

OPINION

Need for New Politics - of Consultation, Consensus and Community Engagement

Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, Prime Minister of Great Britain - 3 September 2007

Can I say first of all I am delighted to be here, delighted to be with the National Council of Voluntary Organisations and delighted to have in this audience with us some of the country's greatest campaigners and some of the country's greatest campaigning organisations. And I pay tribute to the work of the National Council of Voluntary Organisations under your leadership, Stuart, and I pay tribute to all of you here today from the voluntary and community sector for the passion, for the commitment, for the fearlessness you bring to your work and for the extraordinary things that you achieve each and every day on behalf of those that you serve.

And the reason that I am here this morning to speak to an audience of people that makes change happen in our communities, day in day out, is very simple, it is because I believe that the big challenges that we face as a country, from security, to climate change, to global competition, to the rising aspirations of individuals, to the desire for stronger, safer, more sustainable communities throughout our country, I believe that these challenges can no longer be solved by the old politics. I do believe that Britain needs a new type of politics which embraces everyone in the nation and not just a select few, a politics that is built on consensus and not division, a politics that is built on engaging with people and not excluding them, and perhaps most of all a politics that draws upon the widest range of talents and expertise, not narrow circles of power.

This is the politics of the mainstream centre ground in Britain, it takes a hard look at the tough questions, doesn't promise an easy path of short term slogans, it is a politics of the common ground and draws upon the common sense of people and it is where the new progressive consensus will be built so that we can meet the challenges of change in the long term interests of our country.

So quite simply I reject the old politics of dividing people, not uniting them, of quick fixes, not the long term solutions that everybody knows we must work hard to achieve together, and it means therefore debating concerns and issues like housing, crime, the NHS, schools, community development and regeneration, debating issues that affect local communities direction, not just in the corridors of power but throughout the country.

And so let me say what this means for the next stage of the development of our country in my view. I know that in this room today each of you is working in very special and dedicated ways in the different organisations you represent, committing your energies and often your whole lives to the good of the people of this country. You shape new ways of strengthening our communities, improve our public services in doing so, meet new and sometimes otherwise unmet needs and you enrich our civil society. And although ours is an era in which many of the traditional structures of society and association and voluntary engagement have declined, I have also seen round the country as I have visited different communities new and vibrant forms of civic life, social and community action, multi-media technologies that have

transformed and are transforming the scope and nature of civic participation. And I have travelled round the country outside Whitehall and Westminster to see in social enterprise, in local environmental action, in new forms of neighbourhood engagement, in non-governmental organisations such as Make Poverty History, a new Britain that is being born and it is a Britain that we must recognise and celebrate.

Action by individuals, that even the words voluntarism and voluntary action no longer fully capture, are happening daily in our communities. There are 50,000 social enterprises with a combined turnover of £27 billions. Half of the population, as we know, volunteers at least once a month. We have to reach out and connect with this new energy and enterprise and it is urgent that we do so because of the profound new challenges that I believe this country faces now and for the future cannot be solved, cannot be met by top-down solutions simply by saying, as people often did in the past, that the man in Whitehall knows best. These challenges that each community faces requires us to devise new ways of responding to the aspirations and concerns of the British people. Climate change for example demands that we combine international action and investment with the direct personal and social responsibility and commitment of ordinary people in every community of our country. Tackling crime and security demands we build support in each community for community actions that will tackle and reduce and prevent violent crime, increased global competition and meeting that challenge demands people themselves make decisions about how they will upgrade their skills and they must themselves therefore be involved in the economic decisions.

New pressures faced by children and their parents can be addressed only by the engagement of parents and children themselves. The yearning for stronger communities that I detect when I travel round the country requires us to play our part as local citizens in actually building these communities.

So I do not agree with the old belief of half a century ago that we can issue commands from Whitehall and expect the world to change, nor can we leave these great social challenges simply to the market alone. Indeed when we think about how to tackle the big challenges we face it is increasingly the culture in which we live our lives that matters, our beliefs and aspirations, the values and norms that shape our goals and the boundaries that we set and are prepared to set for the way we behave in our families and in our communities.

