From Polarisation to Collaboration: Rethinking Political Culture

A St George's House Consultation

Thursday, 14th – Friday, 15th December 2023

REPORT

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1 Executive Summary

The *Polarisation to Collaboration* consultation was convened to explore polarisation within and around UK government, its impact on the democratic process, and ideas to create a problem-solving collaborative political culture. The consultation addressed three sub-topics: *Before Government – The Electoral Process*; *In Government – the way MPs and Lords interact with one another and the physical space of parliament; and Around Government – Media Engagement and Civil Society*. The participants brought diverse expertise and perspectives to bear on these topics. Broad consensus was reached on the most important problem areas that should be addressed.

The participant came from across the spectrum of political philosophy and the discussions included a wide range of perspectives. This report represents this broad consensus of views; however, not everyone agreed with everything said or included below. Furthermore, some participants have identified that many of the issues highlighted in discussion are already well known and being resolutions being sought.

The specific solution ideas that garnered a majority of support are listed as *headline solutions*, which are followed by more specific and diverse action ideas.

1.1 Before Government Track - Headline Solutions

- Create an electoral process that enables a greater amount of votes to count, avoids moving to a binary choice (i.e. two party politics) and re engages the electorate
- Review the candidate selection processes for both the House of Commons and the House of Lords using independent and objective selection processes and criteria
- Create a level playing field on funding for political parties

Specific action ideas:

- *Get parties to put pledges about funding transparency in their manifestos.*
- *Set up a non-binding children's election alongside the national election.*
- *Amplify obvious reforms with new candidates across all parties in areas where the current MP is stepping down.*
- *Push dialogue about electoral reform into manifestos for the upcoming election.*
- *Develop a voluntary code for parties and candidates about transparency and funding.*
- *An independent review of political funding.*
- *Conduct research on the barriers people face in deciding to become a political candidate.*
- *Create a feeder system to get younger people into politics and take them through the process.*
- *Require political parties to track the diversity markers of candidates.*

1.2 In Government Track – Headline Solutions

- Re-establish standards and codes for elected politicians which is independently overseen
- Agreed national long-term agendas around the seven items noted in the report
- Empower, fund and deliver local leadership

Specific action ideas:

- *An evaluation of the effectiveness of government decision-making on a cycle.*
- *Encourage something like the Athenian oath in British politics where politicians take responsibility to leave the polis/country in a better place than when they came in.*
- *Require a super majority from parliament in order to reject the recommendations of a committee. Alternatively create a duty for parliament to present very good reasons to reject cross-party suggestions from a committee, as well as a duty to debate the reports produced.*

- *Consider a separation of executive power and policy-making in government from legislators in parliament.*
- *Open a different conversation looking for leadership to help resolve these fundamental problems. This should start with this group who should set a goal of talking openly about these problems*
- *A statutory review of local governance structures and funding settlements.*
- *Survey public opinion on politics, perhaps through an independent institution.*
- *Make more use of institutions like the House of Commons Library, which can generate sets of facts which all parties can use as a starting point.*
- *Produce implementable plans for a new government to be ready to go on improving standards.*

1.3 Around Government Media Track – Headline Solutions

- Regulation of big tech monopolies (micro targeting, geo-accountability, online political advertising)
- Investment in public service broadcasting and non-market solutions for quality news
- Investment in local news and journalism skills

Specific action ideas:

- *Increase the power of the competition markets authority and give it more support.*
- *Introduce a subsidy for public interest media beyond the BBC.*
- *Have a royal commission on the non-market-based solutions needed to maintain high-quality journalism and public service broadcasters.*
- *Organise a public campaign to guarantee the fundamental public services we want.*

1.4 Around Government Civil Society Track – Headline Solutions

- Youth and citizen literacy on civil society, democracy, government, critical thinking and propaganda (especially foreign state media influence)
- Promote local civic assemblies that filter up to national agenda with problem solving ethos and civil code of conduct
- Shift more national funding to local government and empower local government

Specific action ideas:

- *Start PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) education earlier and make it more important in the curriculum*
- *Introduce political national service for children*
- *Collate a list of civic engagement experiments to compare and find good practice*
- *Identify not-spots, where no initiatives are occurring, rather than focussing on hotspots*
- *Introduce jury service for civic engagement, entailing funded time off from work - pilot studies for this idea should be done in the first instance*
- *Promote local civic assemblies that filter up to the national agenda with a problem-solving ethos and civil code of conduct*

2 House Background and Consultation Process

From 14th-15th December 2023, a group of key individuals working in and around the UK political system convened at St George's House, Windsor to discuss political culture. Participants included members of the House of Lords, historians, former members of parliament, employees of charities working on political culture and media, participants from the private sector, and convenors with experience of facilitating collaboration between rivals. St George's House was an ideal forum to have this discussion as it offers a safe space where participants can freely share contrasting views and opinions. This report documents a range of views expressed by various participants in the course of the consultation, including deliberately provocative views intended to inspire meaningful discussion. The contents of the report therefore do not represent the considered opinion of any individual attendee or group, or indeed the consultation members as a whole.

Participants were directed to three discussion groups over the course of the consultation.

The first considered issues broadly classed as 'Before Government', mostly meaning the electoral process, candidates and funding of party politics. Solutions offered through this stream were:

1. A significant change in the electoral process to produce fairer and less binary options and reengage voters.
2. A reform of party funding.
3. A significant change in candidate selection for both the House of Lords and the House of Commons

The second group considered issues broadly classed as 'In Government', meaning the way MPs and Lords interact with one another and the physical space of parliament and government processes. Solutions offered through this stream were:

1. Encourage honest approaches to long-term challenges, potentially by creating a long-term body like a royal commission to provide a stable environment for long-term political thinking around the key challenges faced by society.
2. Decentralise government and empower local leadership.
3. Improve trust and standards for politicians.

This group also considered:

4. Improving career progression for MPs and incentives to work together across parties.

The final discussion group considered issues broadly classed as 'Around Government', meaning on the one side media engagement with government and on the other civil society. This stream produced separate solutions for each aspect of their brief.

Media:

1. Increase big tech regulation and make social media companies as accountable as traditional broadcasters.
2. Increase and make sustainable investment in public services including non-market solutions.
3. Increase investment in local news.

Civil Society:

1. Increase literacy on civil society and democracy including foreign state interference.
2. Promote local civic groups.
3. Shift more national funding to local government. (This is discussed with group 2's suggestion to decentralise government and empower local leadership)

3 Introduction to the Consultation Topic

Participants for the consultation were drawn from a range of backgrounds. All participants moved between all three discussion groups meaning that those usually working 'before' or 'in government' (Lords and MPs) also engaged with concerns of those 'around government' (media and civil society workers). Participants were encouraged to come up with new solutions as well as consider things that have been thought of before but could have more energy behind them. The streams started by considering what was wrong, before coming up with the solutions selected for this report, and finally considering whether there were any key actions to move these forward. These actions are highlighted in bold throughout the report and listed in the conclusion. Many of these actions did not have unanimous support and the headline solutions were more widely agreed upon than specific actions. It was suggested that the consultation happened at a unique moment in time, as there will be elections next year in this country alongside at least 50% of the world's democracy, so a number of actions refer to preparation for the upcoming election.

3.1 Agreement on Scope and Terms

The title of the consultation was 'From Polarisation to Collaboration'. However, it emerged that there was no common consensus among participants on the definition of polarisation. One definition of polarisation, based on the consultation title, was simply the opposite of collaboration, that is, a lack of collaboration. However, for some participants this was problematic since it did not appear to consider the value of disagreement. These participants argued that polarisation (defined as 'non-collaboration' or 'disagreement') between politicians was a good thing because it produced high-level debate about the best way forward and a striving to do better and produce better solutions within each party.

