MPs and politics in our time

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MORI social research institute

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Note on references

Where quotes are not referenced in the text, this indicates that the information derives from interviews with the authors and researchers. Note that quotes from Joan Ruddock MP and Eric Forth MP were first used in the Hansard Society report *New Politics, New Parliament? A review of parliamentary modernisation since 1997* (2005).

Members of Parliament rank alongside journalists, estate agents and second hand car salesmen as the least trusted of professional groups. Indeed, the characterisation of MPs as dishonest and duplicitous is today deeply ingrained in the popular psyche. At one level, this is nothing new. In 1954, Hugh Gaitskell observed that the public held politics to be a 'slightly odd, somewhat discreditable' occupation. Indeed, 'politicians' were the subject of scorn even in Shakespeare's time, as King Lear said to Gloucester: 'Get thee glass eyes; and like a scurvy politician, seem to see the things thou dost not'. More recently, Ivor Crewe, the political scientist, told the Nolan Inquiry into standards in public life that: 'The British public has always displayed a healthy cynicism of MPs. They have taken it for granted that MPs are self-serving impostors and hypocrites who put party before country and self before party.'

But how strongly held are negative perceptions of MPs, and has healthy cynicism developed into something more corrosive? Moreover, what does public opinion of elected representatives tell us about the state of politics in Britain? Does it offer any pointers as to how political disengagement, still evident after a further low turnout in the recent 2005 general election, might be tackled?

These questions are important as representative democracy depends on public participation to give legitimacy to the decisions that elected representatives make about how society is governed. In this pamphlet, we outline existing research about what the public thinks about politics, political institutions and its elected representatives in Parliament. Moreover, through interviews with MPs across the political spectrum, we add a politicians' perspective on how they believe the public view them and their role. In a concluding section, we set out some implications and suggest steps that could be taken by politicians, Parliament and political parties to increase public confidence and trust in the job they collectively do. We suggest some ways in which the media and the education system could help build a better public understanding of, and engagement with, MPs as elected representatives. And we also highlight the role that the public has to play if the waning health of British democracy is to be improved.

At the heart of our argument is a belief that 'politics' needs to be redefined and that this must be reflected in the practice of politicians, the role of political parties and the conduct of the political process. In most people's minds, modern politics is formal and remote. If it touches their lives, then it is generally seen as

something that is done to them by an elite they dislike and distrust, operating in institutions that are distant, irrelevant and ineffective.

We are not suggesting that the solution to the apparently growing problem of political disengagement involves turning back to some previous 'golden age'. In truth, as our review of social and political research shows, one never existed. Even in the period when voter turnout and political party membership were much higher, the public's view of politicians was cynical and their connection to the political process was limited. However, social changes since then have weakened the bond still further. Increasingly voting is no longer seen as a duty. People are more demanding, and want to know what an MP or party will do for them personally. To some extent electors have always acted this way, weighing up the costs and benefits of political action and making electoral choices on the basis of what party will best serve their own, or their community's, interests. But many politicians and party workers in recent election campaigns would agree that a 'what's in it for me?' attitude is becoming more obvious, or at least more overt. And, with the general decline of collective institutions and identities, political choices have become even more personalised, posing obvious difficulties for a representative democracy based on the ideal of parties aggregating different interests through broad policy programmes and elected representatives taking decisions in the general good.

In some ways we need to encourage in politics the type of cultural change which is taking place in the health sector. Healthcare used to be viewed as something administered by doctors, in severe and formal institutions like hospitals and surgeries. The explosion of high quality independent information about health, and public policy reforms that try to place the individual – and not the health professional – at the centre of a service designed to do more than simply treat illness, is transforming our relationship with doctors. People are becoming more confident about making judgements on their own health and about arguing over the best course of treatment, and so the patient-professional relationship is more level and two-way. More fundamentally, there is a wider acceptance that 'healthcare' requires the individual to take some responsibility for keeping well, and not just the NHS to be available to treat illness.

We believe that politics needs a similar cultural revolution and that elected representatives and their political parties must be the agents of change in popular

attitudes. We argue that civic activism is strong, that this interest and involvement is certainly 'political' in a broader definition, and that political parties and elected politicians are not doing enough to ensure that their politics is connected to the everyday activities and aspirations that are a part of people's lives. This relationship between elected representative and electorate is central to the renewal of politics and reinvigoration of our system of democracy. But it requires investment from both the electorate and the elected – the former to take an informed interest and actively offer their views, the latter to take a great deal more trouble to seek, listen and respond to public concerns.

Political knowledge, understanding and attitudes

Popular perceptions about MPs are formed within a wider framework of opinions, so this first chapter assesses public knowledge and understanding of the political system and attitudes towards 'politics' generally.

Levels of political knowledge

Whether trying to measure actual or perceived knowledge, indicators show that the majority of people have a low level of knowledge and understanding about politics. Just 42% claim to know at least 'a fair amount' about politics (which includes only 3% who claim to know a great deal) while 57% say they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all'. These low levels of perceived knowledge are supported by research aimed at testing actual knowledge. In a recent survey by MORI, less than half the public believed the statement that 'the House of Commons has more power than the House of Lords' to be true, while two in three people (65%) concurred with the assertion that, 'there has to be a general election every four years'.

Just as public understanding of the political process and institutions is lacking, so levels of knowledge about MPs and their work is similarly low. Research conducted on behalf of The Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society in December 2003 found that only two in five people could name their parliamentary representative, while under half the population (45%) claimed to know at least a 'fair amount' about the role of MPs. One in eight said they knew 'nothing at all'. Significantly, younger groups and those from ethnic minorities were the least confident in their political knowledge.

'Alienation' from the traditional political system

Reflecting, and reinforcing, low levels of political knowledge is the public's sense that politics is an exclusive activity. Asked what they understood by the term 'politics', only a minority of respondents who took part in the 2004 *Audit of political engagement* linked it with their own or an individual's involvement, with most describing politics as something done by other people or as a system with which they are not engaged or enamoured. Part of the reason for such hostility and disengagement is again linked to a lack of knowledge. Quantitative research in recent years has consistently found that a significant minority (22% in 1996; 17% in 2002) of the public *strongly* agree that 'politics and government are so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand'.

These findings are backed up by recent qualitative research commissioned by the Hansard Society and conducted by MORI (2005), which suggests that many members of the public, especially the young and those from ethnic minorities, find the political system – and in particular Parliament – impenetrable due to its

specialist language and seemingly archaic procedures. These findings are sometimes used, in the context of declining participation, to back up claims that people are being 'alienated' from the political system. But this implies that people are becoming estranged from the political process against their will. While this may be true for some it should also be understood that, although the conduct of formal politics can act as a barrier to public engagement, there is no guarantee that the removal of this obstruction would automatically change matters.

Is the public apathetic about politics?

It would seem likely that a certain section of the population is, and always has been, utterly uninterested in politics. If voter turnout is the yardstick, then it is telling that even in the 1950s, the highpoint of electoral participation, the proportion of non-voters was still around 20% of the electorate. Nonetheless, the average turnout for British general elections between 1945 and 1992 was just over 76%, significantly higher than in general elections since 1997, so can the recent fall in turnout be explained in terms of increasing apathy among the electorate? Ostensibly, it would seem: no. The proportion of people who say they are interested in politics (around 60%) is no higher or lower today than was the case three decades ago. Social research shows that the vast majority of people remain interested in issues that affect them, their families and the wider world. The desire to have a say in the way the country is run remains as strong as ever, with 75% expressing the aspiration; and significantly, that aspiration is felt equally across all social groups. Moreover, research shows that levels of involvement in many social and political activities (such as attending a demonstration or making a speech) have remained stable over the past few decades. Yet fewer people are using the ballot box as means of realising their aspiration to influence decisions that affect and concern them. Turnouts of around 60% in the last two general elections suggest that it is only those who are interested in politics who now seem to be voting and not, as before, others who would happily say they had little interest in politics but still voted. How can we explain this?

The problem of efficacy and relevance

Audit of political engagement (2004) has shown that one apparent factor contributing to declining electoral turnout, and other forms of political engagement, is the increasing number of people who doubt the efficacy of getting involved

in the political system as it is currently formed. The perception that representative institutions have little impact on everyday public life was illustrated in a recent survey which found that a majority of the public and, significantly, MPs, believed the Westminster Parliament had less impact on their daily lives than business or the media. Moreover, although both the public and MPs believed local government to have an important impact on people's daily lives, the former were less convinced.

