

**GOVERNANCE OF BRITAIN LOCAL ENGAGEMENT EVENT**

**NEWCASTLE**

**MONDAY 14 JULY 2008**

**The Statement of Values**

The overarching message from the discussion was that values need to be rooted in something substantial. To have values based in nothing would leave them lacking any real significance. It would be difficult to root them in religious values, as they would need to be secular given the make up of modern British society. But it would be vital to ensure that the values chosen had some meaning beyond a collection of vague aspirations. This is the very difficult balance that needs to be struck if a statement of values is to mean something to the public.

The main points made by participants were:

- Much discussion focused on the values that are important to the country such as freedom, tolerance, equality, Habeas Corpus and freedom of conscience.
- Philosophically we are a liberal nation and this should be reflected in our values. Those values are set out in statute already- such as the Human Rights Act. It will be very difficult to distil all that this represents into just a few words without it running the risk of being banal and meaningless.
- It is the common institutions that tie the UK together such as the BBC, National Health Service, World Service News, The Monarchy and our Parliamentary political system. These are regardless of background, race, religion etc. and therefore reflect what it is to be British today rather than being rooted in history and what the country used to be.
- However, such institutions are not necessarily unique to the UK. For example, Canada has the CBC and we are not the only nation with a national health service. If we define ourselves by our institutions we are not defining ourselves as being unique.
- The danger of basing our national identity on values is that it could turn the UK into a 'crusader nation'. The USA is a country that is based upon values and this has influenced their foreign policy in a negative way.

- A statement of values could be used in schools. Parents may also want to use it to teach their children what it is to be British- rather like a Service Level Agreement. However, were we to use them in such a way they would need to be kept very broad (which in turn runs the risk of them being viewed as 'motherhood and apple pie').

## **Bill of Rights and Responsibilities**

Opinion was divided about the need or desirability of a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. A Bill could give welcome clarity to our historically evolved system. But there was also the question as to why it was needed and what evidence there was for having one, especially as much of what we needed was already in our legislation.

The main points made by the participants were:

- Concern about how rights are framed in UK legislation. By defining them in the negative what you can do is up to you, there is a 'citizens space' left open for society to define. Concern if a Bill of Rights would serve to *limit* what we could do. What we can't do and what our fundamental civil liberties are should be very clear.
- There is no central document and a lack of coherence about our constitution as we've evolved as a democracy. It could pull together what has developed piecemeal as a result of history. At present, it is really time-consuming and confusing even for those that are interested in it.
- Defining our rights and responsibilities might mean we lose flexibility. It would need to be flexible enough to be changed in a constitutional manner. Other countries have found ways to handle this, perhaps the French model, but concern about the US right to bear arms. It must be something that lasts for 100 years or more so must be just the essentials kept very clear on which we can always build.
- There is a need for a 'grown up' conversation in the country about a Bill. A Bill would be consistent with the direction for public bodies to have a charter setting out what the citizens expect and it is incumbent on Central Government to do likewise.
- Concern about the relationship between a Bill of Rights (which might only apply to citizens) and the Human Rights Act (applying to anyone). Would it create a two-tier system with different rights and responsibilities for citizens and non-citizens? Presumably a Bill wouldn't limit the HRA. Perhaps it would increase take up of British Citizenship?
- Further questions include: How might a Bill relate to Equality legislation? How might it apply to the armed forces? The monarchy? Why not have a written constitution?

## **Community Engagement**

The overarching message from the discussion was that the Government must take seriously the devolution of power and involving the public in decision making. Whilst important, the mechanisms used to do this should be secondary.

The main points made by the participants were:

- Greater local participation should go alongside greater devolution to local areas. Devolving power will assist in increasing participation.
- Methods of engagement - rather than supporting or rejecting any method, participants thought that methods should be selected according to the circumstances. For example, using direct or deliberative democracy would be appropriate, if there was scope to affect change. However, when the Government had decided on a course of action, representative democracy should apply.
- Hearing Different Voices /Inclusiveness – Concern that creating new mechanisms for deliberation should not simply be an opportunity for lobby-groups to exercise more influence or power. It is important to involve hard to reach groups and to mitigate against conversations being taken over by the majority. Using new technology may broaden the range of voices heard.
- It is important to manage expectations. People should be clear on the parameters of the debate and the scope that exists to affect change. People are more likely to participate if their input affects change. This needs to be accompanied by consistent and timely feedback on progress. People understand that change can take time but they need reassurance that things are happening.
- Concern about the appropriateness of rolling out a policy at a national level, without taking into account local applicability. For example, free travel for older people has a greater impact on local budgets in areas where there are a disproportionate number of older people. Citizens' Summits will be useful in hearing peoples' views, but questions were raised as to whether the decisions should be applicable across the whole country.
- The 'Speakeasy' concept used in Barnsley was cited as a good example of getting local people involved and hearing their views. The group also suggested the possibility of getting on board a large media partner to deliver a Saturday night TV programme to debate issues of importance.

## **Election Day**

The overarching message from the discussion was that it was not necessary to change the day on which elections take place. Improving access was the key to improving turnout, as was more involvement by citizens at a grass roots level and more public education on the importance of citizens exercising their democratic right to vote.

The main points made by the participants were:

- Factors that contribute to a rise in turnout include:
  - Campaigns on local issues – e.g. a new community centre;
  - The popular candidate effect; and
  - National factors e.g. the economy
- Factors that contribute to a drop in turnout include:
  - A lack of choice e.g. a perception that the main parties are too closely aligned; and
  - People do not think their vote will make a difference to the outcome because of the electoral system or the similarity of policies between parties.
- Societal changes mean that that the civic `duty to vote` has been eroded, particularly amongst young people. Participants thought that the importance of voting should be included in the school citizenship curriculum.
- Holding elections on a Thursday rather than at the weekend was not thought to be a significant barrier to voting. However, participants were in favour of trialling new methods of voting in order to open up greater access. These included:
  - Internet Voting – providing there were appropriate safeguards in place to prevent fraud
  - Telephone voting – this needed to be simplified as the present system was
    - both complicated and time consuming
  - Postal voting – this had a high take up in a number of wards in Newcastle
    - and was popular with those who used it
  - Advanced Polling
  - Setting up Polling Stations in alternative venues e.g. supermarkets or doctors surgeries.