Therefore, another argument put forward was that the consultation was aiming for a more constructive situation in parliament where good disagreement could be managed well. Polarisation, then, was defined as the kind of disagreement where those involved feel that 'I will never talk to the other side and can't be seen to'. This sort of disagreement does not lead to high-level constructive debate.

Another argument was that this is all part of a cycle where polarisation increases and creates a desire to unify, and unity creates a desire to split and take stronger stands on important issues. This argument suggests that at the moment people are looking for a catalyst to come together over, which could simply be the next general election.

There was also some attempt to define collaboration, emphasising that the consensus achieved in collaboration does not mean that everyone agrees. For some participants collaboration aims to connect with others not convince them of your viewpoint, so that you can both see what the middle ground looks like. Some participants emphasised that collaboration should be seen as a stronger position than intransigent disagreement and refusal to communicate and debate.

It was emphasised that the polarisation discussed could be between political parties, but also within political parties. When speaking about government, participants considered all institutions involved in the UK political system rather than just central government. It could also be considered within society in general, where it was suggested that it leads to rising inequality.

3.2 Positives of the UK political system

Various participants were keen to point out that the political system in the UK is not all bad and some felt that it was in fact very good. Historically, some participants argued that the UK had been a pioneer in creating a responsible government and developing religious toleration and intense diversity. It was argued that the strength of the British political system has been shown in that, compared to other countries, the constitution didn't need to be ripped up in order to accommodate

political enfranchisement and equality among social groups that had previously been disadvantaged.

Participants emphasised that care must be taken when claiming that democracy is not working in this country as the British system is still better than many others. By arguing that democracy is failing, you may play into the hands of people who want to move away from democracy. It is also important to consider how to be positive about the situation with the current political class in order to influence change rather than alienate.

Others highlighted that despite the potential rigidity of the system there is still a lot of experimentation going on within British politics.

3.3 The Problem: Adversarial set up of parliament

However, throughout the consultation a strong argument was developed, albeit alongside arguments to the contrary, that the current set up of the British parliamentary system is adversarial in nature.

Participants argued that it is difficult for smaller parties to intervene in British politics and that government in this country is set up as being about managing the opposition. The uniqueness of the shadow cabinet in this country was highlighted and it was suggested that it is hard to understand for people from other places. Some felt that the opposition see their job as being to attack government and undermine them, whereas it should be a constructive critique.

Others argued that the idea that politicians can be impartial is unrealistic. Living with controlled conflict is part of democracy, but it must be managed well to avoid violence on one side and stagnation on the other. Some suggested that this management of disagreement is the basis of the British constitution, resulting in a good system to manage conflict. However, others argued that if there is such a system, it has gone wrong. Another view was that there are structures in parliament which bring people together, but they are not being made use of.

3.3.1 In legislation

Some participants suggested that legislating in the UK is based on a binary: you either win or lose the vote. It was pointed out that votes are counted through a 'division lobby' not a 'cohesion lobby', language which encodes adversariality. This binary creates an ideological 'tug of war' over rightness and, it was suggested, makes it impossible to find complex and nuanced solutions. Some participants argued that more use should be made of super majorities to encourage governments to engage with the opposition. At the moment, some argued, the ruling government can do what it wants without seeking consensus with other parties. Instead, some argued that governments ought to see themselves as being in the business of conflict resolution rather than ruling the country.

<u>In physical space</u>

There was an argument that even the seating within the commons was adversarial as government and opposition sit on opposite sides. There were proposals that MPs could change seats every day, as in the Icelandic parliament where members choose a random ball out of a bag each day that indicates where they should sit. Others suggested simply sitting in a semicircle as in European parliament would make a difference. Some participants were concerned that this would not solve the problem and indeed people could get even more heated when seated next to someone they disagreed strongly with.

Some argued that the essential structure of political debate that needs to be broken down is the idea that a champion for each side should be picked and have it out on the public stage. Prime Ministers Questions was highlighted as a particular platform that produces a lot of anger.

3.3.2 In elections

The need for election success and popularity was another suggested cause of an adversarial environment. Some participants suggested that politicians have worked out that promoting polarisation wins them popularity. Thus, politicians exploit the human wish to divide into 'us and them'. However, others argued that it is also part of human nature to cooperate, which should encourage politicians to do more cross-party work. However, it was stressed that politicians act within the constraints of elections, which are essential to democracy, and they can't be expected to be saints when they are under constant election pressure.

However, others worried about this constant electioneering which takes precedence over the responsibilities of legislation and government. Another concern was that even successful governments sometimes store up discontent behind the scenes which explodes when they lose power.

3.3.3 Causes and results

Some felt that this adversarial set up led to almost inevitable polarisation while others argued that this was not necessarily true. It was pointed out that the British legal system is also adversarial in nature. In addition, the adversarial parliamentary system has produced agreement in the past. The situation after World War Two was pointed to, although some suggested that the adversarial political system was actually suspended after World War Two, producing a successful coalition.

Others argued that it is the country's culture rather than the political structures which leads to polarisation. The consumerist culture of Britain was highlighted and it was suggested that politics should be different since politics and democracy operate on a different logic to the market.

Still others argued that the nature of the problems faced by the country rather than the system itself produces adversarialism. It was suggested that Britain's declining economic power fuels the adversarial political situation, alongside the shifts in cultural binaries such as the reducing division between those with capital and those reliant on their own labour. Immigration and growth of and recognition of diversity within areas like gender and race may also increase tension even though it is important and desirable. It was emphasised that societies that value diversity do better than those founded on cohesion and therefore, since we don't all think the same way, a certain amount of space needs to be made for continued disagreement rather than chasing consensus all the time. A diverse society will have irreconcilable differences and the need is to give people the tools to conduct civilised debate and find consensus.

Some suggested that the creative aspect of disagreement has gone wrong because disagreement has snapped onto party divisions. There was an argument that parties are problematic, not because they create an adversarial environment but because they eliminate the adversarial approach within parties, preventing individuals from voting for causes they believe in and creating binary options based on loyalty. This has resulted in disagreement for disagreement's sake, in the opinion of some participants, and some felt the solution to this might be more polarisation, allowing serious radical disagreements to replace frivolous ones. However, others argued that the radical disagreements are there but hidden, blocked by the lack of clarity created by the system.

Some argued that we currently lack forums where big debates can be conducted sensibly, leading to this lack of clarity. They suggested that although there were good arguments on both sides of the Brexit debate there was no space where they could be aired productively, leading to a bitter division with both sides alienated. Parliament was incapable of looking at anything but a binary, resulting in a referendum which lacked any nuanced options, despite attempts being made to have indicative votes on a range of options. Others argued that referenda are always problematic when in conjunction with a first past the post system.

Others argued that debate itself is not necessary for decision making, pointing out that multinational companies do not set up debating chambers. They sought a new, less adversarial method to resolve issues. However, the definition of 'debate' was an issue as some participants felt it was an intrinsically adversarial word which sets up one side against another, suggesting that multinational boards 'discuss' rather than 'debate'. Others felt that 'debate' was good for outcomes and did not have to be binary, and indeed could produce less binary options. They would say that multinational boards did 'debate'. There was also disagreement on whether companies deal with simpler issues than government or not, with some suggesting that multinationals actually have more power than many governments.

3.3.4 Methods to create change

Participants considered a variety of methods to create change and communicate across polarisation.

One method, as mentioned above, is to connect not convince. This relies on listening to other viewpoints and learning from them. Part of this could involve reversing the highlighted shrinkage of community spaces.

Other participants suggested increasing levels of psychological safety in order to create opportunities to connect with opposing viewpoints. This would involve moving from a closed, fear-based system and mind-set, to an open one based on trust. In addition, they talked about deescalating situations to avoid the fight or flight response, which doesn't produce solutions. Some suggested that respect for others' points of view was the most important thing for de-escalation and that this was lacking in British politics.