Q **From this list, which two or three of the following do you believe has the most impact on people's everyday lives? You can select up to three options.**

	1,976 UK Adults (%)	MPs (%)
Media	52	65
Local councils	47	77
Business	41	45
Westminster Parliament	30	34
Prime Minister	25	27
Civil Service	22	25
European Union	17	20
The Cabinet	8	8
None	*	–
Don't know	6	–

Source: MORI/Hansard Society/Electoral Commission (December 2003)

Alongside a low appreciation of the considerable powers that still reside in the British Parliament and Government, these findings suggest there is a widespread sense that power has drained away from these traditional institutions as people observe the effects of 'globalisation', the growth of bureaucracies and supra-national authorities like the European Union, the increasing influence of the judiciary, and the spread of regulators and administrative agencies at arms-length from ministers and elected national or local politicians. These trends have led some to argue that 'the ability of elected representatives tangibly to ameliorate their constituents' lives, has never been so restricted. Britain has become a post-representative democracy as power has been agglomerated by a class of well-paid and occasionally well-meaning administrators who are immune to the electoral process' (Carswell *et al* 2005).

A problem with political parties?

As more people doubt the relevance of elected bodies, it is unsurprising that engagement with political parties, the agencies that operate within those forums, has also declined. Party membership in Britain is at an historic low; relatedly, traditional partisan affiliations are weaker than ever before among the electorate, as evidenced by the falling turnout in elections. Furthermore, qualitative research for

the Hansard Society has found the public to be turned off by the adversarial nature of party politics (2005). At the same time, however, people also criticise parties for being too similar, a contradiction that underlines the difficult challenge parties' face in presenting the public with alternative visions in a manner that does not come across as overly or unnecessarily confrontational. At the moment, evidence suggests that they are not striking the right balance.

The extent to which the public is not just turned off, but actively opposed to, party politics has been measured by MORI during the past three general elections. The following table presents the results of campaign polls using the MORI Excellence Model. This model was initially developed for the measurement of corporate reputation, and first adapted to the political scene in 1997 in order to indicate the strength of both the positive and negative 'word of mouth' atmosphere surrounding the major parties.

Q Thinking of the … Party, please pick one statement from each section on this card according to which best reflects your behaviour and opinions with respect to the …. Party.									
	Conservative			**Labour**			**Liberal Democrat**		
	1997 %	**2001** %	**2005** %	**1997** %	**2001** %	**2005** %	**1997** %	**2001** %	**2005** %
I support the Party so much I encourage others to vote for it, without being asked	3	2	4	10	6	6	2	1	2
If someone asked my opinion I would encourage them to vote for the Party	11	10	12	21	17	15	9	7	13
If someone asked my opinion I would be neutral about voting for the Party	42	57	40	45	57	42	60	68	56
If someone asked my opinion I would discourage them from voting for the Party	22	16	18	11	11	16	11	11	12
I am so strongly opposed to the Party that I discourage others from voting for it without being asked	12	10	17	3	4	14	4	5	6
Positive Response	14	12	16	31	23	21	11	8	15
Negative Response	34	26	35	14	15	30	15	16	18
Net	-20	-14	19	+17	+8	-9	-4	-8	-3
Don't know /No opinion	10	5	9	9	4	7	14	8	11

Source: Worcester, Mortimore and Baines (2005)

As a measure of the overall fall in enthusiasm between 1997 and 2005, if we total the first two options for each party (i.e. positive response), we find that the total of the three percentages for 2005 is 52% who would encourage somebody else to vote for one of the three main parties; in 1997 the corresponding figure was 56%.

But more significant is the level of negativity towards all the parties. In the 2005 general election, over six million people (14%) said they were so strongly opposed to the Labour Party that they would discourage others from voting for it without being asked, and almost seven and a half million were doing the same against the Tories (17%). Taken overall, adding the 'pro' and 'anti' advocates for the three parties, in 1997 15% of the public were *voluntarily* encouraging others to vote for a party while 19% were urging them not to do so. By 2001 the totals were 9% and 19%, a two-to-one negative ratio; and in 2005 the totals were 12% and 37%, a three-to-one ratio. Thus mistrust of political parties seems to feed on itself, and is increasingly clear in the way people choose to vote. In the 2005 general election, aside from the 40% who did not vote, more than one in ten cast their vote for candidates who were not standing for one of the three main parties. This was higher than in any previous election and almost double the proportion in 1992. At best this might represent a trough in the political cycle with the public turned off by what they see is currently on offer. At worst, it may be a trend that continues in the future, with still more of the public becoming actively hostile to mainstream political parties.

It is possible to make comparisons of UK public opinion with popular sentiment in other liberal democracies, which reveals some significant similarities and differences. Eurobarometer surveys in each of the EU countries show that out of a list of 16 different types of institutions and organisations, political parties are the least trusted. However, although that phenomenon is Europe-wide (16% trust; 76% do not trust) it is notable that political parties are less trusted in Britain than anywhere else in the EU (10% trust; 78% do not trust).[1] Furthermore, while in times of crisis (as after the terror attacks in America on 11 September 2001) survey research found increased trust and support for political institutions, this has not been apparent with political parties in Britain.[2] In Oct-Nov 01, Eurobarometer measured a 13 point rise in trust in the British Parliament, and a 12 point rise in trust in the British government from Apr-May

01, but no statistically significant rise in trust in political parties (15% to 16%). It would therefore appear that in Britain, the problem of public disaffection with parties is more pronounced than elsewhere.

Conclusion

The research outlined above suggests that there is a low level of public knowledge and understanding about the political system and the role of the institutions and actors that work within it. That contributes to a sense among many members of the public that politics is an exclusive and remote system which they will never understand. Consequently, with old affiliations and networks declining in strength and influence, many people – particularly younger groups – are disengaging from formal politics altogether in a trend that some believe is evidence of widespread apathy. That is a misreading of the situation. While some members of the public are undoubtedly apathetic and simply uninterested, it is clear that the majority of people – from all social groups and of all ages – still care about issues that affect them, their families and the wider world. Moreover, declared interest in politics has barely moved over time. The problem, in part at least, is that many no longer believe representative institutions, such as Parliament, have a major impact on their daily life and increasingly shun political parties as the vehicles through which they can seek to affect change.

Public perceptions of MPs

It would seem on the basis of the available evidence that British democracy presently suffers from declining faith in political institutions and a lack of trust in political parties; but what about its politicians?

Attitudes towards politicians

One of the difficulties in analysing public opinion towards politicians is that it is difficult to disentangle people's views about the individual actors from those about politics and the political system generally. For example, what do people mean when they say they are dissatisfied with, or do not trust, politicians? The public, it seems, have always had a sceptical view of politicians. More than half a century ago, with the Second World War still being fought, the majority of the British public questioned the motives of their political representatives, as a Gallup poll recorded:

Q Do you think British politicians are out merely for themselves, for their party, or to do their best for their country?	
	1944 (%)
Themselves	35
Party	22
Country	36
Don't know	7

Source: Gallup. Reported in George H. Gallup (1976), The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain 1937-1975 (Random House, New York), volume I, p 96.

Today the public continues to question the motives and morals of politicians. Recent qualitative work by the Hansard Society, in conjunction with MORI, found people's instinctive perception of MPs is of 'liars' and 'hypocrites' who are 'out of touch' with common concerns and almost Machiavellian in their preference for political expediency over the everyday concerns of their constituents. Five specific criticisms were levelled against them:

1. That they are solely in politics to make money for themselves or to advance socially;
2. That they fail to give accurate answers to questions or 'bend' the truth;
3. That they are effectively party automatons, forced to follow their leader's line;
4. That they are unresponsive to the demands of most constituents; and
5. They spend too much time 'point-scoring' or arguing in Parliament rather than working in their constituencies.

Comparisons with other professions

Significantly, politicians are held in lower regard by the public than almost all other professions. MORI's latest update of its annual research for the BMA,

released in March this year, shows that just over one in five people (22%) say they would trust politicians generally to tell the truth. The vast majority (71%) say they would not, giving a net score of -53%. This 'veracity rating' is the lowest for any of the professions covered in the MORI/BMA survey, with the exception of the -61% score given to journalists. Using a slightly different list of professions, research conducted by BMRB for the Committee on Standards in Public Life, between November 2003 and March 2004, also found low trust levels in 'MPs in general'. The survey showed that 24% of people felt MPs in general could be trusted to tell the truth, with 67% believing they could not, giving a net score of -40%. That was one of the lowest of the 17 professions covered, though this time not as low as those for 'people who run large companies' (-43%), 'Government ministers' (-46%), 'estate agents' (-55%) and 'journalists on newspapers like the Sun, Mirror or Daily Star' (-83%). Both studies confirmed that the public put much more faith in 'frontline' professionals and professions with whom they have day to day familiarity, such as doctors and teachers, or those they feel are independent or impartial, such as judges and the police, than they do with (national) politicians. Ironically, this is despite the fact that the latter are the only group which the public has a direct role in appointing.