So only a new kind of politics can help us meet these challenges, whether it is tackling crime or gang violence, the future health of the nation or climate change, the solutions will not come from simply a narrow debate between what states do and what markets do. We found in the 20th century the limits of this paradigm is through people themselves, through cultural and social change that we will see the difference being made. It is people who are engaged in changing the world as individuals, parents, neighbours and active citizens that will be the next momentum for change.

Now many will recall that when I took over as Prime Minister I emphasised that the government must listen and the government must learn. And now I say that we must do more, we must engage and involve with people on the issues they face in their early day lives, and that means each challenge we face requires us to be open to new ideas and to new ways of doing things and this is the unique and pressing requirement that demands this new politics.

September usually sees the resumption of Westminster politics, but while party politics resumes its normal routines it cannot and should not be this year business as usual. Facing serious challenges we must address together as a nation, the British people deserves better. And I believe I am not alone in thinking that the normal politics, the old tired sloganising politics of the past should not resume in the old ways this autumn.

I think we are being held back by three great failings in our political system: the political parties themselves have not reached out enough to people so we have to rise to the challenge of forging a better party politics; that the political system too often ignores or neglects new ideas that flow from outside in Westminster and often in the past have failed to listen and learn, so we have to rise to the challenge of opening up our political system to recognise and to take on board new ideas; and our participatory democracy is too weak at a local level so we have to rise to the new challenge of encouraging engagement. Indeed the power of progressive politics rests in the empowerment of people it serves and that is our purpose and I believe progressive politics in this country will only truly succeed in shaping a better Britain if we actively reach out to new ideas, if we find new ways of engaging people in their communities and then build a consensus for change. So I don't want to carry on with politics as usual.

And let us be clear about the basic facts. Once 84% of people voted, and that was 17 out of every 20, in the last election it was less than 62% - 12 in every 20. In the 1950s 1 in 11 people joined a political party, today it is 1 in 88. Once political parties aggregated views from millions of people, now they need to broaden their appeal to articulate the views of more than the few. In 1987 nearly half the electorate identified fairly, or strongly, or very strongly with a political party, now only 1 in 3 do so. 20 years ago 4 in 10 people trusted the government to put the needs of the nation above those of political parties, more recently it has been only 1 in 5.

And this is not because politicians are necessarily as individuals less trustworthy or because they work less hard, nor does it mean the end of political parties. Party politics remains at the heart of a representative democracy, it reflects inevitable differences of values and principles and it is fundamental to citizens to have a clear choice of programmes and policies. But I believe that the evidence shows that the depths of people's concerns cannot be met by the shallowness of an old-style politics. The breadth of these new challenges I have identified cannot be addressed by the narrowness of the old tired political discourse, so to make change happen, to secure the national interest, to fulfil our potential as a country we need to reach out beyond governing parties, we must be open to new ideas, we must take them on from whatever quarter they come. Change happens when we involve people who are rarely involved and want to do more than cast a vote at elections, change happens when we enhance rather than constrain democracy at the local grass roots level.

And I want to propose new ways of reaching out today, reaching out so that voices outside my party are heard and that means voices outside normal political processes, for politics cannot resume in new ways without recognising the need to engage people of no party as well.

So here is the outline of some initial proposals. In the constitutional statement before the summer I suggested how the Executive should give up power to the legislator and that both the Executive and the law-making body must be more

closely in touch with the British people. I now have three proposals that enable us to reach out beyond governing parties and strengthen the link between people and parliament, citizens, communities and government.

First, if we are to meet the challenge of engagement the old models of consultation need radical renewal. While they have been useful in shaping policies we have come nowhere near realising the potential of the public to make better policies. I am determined that the wisdom and experience that resides within the British people will be better put to use in the future. Now in the old days when politicians went round the country the principal method of communication was political party speeches from platforms. More recently this country opened up to question and answer sessions where politicians went round the country offering to do questions and then answers, and often, I admit at least in my case, the answers from the politicians were far longer than the questions. Now we need new ways and means to bring together citizens to discuss both specific challenges that need addressing, and concrete proposals that we can discuss for change. We have already taken the step of publishing the legislative programme in draft, inviting comments and views, and for the last six months I have been discussing and working through how to do in a more consultative way that involves people in debating the issues that matter - drugs, crime, antisocial behaviour, housing development or even foreign policy issues like Iraq where there are public discussions.