Participants also discussed the benefits and drawbacks of massive reform or incremental change. Some considered that there is a pendulum between these approaches as circumstances change. Others argued that it is very hard to make change if you refuse to take the radical approach and that big improvements often occur only with a proper crisis. Therefore, one suggested approach was to create a case to politicians that there is a crisis now in order to trigger change, although without letting the crisis itself dictate the change. Some suggested that the argument that we are in crisis is already starting to be accepted. However, a vision will must be ready to articulate in response to the accepted crisis, perhaps with strong advocates to share that vision. Others argued that there truly is a crisis on its way and that people who benefit from a polarised system are gearing up to take advantage of it. Therefore, it is important for those interested in collaboration to also be prepared to take advantage of it.

In contrast, others suggested the need for positivity rather than doom and gloom to counteract those who benefit from polarisation. They worried about political influence from polarised politics overseas and emphasised the importance of counteracting those messages. They reminded participants that the materials for change in the political system are people.

The movement of the conversation towards a fight against people who are pushing polarisation, denoted by some participants as populists, worried other participants who felt that this narrative was itself an expression of polarisation within the consultation. Others highlighted that 'bad' movements could gain support regardless of the labels put on them, meaning that change focussed against particular groups would be ineffective anyway. Some participants suggested thinking more deeply about how to talk to the 'losers' in any change, as they will continue to have a profound impact on the 'winners'.

Some participants promoted starting from the current position despite the need for a big change. They emphasised that prioritisation is necessary. Small things, described as 'low-hanging fruit', should be done even when aiming towards radical reform. Some participants added that when changing systems it is best to ride the old system until you are ready to discard it entirely. Others

aimed for a snowball effect, or 'strategic incrementalism', meaning to have a big vision for change but do things in a steady practical way.

Some worried that when scaling small changes, good practice could be lost when it gets too big. Replicating good practice in similar sized pockets was suggested as a solution, rather than scaling it to cover the whole system.

However, others worried that in systems change, any change made may be undermined by something left unchanged. They suggested a big framework with lots of small things in it ensuring that you don't change one thing without changing the many things connected to it. Moreover, it is not always best to have everyone working together on one change. Nevertheless, the importance of working together to create change was stressed: individuals cannot do anything on their own.

Others continued to argue for a 'big bang' overhaul where everything would change at once and this wouldn't be an issue. Such a 'big bang' change might require a referendum or a constitutional assembly of the people. However, others warned of the danger of imagining that a big change would be a perfect fix, which they did not think would be true. In addition, even if those orchestrating the big change did not believe it was perfect, those observing the change might. They might then think that the problem was not urgent anymore resulting in inertia.

3.3.5 Turkeys and Christmas

Another worry was that every solution considered in this consultation boiled down to making demands of people who don't want to do what is asked. As it was December, there was frequent mention of making turkeys vote for Christmas. Others argued that the point is not to get the turkeys to vote for Christmas but to get the public to vote that there must be Christmas. There needs to be a force greater than self-interest.

The question was what pressure would make this happen. Some suggested that the only big sovereignty issue that has recently been decided, Brexit, was decided due to UKIP's pressure on the Conservatives. Others suggested making the ideas current and part of public conversation until those concerned can't ignore it anymore. This would involve presenting ideas in memorable ways and pushing them into public consciousness until people think it has just got to happen.

3.3.6 This moment in time

Practically, participants suggested taking action on influencing manifestos, as there was an election due soon. However, others argued that it was too late for that, as the process of influencing manifestos had been going on throughout the year and was almost over. Instead, they argued, people should influence the new government when it comes in. Others added that the upcoming election will be defensive not offensive, so manifestos will be cautious not bold. Therefore, campaigning for a political reset should wait until a new government is formed. One focus of this campaign could be drawing a distinction between the new government against what previous governments have been and suggesting that a big reform of the political system could be a good way for them to show how different they are.

For some, there was learning even from the communication that occurred in the consultation on how to make these changes. In some groups it was hard to reach agreement on the solutions and actions to take. However, there was sometimes agreement on headlines even when the details were hard to agree. There was agreement on the frame but not on what to put in the frame. Some therefore suggested that the vision needs to emphasise what we have in common, while allowing for different ways to get there.

4 Track One - Before Government: Electoral Process

4.1 A significant change in the electoral process to produce fairer and less binary options and reengage voters

4.1.1 Electoral Reform

Many participants considered that the 'first past the post' system in the UK problematic. However, although this topic is presented first in this report, some were surprised that it was not actually brought up until fairly late in the consultation. Participants explained that electoral reform did not need much discussion as it was not new and had been suggested for a long time. Others emphasised that electoral reform will not be a fundamental solution to the problems faced and that it would be dangerous to think that it would be. However, many participants felt that proportional representation could reengage voters by offering fairer and less binary options and create input from more parties.

Ending elections altogether was discussed as an extreme way of resolving problems produced by politicians' focus on electioneering, such as what some participants considered an inherent conflict between what you do to get elected and the best interests of the country. Whilst this was a useful discussion to understand some of the difficulties representative democracy can bring, it was universally dismissed as a plausible solution.

Some participants criticised the newly introduced voter IDs, which they argued were widening gaps in the electorate. They suggested the requirement should therefore be removed again, although this was not agreed by all. Some argued for automatic voter registration to counter these widening gaps. There was a suggestion to introduce fines for not voting, but some felt that this would be inherently undemocratic.

Some participants wondered whether children should vote. It was suggested that young people look at the world in a different way. Some participants suggested holding a non-binding children's election alongside the national election. Others wondered whether older people should lose the right to vote. There was no agreement on changing the voting age, however.

A challenge suggested by some participants was that politicians and activists hold stereotypes about voters, including assuming that when people vote against them this is due to lack of understanding. However, there are other factors at play in how people vote. Some participants suggested that electoral engagement could be improved by creating and listening to more citizen assemblies rather than necessarily changing the way we vote. This is discussed further in the section on promoting local civic groups. Others argued that changing the voting system is starting too low down in the process and the real problems are higher upstream.

There was a strong feeling that dialogue about electoral reform should be pushed to get it into manifestos for the upcoming election.

Another suggested action was to amplify obvious reforms with new candidates across all parties in areas where the current MP is stepping down.

4.1.2 Parties

Participants raised many concerns related to parties. Some of these will be discussed in later sections but participants stressed that problems with parties emerge from the electoral system we have. Some argued that our system is designed for just two parties: the party in government and the shadow cabinet.

Some problems with the electoral process are also enhanced by the party system. Some participants argued that there is a tension between MPs being elected by their constituents and

then being under the power of whips rather than able to represent their constituents. However, some suggested that the power of whips also initially arises from the electoral system, since candidates need to be loyal to a party to get elected in the first place. Although candidates can stand without a party, they are then unlikely to be elected. This is discussed further in the section on candidate selection.

There was also concern about centrism in parties at the moment, where all the parties are essentially offering the same thing, meaning voters have little real choice. Some argued that this is because there isn't enough money available at the moment for parties to realistically offer different policies. Others felt it was due was to a societal liberal meta-consensus based on class and education and offering no space to dissent. However, other participants argued that there has not been any convergence between parties and that the Conservatives and Labour are further apart than they have been before, especially the sections of Labour that supported Corbyn.

Some participants queried why coalitions are so little practised and why people are wary of them. Others argued that coalitions should only be used in times of real crisis like a war.

4.2 A reform of party funding

4.2.1 Political Funding

Participants argued for the need to create a level playing field for elections, potentially by providing central, tax-payer funded financing for political parties to replace current party fundraising operations. However, others argued that levelling funding is a problem because different parties operate in different ways, which may require more or less funding. They argued that greater transparency was most important, so that there is knowledge available about what is going on. Therefore, they suggested getting parties to put pledges about funding transparency in their manifestos. It was stressed that there are already initiatives happening around this, which could be brought together to give them more power. A coalition was already being formed around this. Others suggested developing a voluntary code for parties and candidates about transparency and funding.