A further complicating factor is the marked difference between public perceptions of individual MPs, and MPs as a group. The BMRB survey, for example, reveals that slightly more people say their 'local MP' can generally be trusted to tell the truth (47%) than not (45%). Although that is still far below the levels of trust placed in family doctors (92%) or head teachers in schools (84%), it is twice as high as trust in 'MPs in general' (24%). MORI's research for The Electoral Commission/Hansard Society found a similar pattern when examining public satisfaction with different 'levels' of politicians, as shown in the following table.

The link between knowledge and satisfaction was summarised in the first *Audit of political engagement*:

> *People's satisfaction with their local MP seems to be closely related to both their contact with him/her and with a sufficient level of familiarity to recall his or her name. Six in 10 of those who can correctly identify their local MP are satisfied with his/her performance, compared with only*

> *26% who cannot. However, the proportion dissatisfied*
> *does not vary in the same way – 13% are negative whether*
> *or not they know who he or she is. Similarly, those who can*
> *and those who cannot name their MP are equally likely to*
> *be dissatisfied with the way MPs in general are doing their*
> *job and there is no significant difference in the proportion*
> *dissatisfied with the way Parliament works.*

This pattern is not unique to the political sphere. It is generally the case that people are much more dissatisfied with the general and the institutional, than the specific and the individual. As with much else, in politics the individual will tend to be given the benefit of the doubt, while the general and the institutional will not. But why is this? To some extent it is because, contrary to the old saying, familiarity breeds favourability – not contempt. Perhaps it is the case that experience tends to lead to favourable judgements – people are more likely to judge their own MP from personal contact, word of mouth from friends/relatives and what they read or hear in the local media, than on general social perception.

Q Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that Parliament works?

Q Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way MPs in general are doing their job?

Q Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way your MP (INSERT NAME) is doing his/her job?

Base: 1,976 UK 18+, 11-17 Dec 2003	Parliament	MPs in general	Your MP
	%	%	%
Very satisfied	1	1	8
Fairly satisfied	35	31	33
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	27	26	26
Fairly dissatisfied	23	26	9
Very dissatisfied	9	10	4
Don't know	5	5	21
Satisfied	36	32	41
Dissatisfied	32	36	13

Source: MORI/Electoral Commission/Hansard Society, December 2003

Or perhaps it is simply that people are inclined to be rude or dismissive about the general group but more polite to and about individuals they know. MORI's qualitative work for the Hansard Society, for example, found that initial negative views of parliamentarians gave way to more positive assessments once focus group participants began to discuss the subject in detail and related their views of MPs to personal experiences (something which is not easy to capture in normal quantitative surveys). Or do these findings simply reflect that most MPs are in fact doing a good job? If so, it is the negative general viewpoint, not the positive specific one that needs explaining.

It seems that there is an inherent scepticism in public opinion about politicians that is not found with many other professions. This can be clearly observed in research by MORI which posed a question strongly loaded against doctors by explicitly reminding respondents of recent health horror stories; yet in two successive years' surveys the public refused to take the bait and only 4% would say that 'most doctors' do their job badly nowadays.

Contrast this with questions about 'most politicians' posed over more than half a century and each time the public is sceptical about politicians' motives. As illustrated above, the Gallup poll from 1944 showed that at that time over half the public believed MPs put their own (35%) or their party's (22%) interests ahead of the interests of the country (36%). Another Gallup poll in October 1994 found that 64% of the public agreed that 'most members of Parliament make a lot of money by using public office improperly' (Gallup *Political and Economic Index*, Report 410, October 1994) and research by MORI in 1994 and 1996 confirmed

Q **As you may have heard or read, doctors have been reported in the press or on TV recently in an unfavourable light, e.g. the Bristol surgeon inquiry and stories about Alder Hey and other hospitals retaining body parts. Thinking about those stories and taking your answer from this showcard, how well or badly would you say that most doctors do their job nowadays?**

	2001 (%)	2002 (%)
Very well	26	24
Fairly well	58	63
Neither well nor badly	10	8
Fairly badly	3	3
Very badly	1	1
Don't know/no opinion	2	1
Well	84	87
Badly	4	4
Net well	80	83

Source: MORI/BMA; Base: c. 2,000 British adults 15+

the even greater public scepticism about politicians previously uncovered by the Gallup poll of 50 years before, as shown in the following table.

As MORI's Roger Mortimore wrote, 'It is the preparedness of the public to believe the worst about politicians which is perhaps the most alarming feature of their public image' (2003).

Q In general, whose interests do you think MPs put first – their own, their constituents', their party's or their country's?		
	1994 (%)	1996 (%)
Own	52	56
Party's	26	27
Constituents'	11	7
Country's	5	5
Other	1	1
No opinion	5	4
Source: MORI		

Clearly, as various surveys have found, politicians are less trusted than many other professional groups. However, the hasty conclusions that are made on the basis of such surveys require some qualifications. In particular, it is important to be mindful of the distorting influence that political allegiance can have on responses to questions about politicians' trustworthiness. That is because the word 'politician' is in many ways an umbrella term, referring to a group who, while linked by their common role as elected representatives, are differentiated by the fact that they generally belong to opposing parties on the basis of political outlook. Hence, a member of the public making a negative judgement about the trustworthiness of 'politicians' may on occasion be registering their personal opposition to a particular party – especially if they support a party different to that in government. The evidence for this can be found in The Electoral Commission/Hansard Society *Audit of political engagement.* Among Labour supporters, 51% said they were satisfied with the way Parliament works (15% dissatisfied), but among Conservative supporters just 38% were satisfied and more (41%) dissatisfied. A similar division can be observed in terms of whether 'MPs in general are doing a good job' (45% of Labour supporters believed they were, but only 32% of Conservatives said the same); or trust in politicians (22% of Labour supporters had a fair amount or a great deal – twice as many as Conservative supporters).

This is not to explain away the problem of low public regard for politicians highlighted in opinion surveys, merely to point out that the true meaning of such statistics is often more complicated than it first appears. Nevertheless, the fact that

politicians appear to suffer from a 'trust deficit' must be regarded as a problem, albeit not a new one, not least because elected representatives rely on popular support for their legitimacy.

What do people want from MPs?

To what extent are negative perceptions based on the belief that MPs are not performing their jobs properly? The work for the Committee on Standards in Public Life suggests that honesty is the key requirement for an MP or government minister as far as the public is concerned:

Expectations of MPs and Ministers	
Base: 1,097 GB adults, Nov 03 – Mar 04	% rated as one of the three most important attributes
They should tell the truth	53
They should not take bribes	46
They should make sure that public money is used wisely	43
They should be dedicated to doing a good job for the public	37
They should not use their power for their own personal gain	34
They should be in touch with what the general public thinks is important	28
They should be competent at their jobs	23
They should own up when they make mistakes	17
They should explain the reasons for their actions and decisions	12
They should set a good example for others in their private lives	5
Source: BMRB	

At the moment, however, a majority of the public does not believe that MPs in general live up to that standard. Other findings from the BMRB report, outlined in the table below, led the authors to conclude that, 'there is a widespread perception in which politicians try to cover up the mistakes that they make, which sits uncomfortably alongside a strongly expressed desire among the public for them "to come clean".'

Clearly, cases of indefensible behaviour by MPs over the years have done a great deal to determine and justify the public's highly critical view of politicians. But one interesting aspect of the recent research in the table above, when compared against the Gallup data from 1994 we cited earlier, is that following the very negative perceptions about the financial probity of MPs evident in the wake of the 'cash for questions' affair, the public now has a great deal of faith

Perceptions of MPs' behaviour

Base: 1,097 GB adults, Nov 03 – Mar 04	% saying applies to most or all MPs
Do not take bribes	79
Do not use power for own gain	51
Dedicated to doing a good job for the public	46
Set a good example in their private lives	42
Are competent	40
In touch with what the public think important	32
Make sure public money is spent wisely	31
Tell the truth	30
Explain reasons for actions and decisions	29
Own up when they make mistakes	12

Source: BMRB

that MPs do not take bribes. This is significant, as it suggests that politicians, to some extent, have the capacity to shape the public's perceptions of them. If they act properly and take visible steps in response to public concern – as was the case with new rules and reporting in relation to standards in public life after the 'cash for questions' scandal – they can guard and enhance their reputation. However, what we have identified as the public's long-established 'disposition to disbelieve' politicians has shifted from a concern about the misuse of position for financial gain in the early 1990s to misuse of truth for political reasons and concerns about 'spin' and 'truth' in the late 1990s.

