

What ideas came out of the Deliberative Poll and why?

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Summary:

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As readers of OurKingdom will know, POWER 2010 ^[1] has just launched a nationwide poll to choose five proposals for democratic reform from a list of 29 items that a deliberative assembly in London short-listed last weekend. The assembly consisted of some 130 citizens who were a representative sample of the population, in terms both of demography and attitudes.

POWER 2010 has issued a press release on what are essentially ideas for practical reforms that talks of 'mending Britain's broken politics'. Well these choices will not do that, but among them are key proposals that would at least make politics more open, representative - and interesting.

The participants' faith in Parliament and representative politics is quite striking (see here ^[2] for a pdf breakdown of how the reforms were ranked). There are a bunch of proposals for strengthening Parliament and the role of MPs, with stronger select committees at the head of their choices, but the expenses scandal has made its mark, with proposals to introduce recall for MPs and to involve the public in setting the wages and working conditions of MPs (at Nos. 8 and 11). They would also expand the role of the public, making it a duty on governments to consult the public on 'controversial matters' (No.4), possibly 'through direct democracy', introducing a strong Bill of Rights (No. 7), and strengthening and widening the scope of freedom of information laws (No.10).

I was very pleased to see that the anarchist idea that ballot papers should allow voters to opt for 'none of the above' made it through with a very high ranking (No.2), and also that they made a sensible recommendation that general elections should take place on Saturdays (No.5).

Other pluses for me at least: limiting or abolishing state databases that violate people's privacy (No. 5); reducing the use of statutory instruments (No. 8); giving MPs control of the parliamentary agenda (No. 13); giving more decision-making and financial powers to local councils (No. 18).

So it really is worth spending a few minutes voting for five of these proposals ^[3] in POWER 2010's wider poll and establishing some kind of democratic bridgehead in the forthcoming general election.

However, all in all the participants have assembled very much a practical agenda that patches up aspects of our 'broken politics' without mending them. This is presumably in part a reflection of where they are coming from, of their own experience and knowledge base, but it also reflects the quality of the organisers' input – in terms

of the original briefings and the information they received from expert panels and the difficulties inherent in making crucial links.

For example, the briefing document [4] on proportional representation was narrow and technical and failed to set out the systemic background. The participants' questions to the expert panel (on which I sat) were largely on representational matters, including the danger that PR elections would let the BNP in.

I therefore did not have the opportunity to discuss the effect that PR elections could have on the composition of the House of Commons, an issue that anyway was the subject of the following round of their discussions. Thus the contribution that PR could make to creating a more independent and stronger Parliament vis-à-vis the executive, did not surface as a possibility.

Changing the parliamentary election system 'to allow for proportional representation' thus comes in at No. 23, just above the cut, with no reference to Parliament. Similarly, the introduction of a written constitution is at No. 26. Once again participants were given no systemic information; the crucial distinction between 'parliamentary sovereignty' (that empowers the executive in the UK) and popular sovereignty, merited only a glancing mention in the briefing.

That said, the deliberative assembly was a great success in its own right. Once again a group of ordinary people came together, were eager for information and advice and *deliberated* seriously over two intense days; and showed how very capable they are of assessing complex issues and coming to agreed and sensible conclusions. One measure of the value of the process is the changes in attitudes that took place over the two days.

The initial backing for populist proposals from all those who had contributed to POWER 2010's long list of ideas for discussion, such as making election manifestos legally binding, diminished significantly over the two days. One implication of this of course is that turning to a wider use of referendums for example will not do justice to the good sense of the people, let alone sound results on the issue at hand.