and thanking those citizens who do get engaged (Rogers, 2004)

Digital information and communication technologies (ICT) are well positioned to facilitate just the sort of close, conversational relationship – a relation of direct representation – I have been advocating, and I turn to their potential now. It is up to both government and citizens to ensure that this vulnerable potential is realised (Blumler and Coleman 2001). A narrow interpretation of direct representation as little more than the right to send emails to MPs, watch webcasts of council meetings and vote online is a far from enthralling prospect. Making it easier, quicker, cheaper, gee-whizzier to do all the things that have made traditional politics dull and uninviting in the past, amounts to institutional preservation, rather than democratic transformation. Beyond such replicating practices, digital technologies do have transformative democratic potential.

Broadcast technology allowed citizens, in the form of viewer and listener, immediate and vivid access to the political process, but as spectators

rather than players. The broadcast agenda of discussion has tended to be set by party communication managers and senior media editors, both locked into a systemic process of mutual dependence and ultimate control over the production of news and debate. This has produced an ethos of virtual deliberation in which, rather like the eighteenth-century notion of virtual representation, where the rich voted on behalf of the poor, the politically well-connected debate policy questions on behalf of the disconnected.

With the rise of interactive media, the equation between communication and transmission is no longer defensible as the best or only way of serving the public interest (see Coleman, 2004). Liu and Shrum define interactivity as 'the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages, and the degree to which such influences are synchronised' (Liu and Shrum, 2002). In the context of representation, interactivity opens up unprecedented opportunities for more inclusive public engagement in the deliberation of policy issues.

For example, the UK Parliament has run a series of online consultations, in which groups of citizens with experience and expertise in relation to a specific policy area have been invited to enter an online forum for a period of one month, and share ideas with one another and with MPs (see Coleman 2004). This has enabled MPs to broaden their agenda. After an online consultation on the draft Communications Bill, Brian White MP, a member of the committee scrutinising the legislation, stated that:

*It helped us change the questions we were asking the witnesses and made us focus on areas we would not necessarily have thought of. It tended either to reinforce something that we already knew or raised questions that we would not otherwise have asked.*

Another committee member, Lord McNally, said:

*It allowed us to get on the road, electronically. The alternative would have been to hold a series of public meetings around the country.*

As important, were the responses from citizens who participated in the online forum:

*It was a lot easier for ordinary people to go online than to get a big document on paper, read through it and then write a letter for a submission to a government department. The Committee was receiving evidence largely from a big group of industrial interest groups, which had been following the consultations on communications reform for five years. And it ends up being a very narrow group. But in the online forum, other voices were coming in, voices that are not normally heard. It also gave a chance for a wider set of issues to be debated than those that the Committee itself had set out.*

*Throughout the consultation I was on a learning curve, listening to other people. Even if I disagreed with them it was refreshing. There was a sense of rational debate taking place.*

*Most of the time Parliament is just a remote idea. I like the fact that there is a little bit of energy around it and any relationship that might flow from these small beginnings might be extremely valuable.*

Impressed by the potential of this sort of virtual public engagement in the legislative process, the House of Commons Modernisation Select Committee has called for 'select committees and joint committees considering draft legislation to make online consultations a more regular aspect of their work.' (House of Commons Modernisation Committee, 2004, p.21)

Citizens are no longer content with the role of just being passive spectators. As the phenomenal popularity of reality TV has shown, people want to be (literally) in the picture and to have their judgements respected. One viewer of the UK *Big Brother* series, asked to comment on what politicians could learn from the show, said:

*I think that the main lesson that politicians should learn is that we believe what we see, not what they want us to hear. They would do better to show us their values by the way they live than to try to convince us by the use of spin ... that things are different to the way we know they are. The main lesson they should learn is that we make up our own minds on what we see, and if what we see bears no resemblance to what they are telling us, then we lose faith in them, we do not start believing them. (Coleman, 2003)*

Reality TV can be understood as a phenomenon of mass-mediated public self-disclosure – an (arguably misplaced) attempt by the public to talk for, and to, itself in its own voice. As relatively inexpensive and increasingly convergent media technologies have become accessible, and the rigid division between producer and audience evaporates, opportunities for self-representation, such as

blogging or making videos and distributing them by mobile phone, become more realistic. The remarkably widespread phenomenon of blogging can be seen as its manifestation of digital self-representation. There are now millions of blogs, in which otherwise unknown citizens offer their perspectives on the world and create a web of links to the perspectives of others. Bloggers can rise from

### Communicative overload

The internet shrinks social space and creates opportunities for dispersed individuals to meet and talk as if they were together. For representative democracy, this opens up the possibility of a more frequent and direct interaction between people and politicians.