So starting this week we will hold Citizens Juries round the country. The members of these juries will be chosen independently. Participants will be given facts and figures that are independently verified, they can look at real issues and solutions, just as a jury examines a case. And where these citizens juries are held the intention is to bring people together to explore where common ground exists.

The first Citizens Jury will be held later this week on issues related to children, how to ensure that every child can be safe, secure, successful at school; how parents can get the advice and support they need as they try to bring up their children; how we can ensure that our education system for every child reaches the highest standards. And I know too that parents are concerned about whether children are too exposed to harmful violence and sexual imagery in video computer games and on the internet, so as we launch the court consultation on our children's plan we will be looking at all the evidence on the effects of this material, whether we need new rules for the advertising and sale of these products to children and young people, and what more can be done to help parents regulate access to inappropriate material on the internet.

The second Citizens Jury will be held next week on crime and communities. None of us needs reminding, after the all too tragic events of recent weeks, of the horrific consequences of gun and gang violence. We will do everything in our power to catch and convict those responsible for such heinous crimes that have shocked every parent and every community. And we know that for the people in criminal justice agencies to take effective action to enforce the law, the involvement and support of local people is crucial, that crime falls when communities become stronger. So the Citizens Jury on crime will look at how we can empower people in their neighbourhoods to work with the police and other agencies to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour.

It will be followed by nine simultaneous Citizens Juries on the future of the National Health Service, one in each region, linked by video. These will bring together patients, staff, the public. They will examine major questions of concern to people, like access to services, the quality and safety of care, how we can reduce health inequalities.

So in the next three weeks we will tackle three big issues in Citizens Juries. But this is not a one-off event, it is going to be an ongoing process of reaching out, of doing the business of government differently. So for example I believe we can only win hearts and minds in the fight against terrorism if we engage people in discussion, debate, dialogue at the grass roots, in people's communities. This will therefore be an issue that we will put to the people directly, particularly in those areas most affected, in encouraging local debate, dialogue and interaction.

I also propose that representatives assembled from every constituency come together in a nationwide set of Citizens Juries held on one day. And these juries will look at a range of issues like crime and immigration, education, health, transport and public services, and I hope they will receive the enthusiastic support of MPs and local councillors from whatever party. Citizens Juries will help shape the policies in the way that people for whom they are created want. Direct citizen involvement in policy making can be the ally rather than the enemy of a renewed representative democracy. And a Citizens Summit, composed of a representative sample of the British people, will be asked to formulate the British statement of values that was proposed in our Green Paper on the future government of Britain, a living statement of rights and responsibilities for the British people. It won't take root anyway unless there is a real sense that it has been brought forward by people themselves, and this will be part of the wider programme on consultation led by Jack Straw and Michael Wills on the British statement of values, the idea of a British Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, rights and duties, the components of the Constitutional Reform Bill. Jack Straw will announce details of this programme shortly.

Now Citizens Juries are not a substitute for representative democracy, they are an enrichment of it. The challenge of reviving local democracy can only be met if we build new forms of citizen involvement to encourage them in our local services and in new ways of holding people who run our services to account. So we will expand opportunities for deliberation, we will extend democratic participation in our local communities. I want to see a vibrant reformed local democracy, from neighbourhood level engagement, community calls to action, a renewed focus on the devolution of powers and responsibilities to local government, the accountability of our police, our healthcare services to their communities. In this way people can connect neighbourhood meetings, local ballots and elections and new forms of community action for decision making and the exercise of power over issues they care about in their daily lives. And as part of a new concordat between local and central government, Hazel Blears will be working on proposals for the extension of local democracy in these areas.

My second proposal is that we set up new standing commissions where we can bring together not just people of all parties, but representatives from outside the normal party system to examine continuing issues of concern. Now choosing these issues would be on the basis that they are long term and usually non-ideological concerns that it is in the interests of the whole nation to agree to meet together.

Take for example carers. As our society ages our need for carers rises. Care is an issue that will affect us all in some way in the future. Nobody understands this better than the many organisations in the voluntary and community sector, many of them here today who support carers and the cared for, and who advocate for them. I believe that the thinking that will be of best help for carers and those cared for will draw upon the ideas, the views and the values of the 6 million British carers themselves.