Although parties are only allowed to spend £20 million on their election campaign, they are allowed to spend as much as they like until the election period starts. The spending limit has also recently been doubled and some participants worried that the UK is heading towards holding very expensive elections like the US.

Some participants suggested that big businesses get too much political influence through funding parties. There was a suggestion that companies who receive grants should not be allowed to put money into politics and parties who receive donations should not be allowed to give grants to the business they received from for a set time. A ban on being made a Lord if you have given too much money to a party was also suggested, with the reasons discussed further in the next section on candidate selection.

There was discussion of where to draw the line with large donors. Some participants suggested that there are currently very easy workarounds to get around the law. Some pointed to crowd funder schemes where large donations can be divided into smaller donations which don't need due diligence. There was a suggestion that the reporting threshold should be decreased as parties still don't have to do due diligence on quite high donations. Others argued that people will find ways to fiddle any limit, but making it harder might be good.

Some participants suggested a reclarification of the rules about foreign funding as they are currently hard to understand. Some proposed an overall independent review of political funding.

The monetary value of media coverage was another issue. Participants suggested that at the moment the media can do what they like but that partisan media coverage during elections should be banned.

There was some discussions of fixed terms and salaries for MPs and political candidates, but this is addressed in the section on improving career progression for MPs.

4.3 A significant change in candidate selection for both the House of Lords and the House of Commons

4.3.1 Selection Process

Participants argued that many people are blocked out of the House of Commons, for example, if you candidates in a constituency which has had the same MP for a long time. Others are blocked by the costs of being a candidate or having to take time off work or find childcare. Another worry may be about the life commitment, as it is not easy to leave without 'letting down' the party. The risks associated with social media as a politician are an additional issue. Still others may be put off by the need to pick a party, especially as in some constituencies you just won't be elected if you pick the wrong party. Some wondered how proportional representation might affect candidate selection here. There may also be people who don't recognise this as an option for them, and young people especially may not consider being a candidate since they have only just been allowed to vote.

However, some participants stressed the need for actual research on what these barriers are for people, rather than guessing and imagining. It was suggested that politicians have normally overcome all the barriers that prevent people going into politics and so may find it hard to imagine how someone who gives up feels about these things. In 2018, research of this sort was done around women by the Fawcett Society, resulting in the campaign Ask Her to Stand, based on the discovery that women were more likely to conceive of going into politics if someone close to them suggested it.[1] Additionally, in 2021 research by the Government Equalities Office discovered significant barriers to disabled people entering politics an noted that a representative parliament would have 65 disabled MPs in the House of Commons; following the 2017 general election, it had 5.[2]

Participants suggested improving education and leadership to encourage people to consider going into politics. This is discussed further in the section on political literacy. Others suggested a feeder system to get younger people in and take them through the process.

Some suggested more use of open primaries to open up the selection process. It was suggested that this would reduce the power of the whip.

The tasks you have to complete to become a candidate were considered problematic by some. For example, people may have to spend a long time putting newspapers through doors, which some argued was simply about building loyalty. Participants suggested that instead the journey to becoming an MP should reflect the tasks of being an MP (see section on improving career progression for MPs).

There was broad agreement that there is a lack of transparency about candidate selection, although there might be a change here soon for example if Section 106 of the Equality Act were to be implemented.

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[1] https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/strategies-for-success; https://5050parliament.co.uk/ask-her-to-stand/.
Barriers to elected office for disabled people - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk);
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people

4.3.2 Parties

Within this, the power of parties was a big concern, from discouraging people from standing if they are in an area where they won't be elected without joining a party they disagree with, to the loyalty-building hoops that candidates have to jump through to reach the polling stage.

Participants were not keen to abolish political parties, especially since some considered that they simply grow out of the political system we have and can't be legislated away. However, many participants wanted to limit the power of whips and the party machine. Others searched for a new organising principle in parties which would allow members of parties to do things like share information, lend their vote, or advocate in the media for a cause they believe in.

4.3.3 Candidate selection beyond elections

Participants expressed concern that it is party members who choose the party leaders and they are most extreme supporters of the party. However, others pointed out that there is a filtration process before party members get the choice.

Some participants pointed to selection and reselection being weaponised by the Conservatives in recent challenges to the Prime Minister.

Participants were also concerned that the political system can take good candidates and do bad things to them to make them fit the mould. However, it was highlighted that there are a lot of very good people in parliament.

4.3.4 Quality of Candidates

Participants worried about the nature of people going into politics. It was suggested that many lack experience of real life and are just interested in politics as a game. Some argued for abolishing Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE), which is the degree by which many people now enter politics. They felt that the PPE degree created a sense of pointlessness among politicians. Others argued that the degree was a good way to reduce the classist nature of politics, however it has meant that people no longer have experience of the outside world to apply to legislation. Another suggestion was to create a system where it is not so easy to get into politics at a young age, although this would further disenfranchise young people.

Others argued that the type of people going into the House of Commons is too narrow. This came back to the question of barriers for certain people to go into politics, discussed above. Participants suggested requiring political parties to track the diversity markers of candidates.

Some participants asked whether people who think politicians are trustworthy go into politics or not.

4.3.5 House of Lords

Overall, discussion about the House of Lords and potential reform was measured; however, there were some notable and strong positions held by participants. Some criticised the House of Lords for being stuck in the past, while others argued that the Lords do a lot of collaborative work and work on the detail of legislation. They were suggested to be a good refining chamber that is more out of the public eye than the Commons. However, others were in favour of 'blowing up' the House of Lords and replacing it with a citizen assembly, perhaps selected through the same system as jury service, and a pool of experts for committees.

Some participants emphasised that now might not be the time to radically reform the House of Lords as they felt that the more traditional institutions, like the Lords and the Monarch, are the only things holding the country back from slipping further away from democracy. They stressed that the controls that are less polarised than other parts of the system should not be thrown out. Others argued for keeping the best bits of the House of Lords while removing those that are causing

reputational damage, for example, replacing the Bishops with multi-faith leaders and reducing the male hereditary peers.

Regardless, participants were concerned about the quality of people appointed to the House of Lords and the impact of uncontrolled appointments. It was stressed that the current Appointments Committee is only titular if the Prime Minister has a veto. Some argued for an equal split across all parties in the Lords and others advocated regional representation. Some suggested more regulation and independent quality control. However, others argued that it would be tricky to set criteria for assessing the quality of appointments. Some even suggested that the range of criteria for Lords' appointments should be broadened to increase diversity.

There was discussion of introducing voting for Lords, but some suggested that it was good to have an unelected house to avoid the electioneering problems discussed earlier and avoid people getting voted for based on celebrity status. Lords are also longer term because they are unelected and can therefore work on more long-term problems and solutions. However, other participants suggested that there should be term limits on Lords, albeit long ones such as fifteen years. This might enable people to delay acceptance of a Lordship until they felt they could best contribute. Candidates in the House of Lords may also worry about the commitment of being a life peer as you cannot just leave if it gets too much.

Whilst the practice of 'selling' seats in the House of Lords is against the law, too often an impression is created that this is still happening in practice. A newspaper investigation was cited which found the last 20 donors to give more than £3m to the Conservative Party had gone on to be ennobled[3] which reduces confidence in the integrity of appointments. Some participants suggested a veto on certain candidates to reduce this, for example you would not be allowed to be a Lord if you have given large donations, as mentioned above.

New Tory sleaze row as donors who pay £3m get seats in House of Lords (thetimes.co.uk); https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/new-tory-sleaze-row-as-donors-who-pay-3m-get-seats-in-house-of-lords-2575s6jmp

5 Track Two - In Government: the way MPs and Lords interact with one another and the physical space of parliament

5.1 Encourage honest approaches to long term challenges, potentially by creating a long-term body like a royal commission to provide a stable environment for long-term political thinking around the key challenges faced by society

Health

Industrial Strategy

Education

Infrastructure

Responsibility to the World

Democracy

Wellbeing

Net Zero

Reduce Inequality

Participants considered whether there could be a cross-party common agenda, like there was after World War Two, but around climate change and some other long-term problems. Five challenges were initially suggested: Health, Industrial Strategy, Education, Infrastructure, and Responsibility to the World. Other participants added Democracy to the list of priorities and others suggested Wellbeing, the Good Life, and How to Measure it. It was felt that all the challenges should be aligned with Net Zero and others added Reducing Inequality as an overarching aim.