But what can seem like an opportunity for citizens can seem like a problem for representatives. Citizens look to ICT to offer closer relationships with those who speak for them, but representatives complain of being overloaded or bombarded. When addressing a political representative involved having to make physical contact – a visit to a weekly surgery or a letter addressed to a physical office – the management of the relationship was largely controlled by politicians, via appointment systems and mail protocols. As representatives can be addressed at any time and in any place via mobile phone, text message or email, citizens experience greater communicative equality. Politicians' websites become vulnerable to hackers; they can be talked about by bloggers; and an email reply to a single constituent can be copied and distributed to thousands within seconds. So far, most analyses of this new situation have emphasised the discomfort of politicians in the face of communication overload. The US Congress has gone as far as to support a research project intended to address the curse of overload by unsolicited communications. The Congress Online report on E-mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communication Crisis states that 'With individual House offices now receiving as many as 8,000 e-mail messages per month, and Senate offices receiving as many as 55,000, the burdens on staff are viewed as unmanageable.' (Congress Online, 2001a) Members of Congress, like elected legislators elsewhere, are in search of effective mail-filtering techniques and protocols designed to protect them from unwanted communicators. From the citizens' perspective, the problem is one of non-response rather than overload. Another Congress Online study, entitled Constituents and Your Web Site: What Citizens Want to See on Congressional Web Sites, reports on a series of focus groups in which citizens were asked what they want from online communication with their representatives:

Participants ... wanted assurances that, once expressed, their views would be both acknowledged and taken into account. Just as importantly, however, they expressed their appreciation for Members who showed the courtesy to tell them when they did not agree with them. (Congress Online, 2001b)

There are solutions to hand, but these depend upon cultural, as well as technological, changes. Representatives need to provide more opportunities for those they represent to contact them in efficient ways (using filtering and summation software), but also to contact one another. A key way to reduce the pressure on expert elites is to foster the power of grass-roots knowledge-sharing networks, which allow people to represent themselves to one another

private obscurity to global fame, as happened to Salam Pax, the Baghdad blogger, in the months before and during the war on Iraq. Some politicians are establishing weblogs, but the degree of openness and flexibility represented by such distributed co-operative working may, in the long-term, prove more than disciplined party structures can cope with. Citizens tend to be more innovative and sophisticated in their use of ICT than the politicians who represent them. The danger for the political class is the emergence of a subterranean sphere of discourse from which they are excluded. Public communication could migrate, leaving the 'leaders' behind. Direct representation provides an opportunity for the terms of political communication to be renegotiated for the digital age.

### Conclusion: more than just connecting

A central argument of this paper has been that political relationships between citizens and the state are permeated by distance and disrespect, leaving democracy as an encounter between distrusting strangers. The democratic state needs to design ways of acknowledging citizens, without this seeming like an empty or disingenuous gesture.

This is far from a counsel of despair. As I have suggested, the public has no complaints, even in these more democratic, less deferential times, about the fundamentals of representation. Citizens don't want to go through the time-consuming

process of examining and voting upon every area of policy and piece of new legislation. They do not expect every decision to go their way, nor that politicians will perform miracles. They do expect, however, ordinary levels of competence and efficiency, and to be engaged in the political conversation as equals. And they want to know that their contribution will be valued – that it will make a difference. In an age when blind civic duty could be relied upon, the consequence of civic actions hardly mattered – for the essence of duty is its moral indifference to outcomes. But now that the public is more critical (and authority should learn not to resent this), it is vital to demonstrate clear and honest connections between individual actions and collective results, neighbourhood input and global output, and single-issue choices and systemic effects.

In an age where authenticity and ordinariness are valued more than prestige and expertise, the challenge for democratic politicians is to be seen as ordinary enough to be representative, while extraordinary enough to be representatives.

The current problem of democracy is not about how to re-engage citizens with the linear, hierarchical and indirect processes of representation. It would be ironic indeed if the public were enthused to trust and collude with a culture of representation so at variance with moves towards more open, interactive, collaborative relations elsewhere. The great challenge is not to change people so that they connect with politics, but to change politics so it connects with the people.

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