Is there a more general mismatch between public expectations of what they want from their parliamentary representatives and what they actually get? The BMRB survey offers some useful insights into this, by exploring what the public feels MPs *should* take into account when voting in Parliament, and what they perceive MPs *actually do* take into account. This is a tightly focused area of questioning, yet responses again show that the public tends to reject party loyalties and political leadership as legitimate influencers on MPs, and firmly reject self-interest. According to the survey, a clear majority of the public says 'what is best for the country as a whole' should be the prime motive guiding MPs in their decisions. Taking decisions on the basis of what will make the party popular is considered much less legitimate, and while 'what would benefit people living in the MP's local constituency' is judged to be a more acceptable

influence, it is nonetheless subordinate to 'the country as a whole'. So, in short, people don't want MPs to simply do what is popular – they want them to do what is right – and if that means putting country before constituency, so be it. That seems clear enough, but many MPs may be unwilling to take the chance. They are also unlikely to see the choice in such straightforward terms, as most would subscribe to the view that keeping their party in government is what is best for the country, and that generally means supporting party policies.

As we explore in section 4, the British system of representative democracy is based on party political organisation inside Parliament. Although this system has much to commend it, there is no doubt that the strength of party ties and discipline can restrict the ability of the legislature to hold the executive to account. This is an issue that has exercised political scientists and historians for many years, but is also of concern to the public. Surveys consistently show that people rank 'ensuring government does its job efficiently and honestly' among an MP's most important duties; relatedly, the table below highlights the public's belief that MPs ought to try and act independently of their party leaders' wishes.

Factors MPs should and do take into account when voting

Base: 1,097 GB adults, Nov 03 – Mar 04	% reasonable to take this into account	% most important thing to take into account	% most MPs would base decision on in
How the MP's party leadership thinks he or she should vote	32	*	21
What the MP thinks will make his or her party more popular with the general public	31	1	17
What the MP personally believes to be right	69	8	12
How the decision might affect the MP's political career	15	*	11
What the MP's party's election manifesto promised	85	10	10
What would benefit people living in the country as a whole	94	62	10
What would benefit people living in the MP's local constituency	81	15	7
What the MP's local party members want	58	2	6
How the decision might affect the MP's chances of getting a job outside politics	9	*	1
What would benefit the MP's family	9	*	1
Don't know		*	4

Source: BMRB

We argue that reinforcing the role of Members of Parliament in holding the elected government more systematically and strenuously to account is therefore the most important requirement of further parliamentary reform.

Conclusion

The bold, regularly regurgitated headline, that MPs are among the least trusted professional groups, masks a number of contradictions and complexities in public opinion that should caution against a simple interpretation of such findings. Trust in politicians cannot be compared directly with trust in other professions, as the former is open to the complicating influences of political affiliation and attitudes towards the government of the day. Moreover, there are significant differences between levels of trust in individual MPs, who are generally well regarded, and trust in MPs collectively, who are not. That, and other, findings suggest that familiarity tends to breed favourability, at least as far as attitudes towards MPs are concerned.

The problem seems to be transposing positive views of local MPs into a positive perception of the profession in general. When asked what they want from MPs, people tend to cite honesty, integrity and selflessness as key virtues. But when asked what they think motivates and influences MPs, factors such as personal ambition and political loyalty are cited as the dominant forces rather than concern to do what is best for the country, as the public would wish them to be guided. Although these findings are scarcely new, they confirm that there appears to be a continued mismatch between public expectations of how they would like their elected representatives to operate and how they believe that they do operate. Clearly, this is cause for concern and presents a major challenge. Nonetheless, the fact that MPs, through their own actions, helped to increase trust in their financial probity in the wake of the 'cash for questions' affair suggests that MPs can be and should be the architects of their own public standing and that it is possible to alter entrenched public perceptions.

The politicians' perspective

Having studied public attitudes towards politics, political institutions and elected representatives, it is now time to get a view from the most visible actors in the political system: Members of Parliament. What is their analysis of why they are so poorly regarded? And what is their take on the apparently growing problem of public disengagement from politics?

The role of an MP – changing emphasis

In getting a politicians' perspective on the state of public engagement with the political process, it is useful to begin by examining the changing role of MPs. A recent article in The *Guardian* (28 July 2005) posed the question: 'What are MPs for?' suggesting that there is currently some confusion or disagreement about their proper role, not least among MPs themselves. Several Cabinet ministers are reported as being concerned at the increasing emphasis that newer MPs are placing on constituency activities, in place of their parliamentary duties in Westminster. This apparent shift in focus is in marked contrast to the behaviour of MPs 50 years ago. Up until the Second World War, it was taken for granted that the primary duty of a Member of Parliament lay in the Commons Chamber, debating and voting. Involvement in the day–to-day concerns of individual constituents was not regarded as a priority and visits to the constituency were few and far between. In *Who Goes Home*, Roy Hattersley (2003) told the story of A.V. Alexander, a former Member for Sheffield, who 'hardly ever visited his…constituency during or after the war, producing such disgruntlement that his successor George Darling was elected on a radical promise of quarterly visits. When he was later appointed PPS to Arthur Bottomley, the constituency wrote to absolve him even from that promise "in light of his heavy duties".'

Since then, there has been a much greater emphasis on constituency work. However, it would be wrong to suppose that this has been a very recent trend; in fact, it was discernible in the 1960s. By that time over 90% of MPs were holding regular constituency surgeries, aided by the introduction of a secretarial allowance, which marked a significant break from the pre-war period. A survey of MPs by the Review Body of Top Salaries, in 1971, found that the average backbencher spent approximately 11 hours a week outside the House on constituency business; by 1982, the average had increased to 16 hours and has risen further since then. The flow of constituency casework has ballooned in recent years; in 1964 around 10,000 letters came in and went out of the Commons each week, but by 1997 that had increased to 40,000 letters coming in and 30,000 going out. (Power 2000:23-24; Gay 2005:58-59). Since then, email has provided a new avenue of communication, though evidence suggests it has not yet replaced the letter as the favoured mode of correspondence, with only a tenth of MPs reporting receiving over 100 emails a week. However, the

steady rise in the number of Members with publicly available email addresses and personal websites suggests that in the longer term web technology will further add to the volume of enquiries that MPs are expected to handle (Whitaker 2005) and add to expectations of more rapid and personal responses.

As noted, all this has influenced the way MPs approach their role so the outlook of most elected Members today differs markedly from that of their predecessors 50 years ago. For one thing, time spent in the constituency has greatly increased. It was notable, after the 1987 general election, that a majority of the new MPs who entered the Commons then gave the constituency office, rather than Parliament, as their first address. Ten years later, a survey of the 1997 new intake by *House Magazine* (13 November 1997) found that 86% ranked 'being a good constituency member' as the most important role of an MP; as opposed to just 13% who highlighted 'checking the executive' as their prime purpose. More recently, a survey by the Hansard Society in 2003 again found a majority of MPs placing the constituency role ahead of all others. The new emphasis on constituency work and the increased efforts placed on dealing with routine public enquiries has led Andrew Tyrie MP to suggest that modern parliamentarians have taken on a new role: that of local ombudsman (2000:12).

Why has the role changed?

According to Gillian Shephard, 'the end of deference' has been an important factor in changing the nature of the relationship between MP and constituent: 'When I became an MP in 1987 there was a tremendous amount of deference to my predecessor. There is no deference now…so therefore people find MPs more approachable. I welcome that totally, but it has altered the…nature of communication…people are more demanding, but that is a good thing.'

Austin Mitchell (2005:71), another with long experience in the Commons, detects a similar societal change: 'When I was first elected, an old mining MP told me not to bother replying to letters: "If it's important they'll write again". An office in the constituency was also unnecessary: "They know where I live and if they want me they'll come round to the back door". That is no longer true…Constituents are better educated. Tasting power as consumers they seek it as citizens and want to be heard. The MP is the only part of the huge impersonal machinery of government who can provide the ears they need.'

As Mitchell highlights, public expectations have been a significant element in changing the nature of the MP's role. This has been facilitated by advances in technology, making it far easier for people to contact their MP than ever before, and improvements in offices and expenses, which have helped to 'professionalise' the role of MP. According to Chris Mullin, 50 years ago Members were 'unable to make calls outside of London and all office costs [were] taken from the MP's salary (which was not high); you had an allocation of House of Commons headed paper and no means to set up a constituency office. That was as late as the 1950s and it clearly favoured those who were independently wealthy. [That is] not the case anymore – it is now a professional service.'

Technological advances, including the introduction of email and internet access, have encouraged this cultural shift and have both enabled the physical relocation of MPs' staff to constituency offices and increased their ability to contact large numbers of people through casework databases and mass mailings. Technology has also emptied the green benches of the Commons by providing live television coverage of Parliament in MPs' private offices. Some argue that the changing composition of the Commons has also helped to alter the focus of MPs, with newer Members pursuing grass roots politics and local campaigning, forcing others to mimic this tactic. Consequently, according to Gillian Shepherd, 'It is now accepted in every party as essential…and thought to be worth 8 or 9 per cent difference at an election … That has caused a definite shift in attitude.' Although academic studies suggest this is an overstatement, the fact that many MPs perceive constituency campaigning to be this influential is what matters.

