The problems raised in Question 4 represent the biggest barrier to political engagement. The “first-past-the-post” system means there is a very high number of “safe” seats, which means that those electors who do not support the party holding the seat are effectively disenfranchised; I have never lived in a constituency where my vote would have affected the outcome. This system also encourages a “winner takes all” approach by the party forming the government, which can ignore what may be the wishes of a majority of the electorate. A further problem is this gives the more extreme elements in a party disproportionately more power. Electors are forced to choose between two, often extreme, views, neither of which may represent their political views.

It has been claimed that the current system leads to a clear majority for one party, and this is represented as desirable. Neither is correct. As stated above, it allows one party to dictate policy which may well be against the wishes of the majority of the electorate, and this is fundamentally undemocratic. In addition the claim to provide a strong majority is not borne out by reality. Over the last 50 or so years there have been few occasions when there was a decent working majority for the party in power, notably only for Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s and Tony Blair in 1997, but otherwise majorities have been small and often required careful management of backbench MPs and extremely fierce action by the government whips.

A further consequence of the current system is that, unless and elector’s views are supported by one of the main parties they are completely disenfranchised. This is illustrated by the current situation with regard to Brexit. 48% of the voters in the EU Referendum were opposed to leaving the EU, but neither of the main parties supports a remain position. When/if a final deal on leaving the EU is struck, unless a second referendum is offered, electors opposed to Brexit will have no say in the outcome.

Local Government has become almost pointless as more and more powers have been seized by Westminster. Any change in control in Local Authorities results in only very minor changes in policy. While we do have multi-members wards the electoral system again militates against a more diverse range of councillors, since the majority of voters choose candidates from the same party.

Another issue is that large, and multinational, businesses have now attained such power that they can have a major influence on government policy. This is clearly undemocratic.

In addition, Central Government has become synonymous with rule centred on benefiting London and the Southeast. The North seems to have no voice in central government, and Local Government has too little power to influence decisions that affect local areas.

A final point that creates a lack of respect for politicians is the fairly high number of recent successful legal challenges to decisions by ministers. This creates a feeling that politicians have no respect for the rule of law. A suspicion is that ministers are failing to...
consult with civil servants before they make decisions, and as a result they are not aware of the legal position. This just makes them look both arrogant and stupid.

All the above alienate electors, who feel disenfranchised and disempowered.

Proportional Representation is proposed as a panacea for the above problems. However it is important to recognise that PR can take many forms.

The system used in Israel, where there is just one constituency and parties put forward lists of candidates is not desirable. While the system makes it impossible to form a government without a coalition, which is not in itself undesirable, it usually requires the support of some very minor parties with extreme policies, and these parties makes exorbitant demands in exchange for support. This is no better than in Britain where the extremist wings of the governing party make demands for supporting their government. A further consequence of the Israeli system is that candidates who are considered undesirable by their party will be placed low on the party list and have little chance of being elected; this can result in a candidate leaving that party and forming one of their own. Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion did just that, twice, first leaving Mapai to from Rafi, and when Rafi merged with the Israel Labour Party he sat as an independent.

There is of course a variety of other ways of applying PR, one of which is the creation of multi-member seats.

The German system, while complex to administer, is relatively simple for voters, and clearly has the advantage of being much more representational of a wide range of views from the electorate.

The problem with changing the current system is that both the two largest parties have a vested interest in retaining the current system. It is difficult to see how any change can be effected This is the problem that arose in Israel in 1965 when Ben Gurion was in favour of a change from the existing system, and which resulted in him forming Rafi.

On another issue, and despite being part of the geriatric generation, it seems quite clear to me that the voting age should be lowered to 16 at the very least; I would favour 14. This would introduce young people to the idea of voting in order to have an influence on their future. As a teenager I found it extremely frustrating to be unable to vote (at the time the voting age was 21).
To summarise

1. The “first-past-the-post” system is undemocratic and should be changed to one which marginalises the extremists and allows for the wishes of the majority to take precedence of party dogma
2. It should be recognised that the “first-past-the-post” system does not deliver the strong government with a clear majority claimed by its supporters, and that coalition government is more democratic and preferable
3. A new form of electoral process should be introduced, one that makes all electors feel that their votes count, and that gives greater voice to smaller groups
4. Powers seized by Westminster over the years should be returned to Local Authorities, and the powers of Local Authorities should be enhanced to allow for decision-making that is not subject to Westminster control
5. Large companies, and especially multinational companies, should have power curbed to prevent them acting against the interests of electors
6. The voting age to be lowered, at least down to 16

9 August 2017