

# Deliberative Democracy: how can we hear when the people speak?

By **Diana Smith** / @mulberrybush

For all of us who want an election that is fought on the issues, the challenge of making it happen can at times seem daunting. I have seen enough on the doorsteps - at Crewe during the **local** by elections, and the results in the polling boxes in June - to understand what happens when we are dealing with an electorate that does not feel it has an effective means of making its voice heard, is essentially ill-informed and is therefore open to manipulation by what appear to be cynically orchestrated press campaigns.



One of the things I find quite alarming at present is the extent of the divide that is opening up between people who are informed and people who are not. In this age, we have more opportunity than ever before to find out the facts and share opinions. We also have endless opportunities to express our own opinions. But the sheer volume of words out there in itself becomes part of the problem.

A lot of people have identified that the internet and social media have a huge potential for bringing about the kind of empowerment that many people see as necessary - but we are not there yet. Because these questions have been on my mind for several years my attention was caught by an item on Radio 4 today regarding **Deliberative Democracy**.

A conference is being held in London involving James Fishkin, who is author of "**When The People Speak**". The conference brings together a panel of participants who will consider **58 questions from the thousands submitted to @power\_2010**.

James Fishkin explains the principle behind his process:

"Our subject is how to achieve deliberative democracy: how to include everyone under conditions where they are effectively motivated to really think about the issues. This is the problem of how to fulfill two fundamental values—political equality and deliberation."

I think his analysis of the current barriers to effective participation is useful. He sees four main problems

\* Individuals choose not to take the time to be informed because of "rational ignorance". If I have one opinion in millions why should I take the time and trouble to become really informed about politics or policy? My individual views will have only negligible effects.

\* Second, Fishkin says the public has fewer "opinions" deserving of the name than are routinely reported in polls. Respondents to polls do not like to admit that they "don't know" so they will choose an option, virtually at random, rather than respond that they have never thought about the issue.

\* A third limitation is that even when people discuss politics or policy they do so mostly with people like themselves - those from similar backgrounds, social locations and outlooks.

Efforts to manipulate public opinion work best with an unattentive and/or uninformed public. If the public is unattentive, then it may not take much to persuade and it may be easy to prime. If it is uninformed, it may be manipulated even if it is highly engaged or even emotionally gripped by an issue. In that case, it may be easily misled through misinformation or primed to consider only certain dimensions of an issue.

I think this analysis will seem pretty accurate to many people. It certainly does to me.

An important aspect of James Fishkin's work is that it measures the way in which the opinions of his representative groups actively change as they are given more information. The experiment going on in London this weekend is something that I think we should watch with interest.