Competing visions of the role of an MP

Not every parliamentarian, however, has embraced the constituency role. Eric Forth perhaps exemplifies those Members who hold to a traditional 'Westminster-centric' view of their role, arguing that the principal duty of an MP is holding the government to account and participating in debates and votes: 'I regard that as the main part of my duties…If [a] Member of Parliament chooses to spend less and less time here and more and more time talking to people in the constituency, the thing has got hopelessly out of balance' (HC Deb 20/11/2000 c.52). While some may agree that the constituency focus has become too dominant, few MPs today would go along with Eric Forth's belief that Westminster ought to be their

sole place of work. The division of labour between Parliament and constituency may vary, but almost no-one chooses to ignore the latter entirely. As Wayne David explained: 'What I've tried to do is preserve a link between my Westminster work and my work in the constituency and I do tend to gravitate toward issues that are of interest to the people I represent.' Lynne Featherstone, the newly elected Member for Hornsey, likewise underlined her concern to balance parliamentary duties with her role as constituency representative, which has become a vital component of the work of contemporary MPs.

Struggling to meet increasing public expectations

However, juggling the competing demands from constituents with obligations in Parliament is no easy task. On the one hand, the sheer volume of work is enormous. Many of the first-time MPs elected in 1997, for example, were initially overwhelmed by the volume of mail they received from constituents – some reporting up to 200 letters a day (Power 2000:24). Although that has since reduced, the numbers are still considerable (300 a week according to some estimates). Yet parliamentary commitments remain as demanding as ever. Despite some concessions that recognise the more diverse nature of an MP's work – such as 'constituency weeks' and 'free' Fridays – Members are nonetheless expected to fulfil their duties in Westminster, taking part in votes, engaging in questioning and debate in the Commons Chamber (and now also the new Westminster Hall), as well as participating in additional forums such as Standing and Select Committees, All-Party Groups and official party meetings. For those who hold a ministerial position, the demands are even greater. In Austin Mitchell's words, 'MPs are on a treadmill that is running faster against them as the work, the travel and the parliamentary duties all increase. Those who try to fulfil all the roles in their portfolio must fail because it can't be done' (2005:71).

Unsurprisingly, research has found that politicians are among the most stressed of any professional groups. A survey carried out by Dr Ashley Weinberg (2000:33) in the early 1990s found MPs to be reporting higher levels of physical symptoms of strain – problems sleeping, tending to eat, drink and smoke more than usual, tiredness and exhaustion – than, for example, UK senior managers. Since then, further surveys have found that Members of Parliament are suffering increased levels of stress. Significantly, Dr Weinberg has found

that the introduction of new sitting arrangements in Parliament designed to make the working day 'family friendly' and more in line with normal business hours had not helped to alleviate stress; indeed, he found the opposite was true. According to Dr Weinberg (2004), these findings reinforce his earlier assertion that the solution to stressed politicians does not lie solely in revising the working practices of Parliament but in addressing the wider work of MPs. Significantly, politicians returning to their constituencies are not free to concentrate on family life but face a series of demands and engagements, which explains why many report being unable to take their mind off work when they are at home. The general picture, then, is that the job of an MP impacts negatively on individual well-being, both in psychological and physical terms.

So why aren't MPs more popular?

Yet, despite the fact that many MPs could be putting their health at risk in their efforts to balance the parliamentary aspect of the job with the increasing demands from constituents, the electorate still widely regards Members of Parliament – at least in general terms – as evasive self-promoters who are out to feather their own nests. MPs are acutely aware of this problem. Gisela Stuart, for example, suggested that, 'Politicians as a whole are treated like insurance salesmen. They are seen as being unrepresentative, self-serving, not trustworthy.' Similarly, Wayne David judged that national politicians are regarded as self-interested, boring and not in touch with the people, while Lynne Featherstone believes that MPs are 'not viewed as human beings'. Susan Kramer, also feels that there is a great deal of public cynicism:

'I think there is very little appreciation of how much energy and drive and determination most MPs display. I don't think we should be asking for plaudits, as we have asked for the job and we do love it. But sometimes it is disheartening when somebody says – "oh, you're in Parliament, I suppose you must be holidaying everyday now [Parliament is in recess]".'

So how do MPs account for such disapproval? Gillian Shephard believes the contrasting views of individual Members and politicians collectively is instructive: 'People differentiate between what they know of the work of a local MP – if they know anything – and what they feel is the image of politicians or MPs as pervaded by the media.' That analysis is shared by many within

Westminster, who believe that the media has a significant influence on public views of politics and politicians, and that the tabloid national press in particular tend to portray politicians in a negative light. According to Susan Kramer, 'It's the usual thing – I don't necessarily mean the media makes anything up – but because the focus of the media is always to tell the bad stories, people assume the good stories don't exist. It's the old rule, from a newspaper perspective: murder is good, but serial murder is even better. It obviously leaves people with a fairly distorted view.'

However, while the media is often castigated for breeding cynicism and mistrust, many believe that this is merely symptomatic of a broader malaise infecting the political culture. Ann Widdecombe, for example, highlights the destructive trend of 'what President Clinton described as the politics of personal destruction. It is now a mark of success to bring about a resignation or to "get a head"' (2005:88). In contrast to the world of conventional advertising where companies sell products by extolling their virtues, in politics each 'side' aims to win support by rubbishing the other – gleefully encouraged by the media. As a result, a growing number of the public decide that all the products on view are flawed and opt to ignore politics altogether, as is illustrated by MORI's findings from the past three general elections (see section 1). In such a context it is unsurprising that politicians are viewed negatively. As Martin O'Neill explained, 'MPs don't just exist in their constituencies; they exist in the context of a UK political system. If there is a sense in which the political system is unpopular, then you're going to suffer.'

Thus, explanations for negative public perceptions of politicians must also take account of the environment in which they operate; most particularly, the Westminster Parliament. While some Members may praise its 'sombre majesty', others believe its arcane rituals, ceremonial dress and specialist language place an unnecessary barrier before the public. Joan Ruddock, for one, believes the institution is in desperate need of modernisation, saying the parties of schoolchildren that she brings into Parliament 'find everything so posh and formal [that they] could not identify with it or believe it to be part of the normal world.' Similarly, Peter Hain, the former Commons Leader and current Secretary of State for Wales and Northern Ireland, has also expressed his concern about the negative impact of the language and procedures employed. One of

his last acts as Leader of the House was to remove the word 'Strangers' from Standing Orders as the phrase by which visiting members of the public were previously known; a term that he claimed 'sent out a dreadful signal to every citizen and voter'.

MPs also identify wider changes in society as impacting on public perceptions of politicians and on politics more generally. Many MPs note the 'end of class politics' or the death of the 'battle of ideas'. For Gisela Stuart, 'The problem started in 1989 when the battle of ideas died. To those born after 1983 the terms "Left" and "Right" have become largely meaningless. Once these blocks become obsolete you get a shift toward a more participatory democracy where people become more agitated about single-issues, which don't necessarily fit into a wider ideology. Society has become more selfish.' Chris Mullin likewise believes that living in an age of relative affluence, when ideological barriers are breaking down, has resulted in 'people becoming consumers rather than citizens'. He argues that, 'people don't think they have any particular responsibilities. They believe it is up to government or the council to deliver, and if it gets it wrong, it is their fault. They don't realise that parties are voluntary – anyone can join.' It is in this context, whereby 'people no longer see involvement in politics as a civic duty', that negative perceptions of MPs have flourished. Angela Eagle highlights the dilemma of the 'something for nothing' culture: 'people ask "what can you do for me?" without giving anything in return.' Consequently, many argue that the popularity levels of MPs must be interpreted in a broader context, whereby, 'People are less concerned about politics and community and instead more interested in themselves.'

Such changes in the public's approach to politics, Chris Mullin believes, have meant that many people now fail to see a 'connection between decisions that affect their lives and we poor, despised politicians. For example, several years ago I was standing outside a council estate which had been totally transformed by public money. A woman came out of her house (it was the day of the local government elections) and I asked, "Have you voted yet?" She replied, "Nah, you've done nothing for us"… I was too gob-smacked to give her a rational answer – because here was a woman, her life transformed, and she made no connection between that and decisions made by politicians.'

Changing negative perceptions

So what do MPs think can be done to change negative perceptions about them? MPs are aware that they cannot always meet the public's high expectations. Martin O'Neill believes that politicians fail to educate the electorate in the problems that may arise or that can't be foreseen, leading to frustration and disappointment for which both MPs and the public are jointly to blame: 'Most people are prepared to leave politics to the politicians for four years at a time, then become frustrated when what they have superficially come to a conclusion on is not borne out by events. So it's down to political illiteracy on the part of the electorate and to an extent the over-simplistic presentation on the part of the politician.'