The group suggested creating a long-term body like a royal commission to work on these issues. The body would have the power to put people on the spot about actually addressing the challenges that the country is facing and should ensure that after each parliamentary term there has been a step forward.

Participants stressed the need to be aware of the 'world out there' and not just focus on our own problems. Some suggested encouraging a common vision such as 'we need a safe future'. Others argued that the electorate should set the vision.

Some participants warned that the Climate Change Law and the agreement on Overseas Aid both tried to build such a common consensus but both have been destroyed in recent years.

5.1.1 Role of Committees and Commissions

It was suggested that these long-term challenges should be addressed through a royal commission or select committee with enhanced powers, as some suggested that currently these bodies lack teeth. Participants suggested that select committees play a strong role in developing cross-party work and militate against polarisation, although there was a worry that the people who get called before select committees are very politicised. Others acknowledged that they commissions and committees do often result in MPs working productively together, but questioned what power, exposure, or credit they have. The intelligence and Liaison Committees were considered to be the only ones that have any degree of power, so participants considered how to enhance the power of committees. One suggestion was to require a super majority from parliament in order to reject the recommendations of a committee. Another was to create a duty for parliament to present very good reasons to reject cross-party suggestions from a committee, as well as a duty to debate the reports produced. It was argued that the amount of work done by committees should be acknowledged by requiring high-level arguments for objecting to their conclusions.

Some participants pointed to the Victorian period, when the drivers of reform were committees, as a good model to consider. In the 19th century there was a lot of work around welfare and that is becoming a big problem again. Some argued that the success of these 19th century committees grew out of using them as a space to produce legislation, not hold ministers to account.

Cross-party commissions or committees were also considered to be a good way to reduce the power of whips and demotivate people from following them blindly.

Some suggested that it is currently very difficult to set up Royal Commissions or Speakers Conferences for parties to come together over an issue, and wondered why.

5.1.2 Short termism

Participants worried that UK politics is very short term, but fundamental problems, such as pensions or climate change, are long term and don't fit the political cycle. Some participants commented that other countries such as China and Singapore can't get their heads around the short-term cycle of British politics.

Some participants felt that elections drive short-term thinking by creating an us-and-them mind-set. They suggested that when a new government comes in they will tear everything up at the beginning of their term, and the expectation is that the next person will tear up everything they have done when they lose power, although this was acknowledged to be a slight exaggeration. Others added that the almost fifty-fifty splits resulting in the passing of many policies drive the notion that the next party can just tear them up. As a result, the country seems to be constantly stepping forwards and then back, while politicians focus on short-term wins not long-term challenges. Instead, policies should be for the greater good rather than about gaining power. Longer-term buy in is needed from all parties, although there was a suggestion that this could happen at either national or regional levels.

Some were concerned about the frequent reshuffling of cabinet meaning there are some ministers who have had five cabinet jobs in a year. One suggestion was to introduce ministerial terms so that ministers have to remain in post for a certain amount of time. However, this could be a problem if government priorities change or someone just isn't right for the post. Others suggested there needs to be a structural change at the top of government to avoid ministerial churn. Perhaps more resilience needs to be built in at the top of government departments. Some argued for a longer-term leader at the top of government, referred to as an 'elected dictator', perhaps following the French model. Other participants suggested also looking at civil service churn as this might be more easily controlled through changing how quickly rotation occurs. Another suggestion was to introduce departmental CEOs and revise the role of the permanent secretary.

Some suggested there should be an evaluation of the effectiveness of government decision-making on a cycle. Another suggestion was to encourage something like the Athenian oath in British politics where politicians take responsibility to leave the polis/country in a better place than when they came in. However, others suggested that there is currently no common agreement on the way forward so this will remain hard to achieve. Still others argued that a lack of resilience in UK politics may mean that parties will have to come together whether they like it or not following a sudden shock.

Participants suggested that rewards or incentives for collaboration and long-term planning are needed, including highlighting and giving credit when long-term processes have worked well. It is important to find approaches that outlive short-term political cycles and drag people away from their short-term concerns. This is discussed more in the section on improving career progression for MPs.

The need for honesty in government in order to even admit big problems was stressed. However, some questioned how honest politicians should be about the situation the country is in – is it a good idea to be brutally honest with people? This issue is discussed further in the section on improving trust and standards for politicians.

5.1.3 Problems with the legislative process

Participants argued that the legislative process was a problem in dealing with long-term challenges. It was suggested that if a government wants to show it is doing something, it makes a new bill, resulting in a legislative environment that is very hyperactive compared to other countries as well as very oppositional. In this view, the purpose of legislation is to show the public that you are pushing something important through the Houses, rather than trying to bring people together around it. Some participants suggested that increasingly bills are being brought to parliament half-drafted. Others considered that legislation is being seen through a lens of magical thinking, where a new bill is seen as the answer to every question and introduced to solve every issue, rather than considering other approaches. Others pointed to the rise of ill-considered referenda, which they suggested were used to duck decisions and throw the question to the courts or the public instead.

Some suggested that over recent years politicians have become more interested in politics than government. This was suggested to be due to a lack of big issues demanding collaboration and strong policy-making. Others argued that it was really due to parties refusing to address the big issues that are there. One solution suggested was to create a separation of executive power and policy-making in government so that legislators in parliament would not be able to hold office. This is discussed further under Improving Career Progression for MPs.

Others suggested the legislative process needs to be more transparent, including more lobbying transparency. Some suggested following the Irish model on lobbying transparency laws.

Participants also worried that UK policy-making is based on who can make the best argument, not what is the truth. This is discussed further in the section on improving trust and standards for politicians.

Some participants were concerned that the parliamentary system has become increasingly more rigid compared to looseness before. They pointed to the rigidity of manifestos when the situation changes, arguing that politicians feel that the manifesto says one thing so the real world cannot intrude. This makes parliament less equipped for the big challenges that are coming. A solution suggested was to encourage a view where MPs cannot be the sole arbiters of why people voted for them.

A final suggestion was to open a different conversation looking for leadership to help resolving these fundamental problems. This should start with this group who should set a goal of talking openly about these problems.

5.2 Decentralise government and empower local leadership

It was suggested that geography shapes politics more than we think. Participants argued that there used to be more devolved power and this gave energy to local government. However, this has been destroyed by recent governments, resulting in a lack of energy in local decisions.

Some participants suggested that MPs' regional representation should be enhanced by devolving power to regional clusters of MPs who can work together. This arose from doubts about whether MPs have the ability to serve their localities currently. By decentralising, genuine representation of local areas can be ensured. However, it was also suggested that if local leadership became more vibrant there would be less need for MPs to spend time working with their constituency, allowing them to focus on government and legislation.

Some argued for regional devolution and an increase in Mayors for urban areas. Others felt that parishes used to do a lot and there should be a return of that. Still others suggested that maintaining what we do have is being neglected.

