

**GOVERNANCE OF BRITAIN LOCAL ENGAGEMENT EVENT**

**BRISTOL**

**MONDAY 30<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2008**

**The Statement of Values**

The overarching message from the discussion was that history suggests that nations normally construct Statement of Values in the aftermath of war or revolution. In relatively peaceful and stable times therefore, the Government has the responsibility to ensure that the debate to develop a Statement of Values is meaningful and resonates with citizens.

The main points made by participants were:

- It might be difficult to reach a consensus on a shared set of values and therefore there was a danger that we would end up with a bland document that said very little about who we are as a nation.
- Any Statement of Values should be used as a benchmark by which Government formulates policy and not just as a tool to tell ordinary citizens how to behave. We need to be careful to ensure that the Statement of Values does not become paternalistic.
- A Statement of Values, and the proceeding debate, should rise above party politics and aim to reach a cross-party consensus.
- A Statement of Values could be an opportunity to counter balance the emphasis on individual rights in our society, by looking more closely at our responsibilities to society and each other.
- Once in place we would need to have a clear strategy on how we disseminate and socialise the values amongst different sections of society.
- We would need to be clear about uses for the Statement of Values and its legal status.
- In an increasingly globalised world, we would need to devise a Statement of Values that was adaptable enough to keep pace with change.
- The process by which we debate and develop a Statement of Values is more important than the final product. It must be inclusive of all communities, particularly hard to reach groups.

## **Bill of Rights and Responsibilities**

The overarching message from the discussion was that participants saw merit in a debate about our rights and responsibilities. A new narrative, which ensured that the relationship between the two was better understood, might be of value. However, participants were less certain about whether that should translate into a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.

The main points made by participants were:

- Many people in local communities feel disempowered and lack awareness of the rights they have as citizens. An inclusive national debate on rights and responsibilities might help to reengage the citizen with the state and would be an opportunity to raise awareness of rights amongst the general population.
- It could be difficult to have a meaningful debate about rights and responsibilities as a nation against a global culture that some participants thought was dominated by greed and consumerism. Local people might question why they should follow the common good when they see others profiting from looking after themselves.
- Any Bill of Rights and Responsibilities should apply to the private sector as well as the public sector and incorporate a clause on corporate social responsibility.
- Participants felt that just as those people who were in receipt of unemployment benefit had a responsibility to look for work, so those at the higher end of the income scale had a responsibility to pay all of the tax owed.

## **Community Engagement**

The overarching message from the discussion was that public engagement had to be meaningful and worthwhile to the participants involved and that their contribution is going to be taken into account as part of the decision-making process.

The main points made by participants were:

- It is important to manage expectations when embarking on a public engagement or consultation exercise. People should be clear what scope there is to affect change.
- The Government needs to be careful not to create 'consultation fatigue'. The public do not expect to be consulted on every issue. The Government/local authorities should only consult on issues where participants can actually influence the decision. It is also important to make use of existing mechanisms at a local level, for example online forums.
- The Government needs to think about the breadth and reach of their engagement activities. There is a tendency to engage with the usual suspects and not reach out to hard to reach groups.
- Participants questioned how representative the people who attended engagement events were and whether they acted as 'gatekeepers' or 'gateways' to the communities of place and/or interest they represent.
- Sufficient time needs to be given to respond to consultations.
- It can be very helpful to the public policy process to bring people together to deliberate on complex issues where there are difficult trade-offs as this often results in a slightly different consensus than would be reached through traditional consultation.

## **Election Day**

The overarching message from the discussion was that the Government needed to tackle the underlying reasons why a significant portion of the population didn't feel that voting was worthwhile or made a difference to their lives. Reducing the practical barriers to voting alone was not going to produce a measurable increase in turnout.

The main points made by participants were:

- There is a disconnection between expectations (communicated to voters at the time of an election) and the practical delivery of those commitments. This has led a significant proportion of the population to believe that voting no longer has an appreciable impact on their lives.
- The Westminster system of adversarial party politics was off putting for most voters and hindered effective decision-making. Decisions were often made for short-term political gain. Systemic and structural failures were not tackled effectively because they required long-term root and branch reform which did not translate into effective election winning proposals.
- Our current electoral system, whilst having the merit of producing stable government, results in a disproportionate number of seats for the governing party. In addition because the majority of seats are considered safe for one or other of the parties, a large number of the votes cast make no difference to the outcome of a general election. This produces a disincentive to vote. Participants thought that a system of proportional representation (with or without the constituency link) would have a positive impact on turnout.
- The British democratic system is currently too coarsely grained. There is a disconnection between the different layers of government – particularly between central and local government. A more finely grained system would enable the creation of a framework of participation and deliberation within the context of representative democracy.
- Most people's only or main contact with power is through their day to day interactions with public services, such as the local school or hospital. Yet there is a real gap between government that sets the policy framework and those delivering the services. This is due to an over reliance on targets, and an undermining of professionalism, which has led to a reduction in accountability.
- There was concern about the current system of electoral registration. Household registration tended to discriminate against women and minorities and transient communities and postal voting as currently constituted was open to fraud. Participants were therefore in favour of a system of Individual Registration.