In addition, many MPs feel strongly that the way politics and Parliament is projected by the media is central to shaping the political culture and influencing the public's perception of politicians. At the moment, according to Gillian Shephard, work in Parliament is portrayed in the national media as 'trivial, lazy, irrelevant and quarrelsome', which damages the perception of the institution and MPs as a class. Indiscretions of individual Members tend to tarnish everyone, and in an effort to clean up the image of Parliament there have been initiatives such as the Committee on Standards in Public Life. However, despite these new bodies, many Members concede that such innovations can only have a limited impact and that it is difficult to change existing negative perceptions of MPs. According to Shephard, in the final analysis, MPs are 'independent operators'. Hence, there is no collective identity, making it hard to combat the general image: 'The most you can hope for…is that you alter the perception of yourself as an individual…that you work hard and so on.' Wayne David agrees that individual contact is the preferred means to counter wider negative opinions of politicians: 'The more people I speak to [and] the more personal contact I have, the better reaction I get. That is becoming more important and not less important…[it] is crucial in breaking down negative opinions.'

Conclusion

The role of an MP has changed over the last 50 years. As a number of long-standing inhabitants of Westminster testify, society has changed. People are less deferential and more demanding of their elected representatives. As a result, the constituency role of MPs has increased in importance, both in the eyes of the public and of Members themselves (though some believe the balance of

focus has shifted too far away from Parliament). New technologies, improved office facilities and increased staff resources have enabled MPs to better respond to the greater demands now being placed upon them, but these developments have simultaneously served to expand the amount of work crossing their desks. In their efforts to meet burgeoning demands, MPs have contributed to an increase in public expectations that are already unrealistic. The consequence has been to intensify the pressure on MPs. Yet, in spite of their increased efforts and development of the constituency role, public opinion continues to hold MPs in low regard – at least in general terms. Although a number of factors must explain that puzzle, according to MPs, the role of the national media is a key element. Whereas local and regional media are seen to present the work of politicians in a fuller and more factual light, they argue that the national press, radio and television trade heavily in personalities and adopt a cynical tone that undermines regard for elected representatives. But they also concede that their own behaviour is partly responsible for low public regard for politicians, with increasingly aggressive and personal political attacks contributing to public disengagement.

Finally, MPs lack a collective identity in Parliament, often acting as 646 sole traders or rigid party loyalists rather than members of a coherent group with a common interest in the standing of Parliament and their elected office.

Looking ahead

Crisis? What crisis?

When the 2001 general election produced a 59% turnout one team of political scientists was prompted to claim that, 'if this is not a crisis of democratic politics, then it is hard to know what would be' (Whiteley *et al.* 2001:786). If low turnout does indeed constitute a democratic crisis then the 61% turnout in 2005 would suggest that the emergency is far from over.

But does the drop in voter turnout really amount to a 'crisis'? Is this new? And how far should this be seen as the main problem by those concerned with the health of the British democratic system? Although the numbers going to the polls may have been greater in the past, our study suggests that the public's engagement with the political process has always been fairly fragile. Even while the Second World War was being fought, only one third of people thought politicians were doing their best for the country, as opposed to themselves or their party. Indeed, during the 1950s, when party membership, election turnout and a sense of civic duty were at their highest, still one in five electors didn't vote and there existed a deep ambivalence towards politics and politicians.

Shortly before he replaced Attlee as Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell (1954) was moved to give a lecture 'In Defence of Politics', in which he outlined four fundamental criticisms of politics that he claimed were at the root of public disaffection for the democratic process and those working within in it. These criticisms remain remarkably relevant to the present situation. First, he highlighted contradictory condemnations of political parties, either because their differences were too great and led to too much abuse, or by contrast because they were too similar so that 'the whole thing is like a tea-party'. Second, he cited complaints about party domination, which left 'no room for the independent…who speaks as he pleases, without regard to the consequences'. Third, he referred to unhappiness at the perceived rigidity of the party machines. And fourth, as a consequence, he highlighted the 'objection that you cannot really be objective and honest if you are a politician, that you have to indulge in far too much make-believe'.

As our review of contemporary social research illustrates, people still tend to view MPs with suspicion and hostility, and dislike the mainstream parties for being both 'too adversarial' and 'all the same'. While the numbers going to the polls may have been higher in past elections, various studies have shown that

most were simply voting out of habit or as a result of blind party loyalty rooted in class allegiance. If electors today are less swayed by such motives then it might be argued that this reflects a more critical and reflective polity.

All this might allow some politicians to shrug off claims about a 'crisis of democracy', and conclude nothing has really changed, that people have always been inclined to be rude about politicians as a group and quick to condemn that of which they have no personal experience. But for those who believe that politics and democracy are important, shrugging off declining public participation in the democratic process is an entirely inadequate response. As the recent *Audit of political engagement* argued, 'Democracy is about ensuring that every citizen has a say in who holds power and that the power they hold is accountable and legitimate. The extent to which people are politically engaged, therefore, is of critical importance to the health of a democratic society'.

In this concluding section, we outline some steps that might be taken to help put British democracy in better shape. In so doing, we want to highlight the central role that politicians – most particularly Members of Parliament – can play in changing the way politics is popularly perceived. After all, politicians are the public faces of politics, the central actors in our political institutions and the only element of our democratic system for which people directly vote. Moreover, in the British model of democracy ultimate power resides in the people but is mediated through elected representatives. If the representatives are not seen as an effective or available way of making things happen, then there is a danger they will be bypassed and our system of democracy weakened. If representatives are not confident in the authority bestowed on them by their electoral mandate, then they are less likely to take difficult, long-term decisions that may conflict with short-term or single interest pressures. And if through their own work in the constituency – or their collective work in party and Parliament – elected representatives are not able to reconcile competing sectional interests with the wider public good, then the risk of the most populist or powerful interests holding sway becomes much greater.

The true measure of a democratic system may not be how effectively it converts the will of the majority into political action but how able it proves in standing up for the rights and needs of minorities. As Larry Flynt, not normally cited in this context, has wryly observed: 'Majority rule only works if you are

also considering individual rights … you can't have five wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for supper' (Quoted in McHugh & Parvin 2005). In the modern world – with an increasingly mixed society, rapid technological change, globalised economy, unstable environment, escalating criminal and terrorist threats – the increasing size, scale and complexity of competing interests makes the need for representative democracy more important but more difficult. And in this period, when the weight of what is needed from politicians is increasing, the capacity of our national institutions – Parliament, the media, and political parties – to support both our democratic system and the elected MPs which are its central figures is seriously wanting.

So beyond the cries of 'crisis' in turnout and beneath commonplace generalisations about the lack of trust or respect for elected politicians, there are a number of features that should be the focus for serious attention. These are: the increasing number of people who doubt the effectiveness of involvement in the political system; the weakening legitimacy of representative leadership as voting and participation declines; and the diminishing capacity of the representative system to mediate with real authority between competing interests or to solve long-term problems which demand changes in individual, corporate or institutional behaviour.

However, just as there is cause for concern so our analysis of the available research suggests there are also grounds for optimism. First, the evidence we cite shows that knowledge and personal contact between electors and their MPs leads to more favourable judgement. This suggests that politicians as individual MPs or parliamentary candidates in their own areas have the ability to build a stronger and better reputation both for themselves and their profession. Second, the two-thirds of people who declare an interest in politics has remained broadly the same proportion for 30 years. Research confirms that the vast majority of people are actively interested in the issues that affect them, their family and the wider world, which suggests significant potential for greater participation if the limited definition of politics as something done by other people and not linked to people's own activity or experience can be overcome. Third, the improvement in public opinion about MPs' self-interested mercenary motivations since the 'cash for questions' period demonstrates that MPs can act to raise their reputation, especially when they act collectively (as they have to

establish and police Parliamentary standards on paid outside interests or modest modernisation of Parliamentary procedures). And fourth, despite their declared negative view of MPs and lack of faith in the political system, the majority do still look to politicians and government to deal with the social, economic, security and environmental problems they see. Millions demand action on international poverty from the G8 leaders, expect politicians of all parties to protect Britain better against terror attacks or recognise the requirement for politicians to lead in confronting the challenges of climate change.

But representative democracy depends on public participation to give legitimacy to the decisions that elected representatives make about how society is governed. It is important, therefore, that the public is encouraged to engage with politics. Achieving that goal, we argue here, involves redefining and reasserting the role of elected representatives as an important part of any wider political renewal. We want to encourage debate about ways in which this might be done, and in this spirit we set out some ideas on how perceptions of MPs could be changed and the political process be made more open and effective.