Another suggestion was that a cultural shift would be needed, replacing a hierarchical and rules-based organisation of society into a devolution of society down to grass roots. Currently there is a top-down centralised structure. It was suggested that decisions should be made at the lowest possible point in the hierarchy. Non-conventional solutions will be needed. One suggestion was an increase of grassroots involvement in civic matters and the local press. The Flatpack democracy movement in Froome was suggested as a good model for increasing local power.[4]

Others highlighted that what is missing for local communities to solve problems is money. They argued that without fiscal devolution there is no devolution, as if you don't have financial powers, you have very few powers. This problem is evident since many local governments are going bankrupt. It was argued that the UK has a more centralised way of holding onto money to solve problems, rather than it being shared out and decentralised as in other European countries. For example, it was suggested that in the UK providing local funding falls to charities. Another description of the situation was that the UK distributes tax to local government while countries like Germany raise local tax, producing an argument that local taxes should be for local action and there should be more local retention of taxes to fund public services. Others wanted more national funding shifted to local government. However, still others warned that, regardless of the distribution model, the money is going to have to be taken from somewhere where it is currently being used. A statutory review of local governance structures and funding settlements was called for.

5.2.1 Local leadership

Participants argued that an increase in underrepresented backgrounds is needed in local leadership, especially because local leaders may end up entering parliament eventually. There was an argument for a focus on empowering those that are underrepresented in the system. It was suggested that local politics is a good way to ensure proper levels of inclusion. In addition, some argued that councillors need a pay rise.

Others suggested that local accountability also needs to be improved. Particularly, local leaders should have reporting functions to avoid backsliding and delay when there is a change of minister, as this can result in local decisions not being pushed through to completion. Some suggested that national government should set missions but empower local government to execute solutions in a way that allows for local variance.

However, there was also emphasis that the major problems faced are global and a solution needs to take this into account so local changes need to lead to global influence. The question is how can these changes percolate up? Some participants argued that there has been a vision shrinkage of the UK into itself resulting from Brexit. They asked how can next generation be expansive and start building narratives of outward engagement and pride in where we are in the world?

5.3 Improve trust and standards for politicians

5.3.1 Public Trust

Participants argued that in recent years the public have become more conscious of problems with the way government works. Some suggested that there is desperate discontent with what is going on at the moment and distrust in government. Some argued that there is public concern about governments being more populist than conviction based.

Participants argued for a need to reset public expectations around politics, with an emphasis that collaboration is a good thing. Others felt that opening up and involving citizens in decisions was key to improving trust. This will be discussed further in the section on local civic groups. Others

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[4] https://www.demsoc.org/public-square/articles/flatpack-democracy-reclaiming-local-politics.

felt that a wholesale transformation of the system was the best way to increase trust, as discussed in the introduction.

The role of the media in this was highlighted, as the public see the way the media present politics and collaboration and don't see any of the good work that is being done. This is discussed further in the section on increasing big tech regulation.

Some participants highlighted the economic underpinnings of this, pointing out that we are in economic crisis. They argued that the economic situation is producing a build-up of rage and this is expressed in demands for constitutional change, with a fundamental demand to change the political leadership. They suggested that unless we change nature of political arguments to fit this economic underpinning we will get nowhere.

There was concern about the danger of group think in the room when thinking about how to increase trust. They argued that people are just trying to get on with their lives and are very susceptible to messages about interference from the elite. Others emphasised that you can't essentialise human nature to being susceptible to wrong messages, as human beings are also critical and cooperative.

A suggested action was to survey public opinion on politics, perhaps through an independent institution. Some participants felt it would be good if the public could access the results themselves and it was available for the media to use.

5.3.2 Lack of Honesty

There was a feeling that politicians are avoiding honest debate. Participants argued that this is a growing concern and that people are crying out for more honesty and integrity in politics. Some suggested that arguments around Brexit, for example, are a false debate as it has never really been about Europe. Instead, decisions about Brexit are rooted in profound social, cultural, and educational differences. Some participants were very concerned that in the next election candidates will not be telling the truth.

Some suggested that politicians are not able to disagree, fail, or give a straight answer, and that they need these abilities. At the moment nobody wants to concede when they make a mistake and might need help or introspection. Others argued that politicians should be honest about how difficult their jobs are and what the constraints are. Attention was drawn to the need to create psychological safety so that politicians can speak their truth.

Others argued for better fact checking and visibility of fact checking. One suggestion was to make more use of institutions, like the House of Commons Library, which can generate sets of facts which all parties can use as a starting point. There was some concern about a focus on fact checking producing a chilling effect on debate.

Some participants suggested caution about the word 'transparency', which was used in relation to party funding and candidate selection. They argued that it can be a catch all term covering a wide variety of issues. It is important to be clear about what sort of transparency is needed and to what end. Others similarly emphasised the need to be realistic about the situation now and that some transparency was better than none. However, some felt that a call for more honesty and integrity should be straightforward and there was no need to reinvent the wheel.

The difficulty of finding the truth in media coverage was a related concern which will be discussed in the section on increasing political literacy.

5.3.3 Behaviour of Politicians

Improving standards among politicians was thought to be closely linked to improving public trust Some worried that MPs lack awareness that a central part of their function is to maintain trust in a

democratic system. Participants argued for including the civil service in this as levels of trust in civil servants may differ from politicians.

It was emphasised that the way politicians behave influences how the populace think about appropriate behaviour. Therefore, kindness and empathy should be part of the political environment. At the moment, participants suggested that it takes a lot of courage to stand up compassionately in politics.

There was, thus, much discussion on whether to increase the enforcement of rules in parliament. A return to values-based politics was advocated by some. These participants argued that the rules of behaviour in parliament are complex, lack oversight and operate on trust. However, in recent years that trust has been broken and therefore some felt that more stick than carrot would be needed. They argued for the legal enforcement of good conduct in the House of Commons and Lords, and especially sanctions with real bite for lobbying transparency infractions (see section on reform of party funding). Others argued that the tighter the rules are, the more poor behaviour there would be. For example, they suggested that the Nolan principles have created scope for more poor behaviour since once the rules are written down people can find ways to work around them, or feel that they are free to misbehave in ways that are not mentioned in the principles. Others argued that there was worse behaviour before the Nolan principles came in, which prompted them to be introduced.

Some pointed out that it can be very time-consuming or financially draining to comply with strict regulations, giving the example of businesses that struggle to comply with anti-bribery or corruption regulations and would much prefer a value-based system. However, others suggested that research shows that both values and rules are needed and, particularly when you are trying to change culture and values, you do need some stick as well as carrot. Some described it as needing to police the parts of human nature that will not always do the right thing.

5.3.4 Who should regulate behaviour?

Others were worried about the idea of non-elected civil servants sitting judgement over elected MPs, especially where they might be perceived as an 'elite' group. However, the argument against this was that there is no other sector where those who will benefit from it are responsible for regulating the system. In addition, a related concern was that the party machine can push people out of parliament without the people who elected them having a say. Currently the Prime Minister has ultimate power to regulate behaviour, but there is no clear way to deal with a Prime Minister who does not behave well, or does not regulate his ministers' behaviour well. Some suggested that inconsistencies in the way a Prime Minister deals with ethics fuel media storms around politicians' bad behaviour. Some participants felt that it was upside-down that there is now a Parliamentary Standards Commissioner enforcing the House of Commons code of conduct, but nothing similar for ministers apart from the Prime Minister's whip. One suggested solution was to have an elected assembly separate to parliament to regulate parliament. Others argued that parliament's function anyway is to regulate the government, not to run the country. They suggested that this is the basis of the UK system and why it has lasted so long.

This led to the question of whether to codify the UK constitution to limit certain powers and define the duty of government. Some argued that we are currently in constitutional chaos with battles being fought between parliamentary sovereignty and the supreme court and that this problem goes beyond misbehaviour of politicians. Others felt that the duties and responsibilities of government should transcend a written constitution. Still others were concerned about the difficulty of regulating a system where people are subject to the pressures of election.

It was emphasised that any Commissions in this area need to be statutory. Some emphasised the need for implementable plans for a new government to be ready to go on improving standards

5.4 Improving career progression for MPs and incentives to work together across parties

5.4.1 Role of an MP

Participants questioned whether MPs are asked to do too much. It was highlighted that it takes vastly different skills to legislate, work with constituents, or be in the cabinet. Some argued that work with constituents is necessary for all MPs to act as a reality check. However, others questioned whether cabinet members actually do any work with constituents. Some argued that the workload on ministers is too high and not a reasonable expectation. There was an argument for making a distinction between legislative and executive roles in parliament, see the section on long-term challenges.