Last year when I went to visit the home of a carer I heard at first hand the struggle and yet the desire to help others in the same position. She wanted to train carers, to advise and perhaps even to help service carers with her own company set up for that purpose. And she told me she doesn't want the government to walk away, she wants the government on her side, and it is when government works in partnership with the voluntary sector, local authorities and carers themselves that we can do most to make lives better. But in future working in partnership must mean not only listening and learning, but involving and engaging the carers themselves in solutions we need.

So building on the consultation we are already undertaking this year with carers, I believe we should now establish a standing commission on carers. Philippa Russell, a leading expert and advocate, will work with Ivan Lewis, the Minister for Carers, to take forward this proposal. And because I favour breaking through the old sterile party divides I also want to ensure that advice can be given by the best people of whatever political persuasion, and reviews that are necessary in the national interest can be done by people, irrespective of party label, who have important contributions to make.

I have asked Patrick Mercer MP, a recognised expert on security issues, to advise Lord West on the security of our infrastructure and our crowded places. John Bercow MP, Chair of the All Party Group, will lead a review of services for young people and children who have speech, learning and communications needs and he will report to the Secretary for Children and the Secretary for Health, and full details of this will be announced next week. Mathew Taylor MP will advise on land use through the planning system in support of sustainable rural communities and he will report to the Secretary for Environment and the Minister for Housing.

And then in order to address the problems of the political system itself, I want to revive the idea of a Speaker's Conference. A Speaker's Conference brings together all the parties at Westminster to look at issues that can only be dealt with on a cross-party basis. In the last century there were five Speaker's Conferences and each looked at different aspects of the political and electoral system - reform of the franchise, distribution of parliamentary seats, registration of electors and other matters. Today I am proposing to the Speaker that he calls a conference to consider against the backdrop of a decline in turnout, a number of other important issues such as registration, weekend voting, the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons, and that he should also examine in parallel with the Youth Citizenship Commission whether we should lower the voting age to 16 so that we build upon citizenship education in schools and combine the right to vote with the legal recognition of when young adults become citizens of our country.

And let me also confirm discussions are now being held to arrange a sitting of the Youth Parliament in the House of Commons.

Instead therefore of dividing along party lines, I propose that the Speaker's Conference unite the parties, bring them together in search of solutions that we can jointly agree on to the disengagement of people from the political process.

Now in the next few weeks I will talk in depth about terrorism and security, about global economic cooperation and competition, about the environmental challenge, about the rising aspirations that we need to meet of the British people for better public services, and how there is a shared agenda for new and better opportunities. But my basic thesis today is that I believe that this is the wrong time in history for politics as usual, the wrong time for empty partisan posturing which focuses only on what divides. Faced with the common challenges that we face together it is the wrong time for continuing to treat citizens simply as members of contending groups as if there was no scope for common ground, the wrong time for perpetuating the sterile divisions and archaic battles for territory that dominated the ideologies of an ever more distant past. Instead this is the right time to discover what we have in common, to cooperate across party lines, to work together with patriotic purpose to do what is right in the British interest, to move from that common ground to the higher ground of each doing what we can do together to advance our countries and our country's best interests and ideals.

The voluntary and community sector understands these principles better than anyone. I believe that in the local government proposals the desire of the voluntary sector to be consulted, and the duty on local authorities to do so, will be fully recognised for the first time. I believe that these principles are ones that apply at a national as well as a local level. You are putting the principles of consulting, listening, engaging, involving and serving into practice every day, you share our commitment to changing our society for the better. So this is a new kind of politics I want, it is not an easy politics, it is not about gimmicks, it is about doing things the hard way, it is about finding real solutions to challenges that if we do not face them together we will not address them successfully at all, and it is a politics of consensus because our progressive ambitions for Britain will only be met in the mainstream centre ground where all the talents and energies of the country can be prepared to come together. It is however a politics built on engagement and empowerment because lasting change only happens if people make it happen, and it is I hope a politics of common purpose because our country's future can only be built by being fair to every single person in our community.