Increasing political knowledge and understanding

When surveys show nearly six in every 10 adults say they know 'nothing at all' or 'not very much' about politics and three in 10 believe the House of Lords has more power than the Commons, there is clearly a problem with public knowledge and understanding of the political system. In part, this reflects a democracy that is very poorly served by its media and in part this stands as a long-term indictment of the nation's education system which has failed to equip its citizens with basic knowledge of the democratic system, the rights of individuals within it and the role of the representatives elected to serve them. The introduction of citizenship education as a statutory requirement for secondary schools to teach, fully 84 years after the great enfranchising Act of 1918, should start to rectify this, but only in the longer term with new generations of citizens.

Citizenship education in schools consists of three strands: social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. Many schools also involve students in citizenship activities that are not part of the formal curriculum, such as school councils or raising money for good causes. Although schools are increasingly taking national curriculum citizenship seriously,

Ofsted has found that there are still only 800 teachers specifically qualified in citizenship studies in England's 2,500 secondary schools, that many try to teach it through other subjects rather than as a distinctive subject and some schools are providing less than the minimum time for this learning.

Having now introduced citizenship education, the next step must be to establish it fully as part of the school curriculum, encouraging links to activities outside school particularly through local volunteering and in the context of developing extended schools.

This is made all the more important because the institutions that have in the past introduced many people to political ideas, knowledge and activity – trade unions, churches, libraries, book clubs, local associations and political parties – are declining in membership and reach. Meanwhile, the 24-hour media substitutes as our principal source of information about politicians and politics, and serves as a surrogate for political debate. Tom Bentley describes 'the long-distance lens of the media' through which we now view our political 'cultures and institutions' (2005). Small wonder that people see politics as something 'apart' from their day-to-day experience or that politicians are regarded as remote and out of touch.

A redefinition of 'politics' and the role of elected representatives is vital, so that people can come to appreciate that the broad political process is simply individuals seeing things they want changed, making allies, arguing the case and securing the necessary decisions to bring about change. Organised pressure groups already populate much of the national level debate, so this political widening is most important at a local level. It should be actively fostered by MPs and elected local councillors who can help to facilitate wider consultative public debate and make decision-making structures more inclusive and accessible.

This is not an argument for decision-making simply to be given over by elected politicians to 'the community'. On the contrary, while advocates of 'direct democracy' may declare that such a revolutionary change would reinvigorate public participation in politics – enabling decisions to be taken by 'the people' unmediated by elected representatives, political institutions or state mechanisms – in truth, inherent flaws lay such arrangements open to domination by the most able and articulate self-selecting individuals.

Unlike direct democracy, the representative model distinguishes between

participation and decision-making. Representative politicians and institutions are charged with making informed, reflective and responsible decisions on behalf of those to whom they are accountable. If there is a point in elected politicians, it is to make difficult decisions and then account for their actions. The public has a key role to play both in influencing and conferring authority upon political institutions through open debate and a popular vote. At the moment, however, there is a concern that they are not properly involved.

The role of the public

The so-called crisis of democracy is often presented as a gulf that has opened up between 'the people' and the politicians and institutions that represent them. Earnest pleas are made for this gulf to be bridged. But bridges cannot be built from one side of a divide; the engineers must work from both banks before meeting in the middle. At the moment, although the construction work being undertaken by political institutions and actors could be improved, at least activity is underway. On the other side of the divide, despite statements of intent, there is little sign of action.

Perhaps, as Meg Russell has suggested, citizens 'have grown accustomed to sitting and waiting for politicians to act, rather than reflecting on what they can usefully do to change their own behaviour and that of those around them' (Russell 2005:57). The social research we have highlighted indicates that people declare they want to 'have a say in how the country is run', but what does that really amount to in practice? How prepared are people to search for information themselves, rather than expecting it to find them? How willing are they to offer views if consulted? And how ready are they to volunteer time and energy, not just money, to community organisations, political causes or campaigning pressure groups? Progressive change is only possible if the answers to such questions are positive. We believe that levels of local civic activism suggest they are, but such activity is not seen as connected even with the broadest concept of politics. So it is vital that the political system and those who work within it devote time and energy to creating opportunities for greater public dialogue and more active consultation and involvement in the decision-making process. At the same time, it is important to outline what the public have a right to expect.

Managing expectations of MPs

From our review of the available research, it is clear there is both a lack of understanding of the role of MPs and a lack of consensus as to what can reasonably be expected of them. Comparisons are drawn, always unfavourably, with other professions such as teachers or doctors. This may not be reasonable. Firstly, the multiple and competing expectations of MPs – from the public, both in the context of the constituency and in Parliament, from their Party and from institutions in the wider political system – is much more complex than that of most other professions. Secondly, there is a distorting influence on perceptions of MPs which arises from political affiliations and from attitudes to the government of the day.

How the public rate a product is influenced by their view of its industry. It is worth noting that every other profession, from hospital consultants to teachers, has a trade body to champion its members' common interests, particularly when its critics massively outweigh its advocates. If the nature of party politics makes it nigh on impossible for politicians to speak with a collective voice, then there is at least a case for an independent foundation – perhaps endowed by a combination of government, the political parties and MPs themselves – to sponsor better research and analysis on renewing the role of elected politicians in our representative democratic system.

With a striking lack of consistent research on what people want of their elected representatives – the BMRB study for the Commission on Standards in Public Life and the work of organisations like the Hansard Society being exceptional examples – there is certainly a good argument for more research and better indicators to help establish clearer and more consistent expectations of MPs. Our interviews with MPs suggest that the present answer to the question 'what's the role of the MP?' is: 'whatever the MP makes it'. It is a long-established convention of the Commons that MPs determine their own approach to the job and ultimately answer to their constituents at elections for the way they do it. But such broad scope leaves constituents little the wiser about what they can expect from their MP, who should be encouraged to explain the approach they take to their elected representative role. Every MP should be encouraged to set out for their constituents the role they seek to play in the constituency, in Parliament and in relation to the government of the day and set out the

service they aim to offer. Such an approach or contract with constituents might be expected to include local advice surgeries, working hours access to support staff, response periods for correspondence and regular reports to constituents. After all, government is requiring (and people are coming to see) such service standards as the norm in many other areas of life. We believe there could be consensus reached on what might be regarded as a standard that the public can reasonably expect – and what they cannot reasonably expect – wherever they live and whoever their MP. And furthermore, although the ultimate arbiter of every MP is rightly their constituency electorate, perhaps MPs should be prepared to accept an Ombudsman for constituents to direct serious complaints about failures in service, as greater public confidence is essential to the rehabilitation of perceptions of MPs.

As Leader of the House of Commons, Robin Cook wrote and spoke passionately about 'the growing gulf between Parliament and the public', and there can be no escape from the recognition that the public will no longer accept vote-and-forget representation. So MPs also need to seek more continuous communication with constituents, to encourage more forums for meaningful discussion and to find more institutional support for their mediation and articulation of the broader public interest.

So without relaxing the prohibition on MPs using House of Commons postal services for political campaigning, business correspondence or fundraising, there should be more scope and support for MPs to communicate with constituents about the service they offer, the work of Parliament and the business of the House, especially where matters of significant public policy interest are being debated. Recent easing of the rules on the use of an MP's office administration allowance has established the cost of producing and distributing an annual report to constituents as legitimate expenditure. This should now be expanded to permit at least a second annual communication. Indeed, this need not be limited to more communications from MPs but could also include better communications from Parliament that demonstrate the range of work carried out in Westminster.

The House of Commons as an institution is starting to improve the information it produces about the workings of Parliament. But alongside the scope for widening the reach of Parliamentary publications, Parliament's

website and BBC Parliament, the proper role of MPs as a principal conduit for information about Parliament to their constituents should be better supported. The public should be made more aware – by Parliament – of the information materials already produced, such as the new Introduction to Parliament pack, which should be made easily available for MPs and established, like computer equipment, as a standard service that MPs can draw upon and distribute to constituents without expenditure from their general office administrative fund.

Further modest reforms could also strengthen the other side of the constituent-MP relationship by increasing the scope for MPs to seek, receive and reflect the views of constituents beyond the representations via Parliament that most MPs already make on behalf of their constituents. Loosening the rules to encourage MPs to conduct consultations and surveys in their constituencies, allowing certain early day motions to be debatable and establishing – like the Scottish Parliament – a Commons committee to consider whether issues raised in public petitions presented by MPs should be debated or examined more closely by Parliament are all straightforward steps that would enhance the capacity of the institution and its Members to be more responsive to the public.