The tasks preparing people for candidacy were suggested to be not fit for purpose as they are based on party loyalty not skills development, see the section on candidate selection. Some suggested there is an overall lack of guidance for MPs, with no job description. Some suggested there should be more skills development as MPs approach promotion, and others that more training should be provided for both ministers and MPs, especially in preparation for a new parliament. Some suggested introducing a compulsory training budget for politicians to normalise continuous learning.

Some participants criticised the constant moving of department in government, suggesting it does not help with collaborative efforts, as discussed under the section on long-term planning.

Pay was considered and some suggested looking at the compensation package for MPs and local leaders. Participants argued for candidates to have salaries because not being paid is prohibitive. Additional jobs of politicians were a concern and some suggested increasing the ban on ministers taking advisory roles. However, others wondered whether allowing additional jobs should be considered in order to enable MPs to have another, more reliable, source of income.

Some participants wanted to decouple the role of an MP from the whip. They felt that it was not right that whips sit in cabinet and are paid more. These things could be removed to make being a whip a harder job and discourage parties from using them.

5.4.2 Incentives

Participants wondered what the incentives are when politicians operate in parliament. One was suggested to be advancing their career. Economic incentives were considered a strong blocker to change. Some suggested rewards are currently based on loyalty and party politicisation, with a fine line between loyalty and blind obedience.

Particularly, participants considered what incentives there are for opposition MPs to be supportive of government motions, or for politicians to work together at all. Some argued that, in fact, MPs tend to be 'people people' who want to collaborate, but the system does not reward them for that. In fact, some participants suggested that it is currently seen as a failure if you cooperate.

Some worried that there are no incentives in the system to build an evidence-based case – instead the goal is to have a clearly distinct statement from others. A similar worry was that there is nothing in the system that encourages addressing existential issues.

The control of parliamentary time and the whip system were considered to be a big problem by some participants. Some suggested that parties have been looking for ways to increase leverage over their members and the control has got tighter and tighter. They argued that parliamentarians prioritise tribes, gangs and self-interest over the interests of the nation. Some suggested that the incentives created by a sense of responsibility have been lost, especially through perceived political irresponsibility over issues like Brexit. They argued that people leading the government

are no longer in the service of others but self-serving and the main incentive is political self-interest. This also means that politicians follow their own agenda rather than responding to popular opinion.

Others argued that the system is geared to win votes and that is the main incentive. They suggested that to win politically you must divide people. Instead, some argued for the creation of a unity party based on values. Social media was considered to add to this, with politicians needing to win online too.

6 Track Three (a) - Around Government: Media Engagement with Government

6.1 Increase big tech regulation and make social media companies as accountable as traditional broadcasters.

6.1.1 Traditional Media

Participants suggested that there is growing distrust in the media, related to the idea of post-truth. Some suggested regulations on media, including the broadcasting code were outdated. They argued for a fresh look at media regulations. Some considered better regulation was needed to address fake news.

Participants wondered how media published on the internet gets regulated. Big technology companies were thought to need more regulation to make them as accountable as traditional broadcasters. Participants were worried about the accountability of both technology companies and traditional media. Some argued for increased values and ethics-based order for media supported by clearer regulations. Others felt that the culture in media and social media is what needs to change, and while policies and laws can help, the problem is really cultural. Another difficulty raised was that tech moves so fast that regulating it is very difficult.

Some raised concern about media offshore ownership. They were worried about where the money was coming from and who had control. Some felt that foreign influence on media undermines our identity and threatens our values. They argued that there needs to be more awareness of this, which is discussed further in the section on education. Some felt that while the media market needs more regulation, non-market solutions also need to be found, particularly for finance. This is discussed further in the next section.

Some participants were worried about monopolies in technology. They argued for a crackdown on the power of forming monopolies in order to retain the power to regulate these companies before they get too big. Micro-targeting, geo-accountability, and political advertising were particular concerns in this area. One suggestion was to increase the power of the competition markets authority and give it more support. Some participants pointed out that the argument technology firms use to support their buying out of other companies is that it drops the price for the consumer, however it was felt this should not be a priority.

Transparency was an important consideration, particularly concerning finances and editorial control.

6.1.2 Social Media

It was suggested that there used to be a hierarchy around who could speak about their opinions, but now everyone is a publisher. Some participants argued that most people don't have the necessary skills. Some also felt that anonymity online was a problem as some people feel it makes it ok to rant and shout at people. Additionally, some pointed to the issue of people retweeting things they would not say themselves, as retweeting can be an instant reaction without a great deal of thought. Participants worried that people misbehave online in a way that they wouldn't when face to face and behave irresponsibly. They argued that we need to establish a much stronger ethics and values-based order to replace inevitable loss of hierarchy and rules-based order. However, others were concerned about the delicate balance of regulation with freedom. Some argued for more focus on resilience, to help people respond more appropriately to an unrestricted social media environment.

For politicians in particular, some participants felt that when everyone has a platform to express their views they see no need to collaborate. Social media bubbles and the amplification of one's own opinions were a concern. Bubbles mean that you continually get more of what you choose to

look at, so you believe that everyone thinks the same way you do. Some felt that these bubbles need breaking down, and particularly the 'Westminster bubble'. Participants were worried that many people now get their news from social media and this is not equipped to filter fact from fiction. Others considered it a problem that there is a channel on social media for every conceivable thought rather than these thoughts being more curated. This was described as a 'splinternet' where splintered groups amplify each other. Participants emphasised that social media companies also monetise this as click-throughs increase with conflict and the polarity of the views expressed.

Another issue was that politicians face a challenge in finding respect among the public because their life is lived in full view of the media. However, others felt that destructive media content is a result of the weakness of parliament.

One more positive thought was suggested: that technology is able to connect anyone so could be a tool to build consensus.

6.2 Increase and make sustainable investment in public services including non-market solutions

Some participants argued that big news organisations are struggling financially, partly due to the impact of the internet. Traditional media has suffered immensely with their revenue streams and are looking for new income streams. This is a problem because it was suggested that polarised news involving argument and conflict sells. Particularly, the media was thought to capitalise on wedge issues. This gives the public a particular view of what politics is about. Some participants gave the example of the dramatization of the Rwanda bill, where the media presented lots of different groups going to talk to the Prime Minister as a problem, whereas it was exactly what should be happening. This focus also creates a more pressurised environment among those producing and selecting media.

Therefore, it was argued that a better funding model for media is needed. Participants felt it was important to maintain independent public broadcasting, as the more it withers away the more space is left for polarising media. They argued that funding for public service news needs invigorating. The basic funding model for the BBC (the license fee) is under threat. Some participants felt there was a need for a subsidy for public interest media beyond the BBC. One suggestion was for a royal commission on the non-market-based solutions needed to maintain high-quality journalism and public service broadcasters. Others suggested a public campaign to guarantee the fundamental public services we want.

Others argued for more local control of money and funding for media, as discussed below.

6.3 Increase investment in local news

Participants suggested that local news vanishing because the financial model of local press is not working well. However, some argued that these financial issues can be addressed. They suggested that local content should be owned by local producers and companies like Google should not be able to rip this content off local sites to display on its search engine. Laws against this need to be enforced.

Some participants claimed that local press has traditionally been a good buffer against polarising news. Additionally, they suggested that people recognise the value of local news as translator of national news into what is relevant locally. The removal of local news means national news takes up more space in people's understanding of politics, pushing people towards tactical voting focussed on the biggest parties rather than which MP would best represent their local interests.

Participants wondered how to incentivise, invest in, facilitate, and support local dissemination of news. Some argued that politicians and civil society themselves need to engage more with local

media and not fall into thinking that you won't get as much bang for your buck from local news as national.

