

January 15, 2010

Andreas Whittam Smith: Here's one way to reconnect voters

The meeting came up with some surprising conclusions on reform

A remarkable political event, organised by POWER2010, took place in London over the weekend. Nearly 200 people, representative of the social mix of the country, came together for two days to engage in a "deliberative poll". Their task was to consider and to rank in order of preference desirable reforms in the way that Britain is run. Their conclusions were surprising, as I shall describe. Unfortunately the occasion received little coverage in the media.

The Independent was a pioneer in the use of deliberative polling. In 1994 the newspaper, in partnership with Channel Four, organised a series of deliberations on the issues of the day. Since then more than 50 Deliberative Polls have taken place across the world. They have been used to elect candidates in primaries in Greece. And they have been employed in China, Brazil, Texas, Poland, Italy, Canada and Argentina to recommend policies.

The idea was originally conceived by James Fishkin, who runs the Centre for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University in the US. He had asked himself how in a perfect world he would change the way the American political parties used "primary" elections to choose candidates. He wanted a way of including everybody in conditions where voters are motivated to think deeply about the issues. How could political equality and deliberation be obtained at one sitting?

As is the mark of all great ideas, the answer is surprisingly simple. Bring together a representative sample of the electorate. Opinion polls use only around 1,000 people, so the necessary number is bound to be small and indeed can be safely in the low hundreds. Then, as happened this weekend in London, let recognised experts brief the participants thoroughly. When that is done, take a poll. It will show you what the electorate would really think if it had time to do its homework.

This approach is subversive of political marketing. It is born of resentment at the misleading way in which the parties sell themselves. A typical example was given in the entertaining memoirs of Peter Watt, General Secretary of the Labour Party from 2005 to 2007. He recounts how, during a recent election campaign, someone came up with the idea that if ministers were to campaign at motorway service stations as they travelled, it would show that how closely in touch they were with people.

Accordingly it was arranged that Tessa Jowell should visit Fleet Services on the M3. However, in preparation for the arrival of the minister and her attendant TV crews, the party had summoned 30 local activists to the petrol station to impersonate customers. Ms Jowell was unaware of this subterfuge. Afterwards she told party officials that the warmth of her reception convinced her that Labour was going to win.

Authenticity is what people crave. The petrol station event had none. That is why, I assume, POWER2010, a charity funded by the Joseph Rowntree Trusts, and advised by Professor Fishkin, has been careful to achieve as much buy-in as possible for its process. First of all, it attracted 4,500 submissions to its website outlining ideas for reforms. In the second stage, these were boiled down into 58 issues.

Of these, some 29 ideas received more than 50 per cent support. The most popular measure was a truly surprising choice - strengthening select committees, in other words beefing up Parliament's ability to hold government to account. Then came allowing voters to vote for "none of the above" on ballot papers, followed by raising the number of

issues decided by free votes.

As I read down the list, my respect for my fellow voters rose and rose. For they highlighted a series of ideas that I believe would make the country a better place. Fourth was establishing a duty of public consultation on controversial matters. Fifth came scrapping the plans for a national identity card and sixth was the proposal that elections should take place at a weekend.

Three further favourites of mine obtained high places - reducing the Government's use of statutory instruments to bypass Parliamentary scrutiny, allowing constituents a right to recall unsatisfactory MPs and expanding the scope of the Freedom of Information Act.

What happens next? Through its website POWER2010 is inviting the public to vote on the recommendation so as to find the five most popular. These in turn will become the focus of a nationwide campaign at the general election. It is a brilliantly conceived plan. Whether it can pierce the amour plating of the dinosaur political parties we shall discover.

a.whittamsmith@independent.co.uk [a.whittamsmith@independent.co.uk]