Reforming Parliament

In recent years Parliament has introduced a range of reforms to select committees, sitting hours, facilities for visitors, the conduct of business and timetabling legislation. However, the next wave of Parliamentary reform must be to strengthen the rights and role of Parliament in holding government to account. Its central purpose must be to reinforce what the 2001 Hansard Society Newton Commission called the 'scrutiny culture', with the priority of backbenchers more balanced between their constituents, the Commons and their political party.

This is Parliament's established purpose. As Sir Christopher Fraser (2005) has described, the principal settlement since the reform acts of the nineteenth century has been for government to formulate policy, propose legislation and take executive decisions supervised by Parliament, whose role is to revise and ratify the legislation put before it and hold ministers to account. As noted earlier, it is clear that the public expects to see MPs in Parliament doing better at cross-examining government policy, action, expenditure and legislation.

Individually, ministers must accept that their capacity to cope with sharp scrutiny in committee or Commons chamber is basic to their competence in the post. And collectively ministers must embrace the fundamental principle that a more accountable government makes for a better government.

However, as well as stronger scrutiny by Parliament, further reform should place a greater emphasis on public consultation and engagement. Priority proposals for reform might therefore cover: all legislation published in draft unless there are good reasons for not doing so, with greater use made of special standing committees so that expert opinions on a bill can be heard; increased capacity for select committees through more members and resources, with an expectation that they would do more to open up their inquiries to the public and hold hearings outside Westminster; greater scheduling of parliamentary business by Parliament, with the carry over of bills between sessions; more Commons follow up to select committee inquiries, not just through debates in the chamber but experimentation with special question times, led by the select committee members, on major reports and the government's response to them; a new select committee on delegated governance to bring more Parliamentary and public accountability of non-departmental bodies and agencies via ministers; and a Commons committee, modelled on the merits of statutory instruments committee the Lords set up in 2003, to examine secondary legislation to identify those regulations that should be subject to closer scrutiny and refer them either to a specialist committee on delegated legislation or to the appropriate Commons select committee. Finally, there needs to be more post-legislative scrutiny.

The media

There is little doubt that political coverage, particularly of Parliament, could be improved. Most MPs are ignored by the media most of the time. Almost all the business of the House of Commons goes unreported. If we want the public to be less detached from politicians, then the media must shoulder some responsibility. If we want politicians to be able to confront the big issues of our age – security, climate change, economic forces of globalisation, adequate provision and support in old age – then again the media must make allowances and play its part. Currently, much media coverage of politics and politicians is short-term, selective and specific in the interests or issues it highlights. For many

people their only connection to politics, in the form of Parliament or politicians, is through the lens of the media; and they are often only made aware of politicians through coverage of personal indiscretions, idiosyncrasies or 'sleaze'. We should, perhaps, not be surprised if the public then believe that politicians as a social species are dishonest, self-interested or irrelevant. For many people 'politics' is seen as an obstacle to good government rather than the means by which it is achieved. Rarely do the public get the chance to see MPs working together in ways that demonstrate how politics is a constructive and necessary part of making decisions about society.

This is not to place the blame for negative perceptions about politics solely on the media. Even in terms of media coverage, politicians and political institutions bear a responsibility for what is broadcast or printed. So, for example, if ministers make statements on new policies in the press before Parliament, they can scarcely then criticise the media for ignoring the institution. Nonetheless, there is a widespread sense – shared by some within the media – that the way politics is covered in newspapers, on radio and on television, is damaging to how people perceive the political system and to their belief that they have a central part to play in it.

This is tricky territory, especially for politicians. Criticism of the media or assertion of the responsibilities of the fourth estate in reinforcing our system of representative democracy and values is so often swiftly and savagely dismissed as a desire to gag or regulate for self-serving political ends. Thus we are denied the serious debate about the role and obligations of the media in a mature democracy, which is sorely needed.

Reviving political parties

As we have shown, political parties consistently finish bottom of the public's trust list for different types of organisation and institution. However, just as the low regard for politicians is not new, so dislike of parties is also long-established. Nevertheless, fewer and fewer people now say they identify with a political party and there is an increasing proportion who, without being asked, will actively discourage rather than encourage support for a particular political party. Post 9/11 in 2001 the terror attacks increased support and trust for political institutions, though not for political parties. So if there is a contemporary crisis

in British politics, it is more a crisis for political parties than for politicians. Part of the problem for political parties is the nature of recent social change which has seen the decline of most forms of collective association and activity, from trade unions and churches to hobby clubs and team sports. However, this well-charted trend should not deflect from the strong story of continuing civic vitality and activism. For example, Oxfam commands regular donations from around 500,000 supporters while the 2005 Hansard Society/Electoral Commission *Audit of political engagement* showed 'people engage in three political activities over 12 months, and they devote between one and four hours per week to associational activities'.

As the locus and focus of political parties has become more centralised parties have moved away from the community and civil society, creating a vacuum which single issue campaigns or sectional interest groups are filling. This is a particular characteristic of political parties during periods in power when the imperative to support the government inevitably moves them towards the state and further from being either a voice or channel for wider viewpoints. Many in the Labour Party would recognise this description of their present position and some Conservatives might accept that their Party has yet to re-emerge from the long shadow of their 18 years in government. The imperative for the main political parties must therefore be renewal through reorientation and reorganisation. Traditionally, membership has been the route through which parties involve citizens. And a combination of overlapping membership and active community links meant parties could act as a local forum through which other sectional interests – church, guiding association, chamber of trade, sports club, toddlers' group, trade union or social club – could be mediated. Parties could serve as an environment for social mixing and political discussion. Nowadays, any mediation or articulation of community interests is largely left to elected politicians, with councillors and MPs less supported than ever in this role by their political parties.

But parties remain essential for representative democracy to function effectively. Whatever the level of personal support claimed by MPs, they are voted into office very largely as party candidates. As Gaitskell recognised, as long as striking the balance between competing specific interests to maximise the general good lies at the heart of representative democracy then political

parties have a necessary part to play, both nationally and locally. So in addition to selecting candidates and being effective electoral machines, political parties must do more to renew their role as mediating institutions for realising the common good. This means: first, developing as more active forums for debate and deliberation; second becoming more pluralist in culture, composition and capacity; third, acting as a stronger bridge between local level concerns and national institutions, policies and debate; and fourth, being seen and strongly supported by the Party leaderships to play an essential role between and not just at elections.

Given present social trends this will not be achieved through the singular mechanism of membership. The traditional form of political party association – 'you have to pay to have your say' – is too limited to meet these challenges and political parties must look seriously at extending their reach and encouraging wider connections through supporter-status, consultation panels, and citizen juries.

Conclusion

The issues we have set out in this concluding section lie at the heart of popular judgements about politicians and our representative system of democracy more generally. Are our MPs up to the job of representing a wide and increasingly diverse range of views? How could they operate better in doing so? How can political parties and Parliament reinforce their capacity to engage the public in their work? What responsibilities should the media accept? What expectations should there be of the public?

The future of representative democracy depends in large part on answering these questions. At present, our conclusions suggest there needs to be a cultural shift in politics, led by elected representatives and their political parties. Civic activism needs to be connected with political activism in a broader understanding of politics which is not limited to the party political or the activities of professional politicians. And a renewal of our politics also requires more from the public – to take a greater interest in politics and become more involved. But in encouraging them to do so, we believe MPs have a crucial part to play. Although they already face a difficult task in balancing their parliamentary duties with party pressures and constituency casework, to these must be added extra

roles: setting out more clearly the service their constituents can expect, better promoting the work they do to hold the government to account and, perhaps most importantly, spearheading the renewal of representative democracy by informing and consulting their constituents about politics in a way that reaches beyond the bounds of most current political debate. This is a tough challenge but the renewal of our politics requires MPs, and their parties, to meet it.

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FOOTNOTES

1. NB – this data is from Eurobarometer 61, Feb-Mar 04 (and only includes EU15).

2. A similar trend can be observed after the 7th July bombing in London where net satisfaction ratings (those satisfied minus those dissatisfied) with the government increased by seven percentage points and net satisfaction with Tony Blair increased by ten percentage points in the aftermath of the attacks. See http://www.mori.com/pools/trends/satisf12.shtml.

NOTES

MPs and politics in our time

In this pamphlet, John Healey MP, Mark Gill and Declan McHugh outline existing research about what the public thinks about politics, political institutions and its elected representatives. Moreover, through interviews with MPs from across the political spectrum, they add a politicians' perspective to the contemporary debate on the problem of political disengagement. In so doing, they suggest a number of practical measures that might increase public confidence and involvement in the political process.

At the heart of their argument is a belief that 'politics' needs to be redefined, so it is no longer seen as a remote process 'administered' by an exclusive elite but as an interactive pursuit connected to the everyday activities and aspirations of the public. Political parties and elected representatives, they conclude, must be the prime agents in effecting this change in popular attitudes.