Representation in media was a related concern. Participants worried that we have only got white conservative men from both sides on TV. These were argued to absorb all the community arguments into their debates and give lots of false information rather than being representative and collaborative. Participants argued that we are a more diverse society so need to support alternative media.

7 Track Three (b) - Around Government: Civil Society

7.1 Increase literacy on civil society and democracy including foreign state interference

There was a question around the correct terminology to use for this goal, with some participants talking about political literacy, others engagement, and others suggesting education or even re-education. However, the overall idea was to educate people on their role in the political system and how they can create change. Some argued that it would also need to include media literacy and critical thinking, to help people to identify and deal with extreme views. Others suggested including an emphasis on understanding foreign state interference in politics and elections.

Gaps in electoral engagement were highlighted. There was some brief discussion about reintroducing the aristocracy, as it was argued that people who did not have to worry about work were more able to be politically engaged, with more time and space to learn complicated political skills and keep up to date with developments. As it is, some felt that people are asked to do too many things in a very short time frame.

Instead, education was considered the best solution. Some participants argued for teaching politics in schools so that everyone knows about it. They argued that the timing was important and political education needs to happen when people are young and come through the school system. One suggestion was to start PSHE earlier and make it more important in the curriculum. As it is, some participants suggested this subject was just a tick box exercise. This could also teach more effectively skills like taking someone to a small claims court or running your own business. Some also suggested compulsory citizenship classes.

Others suggested looking at more radical change in education towards a skills-based curriculum. It was suggested that the initial movement to democratisation was associated with reforming education, and this has been neglected. Some argued that portfolio careers are growing in society and there needs to be more focus on skills not knowledge. Specialist support from charities could be important here.

Another suggestion was to introduce political national service for children. The suggestion was to require completion of a certain number of volunteering hours before you can finish school. Another option would be to offer volunteering as a payment option for Higher Education.

One concern was increasing public distrust in institutions, which was suggested to relate to inequality of agency. Some suggested that young people are turned off institutions at an early age due to having to go through school.

Some also highlighted that the voting age could be a problem, as increasing political education may appear pointless to children when they have to wait to be able to take action. They argued that young people are all about immediacy. Some suggested that better democratic systems could be developed in schools and universities to allow young people to practice these skills.

7.2 Promote local civic groups

7.2.1 Community Representation

Some participants thought there should be more grassroots and local influence and access to parliament. They were concerned about how the underrepresented access the political world in this country when it is so embedded in tradition and uses a different language to that of many localities. These participants emphasised that a more diverse boardroom equals better decisions, which should work for political decisions too. The question was how to encourage forums of

communities to have discussions and have that synapse with policy making? One conclusion was that local civic groups should be promoted more.

Others argued that local politicians should represent local people. To support this, it was suggested that grassroots leaders should be able to run without a party. See the section on candidate selection for more on this.

Participants suggested that open democracy is all to do with coding by age and skills. There were worries about the disenfranchisement of younger people, as discussed under candidate selection. The power of the narrative of how women won the right to vote was highlighted as a good example to use to persuade women to be more active in politics.

Some considered hard to reach communities in particular, highlighting loneliness in some localities. However, others warned that in some areas, when people do form communities they can be quite vicious rather than supportive. They wondered how to ensure healthy communities.

Some participants felt that consumerism and individualism militate against community due to the focus on personal wealth not collective wealth. They suggested that economic polarisation might relate closely to social polarisation.

The lack of diversity at the consultation itself was criticised by some.

7.2.2 Communication into parliament

Participants were concerned about the difficulty for external groups to communicate ideas into parliament. One example given was trying to persuade the politicians that we are brilliant at science, but also are at the bottom of the G8 for funding on this, so we need the EU. Others also highlighted that debates that occurred in communities around Brexit did not get publicised. Participants felt that people should be able to contribute ideas easily for government to implement.

Some participants argued that politicians are not listening to the electorate about their hopes and fears, which drives apathy. These emotions are then used to create tribalism. It was argued that constituency activism could change this culture.

However, some felt that current methods of protesting such as people marching on the streets are ineffective and, thus, citizens are disenfranchised. Similarly, petitions do not result in a real debate and participants argued that they should be debated in plenary in parliament rather than in a working group. Some emphasised that the current citizen experience of democracy makes people feel disempowered. They argued that voters are not valued because of the way they are asked to vote, which does not create a sense of politicians listening. They suggested that people don't have time to engage with civic structures that are not rewarding for them.

Some suggested that social media could have a good effect by offering more power to the people. Another positive was that there are currently a lot of experimental initiatives for civic engagement. A suggestion was to collate a list of these experiments to compare and find good practice, and identify not-spots, where no initiatives are occurring, rather than focussing on hotspots.

Others suggested introducing jury service for civic engagement, entailing funded time off from work. Pilot studies for this idea should be done in the first instance.

7.2.3 Citizen Assemblies

Another suggestion was to promote local civic assemblies that filter up to the national agenda with a problem-solving ethos and civil code of conduct.

Participants emphasised that citizen assemblies should not be implementing dictats from government. They need a broad agenda. Additionally, solutions produced by citizens assemblies would need funding and there should always be a pot of money to be decided on. Some also

argued that these citizen assemblies should be complementary to political structures that are already in place. They should work alongside existing systems, not as a challenge.

7.3 Shift more national funding to local government

This topic is discussed with group 2's suggestion to decentralise government and empower local leadership.

8 Conclusions

Throughout this report suggestions for practical actions have been highlighted in bold. To end, following is a list of these suggested actions. While there was not unanimous backing from consultation participants for all specific actions, there was broad agreement determining the headline solutions. These actions have also been copied to the Executive Summary section.

8.1 Before Government

- Get parties to put pledges about funding transparency in their manifestos.
- Set up a non-binding young person's election alongside the national election.
- Amplify obvious reforms with new candidates across all parties in areas where the current MP is stepping down.
- Push dialogue about electoral reform into manifestos for the upcoming election.
- Develop a voluntary code for parties and candidates about transparency and funding.
- An independent review of political funding.
- Conduct research on the barriers people face in deciding to become a political candidate.
- Create a feeder system to get younger people into politics and take them through the process.
- Require political parties to track the diversity markers of candidates.

8.2 In Government

- An evaluation of the effectiveness of government decision-making on a cycle.
- Encourage something like the Athenian oath in British politics where politicians take responsibility to leave the polis/country in a better place than when they came in.
- Require a super majority from parliament in order to reject the recommendations of a committee. Alternatively create a duty for parliament to present very good reasons to reject cross-party suggestions from a committee, as well as a duty to debate the reports produced.
- Consider a separation of executive power and policy-making in government from legislators in parliament.
- Open a different conversation looking for leadership to help resolving these fundamental problems. This should start with this group who should set a goal of talking openly about these problems
- A statutory review of local governance structures and funding settlements.
- Survey public opinion on politics, perhaps through an independent institution.
- Make more use of institutions like the House of Commons Library, which can generate sets of facts which all parties can use as a starting point.
- Produce implementable plans for a new government to be ready to go on improving standards.

8.3 Around Government: Media

- Increase the power of the competition markets authority and give it more support.
- Introduce a subsidy for public interest media beyond the BBC.
- Have a royal commission on the non-market-based solutions needed to maintain high-quality journalism and public service broadcasters.
- Organise a public campaign to guarantee the fundamental public services we want.

8.4 Around Government: Civil Society

- Start PSHE earlier and make it more important in the curriculum.
- Introduce political national service for children.
- Collate a list of civic engagement experiments to compare and find good practice. Identify not-spots, where no initiatives are occurring, rather than focussing on hotspots.

- Introduce jury service for civic engagement, entailing funded time off from work. Pilot studies for this idea should be done in the first instance
- Promote local civic assemblies that filter up to the national agenda with a problem-solving ethos and civil code of conduct.

9 Participants

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