



## Sunday morning with James Fishkin and POWER2010

By *Rosemary Bechler*

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### **Author:**

Rosemary Bechler

### **Summary:**

Rosemary Bechler gives her account as an observer of the POWER2010 Deliberative Poll.

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To my shame, I had to check where the Albert Embankment was, despite living in London all my life. But I found my way to this impressive Thames-side hotel overlooking the historic landscape of the House of Commons opposite, and was directed to the Plaza Suite. I had left snowy Highgate early to sit in on the second morning session of Power2010's Deliberative Poll, organised by the famous pioneer of a process designed to revive our modern democracies which harks back to ancient Athens, Stanford professor James Fishkin.

Every body else in the world seemed to have got up even earlier on a Sunday – and by the time I arrived, twelve round tables of a dozen or so discussants were already in animated discussion, making their way steadily through a series of propositions for political reform put together from 4,000 suggestions from around the UK, and rather coyly referred to in the Channel 4 coverage as 'user-generated'. The session I'd chosen was "Political Parties' AND Rights and Freedom'.

As you might expect, this part of the agenda was packed full of thorny problems and subtle challenges. But my first impression as I sought permission to sit myself down at the first empty chair, was that people weren't vexed or frustrated. If I had to put into words the atmosphere in my small group: each one might be slightly amused to find themselves there, but had decided that these were matters that were worth making an effort to get right. This was what you might with rare precision describe as a concerned public.

At that point, the facilitator hadn't arrived, and once I'd turned down a good-humoured invitation to take that job on – the discussion resumed, on how to ensure that Westminster politics is clean and transparent, how to strengthen our parliament, and how to balance various rights and freedoms. Each and every one of the group was really interesting to listen to. The quietest, elderly lady turned out to have lived in Norway most of her life and have distinct views on ID cards as a result.

The young guy and the local woman community activist sitting next to him were much more attuned to why you might have to have quotas to make Parliament more representative than the older male participants, regardless of the fact that they didn't seem to have benefited from the system much either and were quite fierce about class disparities, greasy poles and lobbying power. They wanted the 'best possible' representative, just like they hoped for consensus from the expert panels. In other words, there must be a right answer.

But all the men were thoughtful and pretty articulate. They didn't waste a single minute, but worked steadily and with great address without a facilitator. Unfortunately, having carefully compiled their questions to the panel and worried about which to submit, they didn't have their question asked. They had disagreed over quotas, but were united in wanting to know where better gender balance and ethnic minority representation worked well and why and what was the 'problem in the first place?' I think there ought to have been a last slot in plenary sessions with expert panels for any table that hadn't had a question asked.

But this is a detail: they were so interested and listened so well to each other, it was a pleasure to be there. The panel of four experts had prioritised questions from a huge agenda to deal with clearly in a short amount of time. Personally, I found most of the panel complacent about the status quo, apart from one human rights lawyer who, thankfully, raised

some of the thornier questions of vested interest and the use of power. Chatting afterwards to one of the people in my small group, he was disappointed that the panel could disagree, but perfectly happy to have changed his own mind on several issues. Others I talked to felt that there wasn't enough time to get to grips with the issues that exercised them.

Everyone felt that the process had been an eye-opener and worthwhile. This came over most strongly when we repaired to the dining room for lunch, and I found myself sitting next to Eileen who was hoping to leave early to catch a train home. As more people joined us over excellent food, all agreed that there wasn't enough time, but that they wouldn't have wanted to spend longer away from their homes.

My companion explained that she didn't like to leave her partner for so long as it was. All the participants had been asked to spread the word about their week-end to ten contacts of their own, and Eileen said she didn't know anyone else apart from her partner, and he shared the same e-mail address anyway. She said that somehow they seemed to have become very isolated, so much so that she had had enormous problems with getting a passport, because she didn't know anyone who could give her a reference. She didn't have a GP and she rather resented having to be vouched for by someone who was 'someone'. So the net result was that she wasn't bothering with the passport.

She, it turned out, was dead against quotas. She said it was like the worst aspects of the school playground categorising people as 'women' or 'ethnic minorities' or any other label, and that you just had to wait until cultures improved in their attitudes for the agenda to really change. That made me think.

When I asked everyone if they would be willing, however, to repeat the experiment, say in June – or even more regularly, just not all in one go, they all said yes. Eileen was the most emphatic – she would love to do more of this. It had been fascinating, and she would really look forward to another session like this.

I don't know what the Deliberative Poll outcome was. I'd like to hear at some point about the shortlist that has emerged from all that discussion. And I wish Power2010 well with the next, voting and campaigning stages. But for me, that's not the really interesting thing. What really matters in a democracy, more than anything else, is the process: whether it gives you some purchase on your life and those of others around you. At the next table, James Fishkin was finishing his lunch. I was glad to have an opportunity to shake his hand.

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