This submission collectively addresses two of the questions in the terms of reference: do current laws encourage active political engagement [4] and how can society support civic engagement [7].

We note that the inquiry should prioritise the view that longer-term trends over the issue of civic engagement need to be understood in terms of citizens’ disengagement from the traditional arenas/institutions of formal politics, not from politics itself.

From this perspective, we argue that efforts to encourage citizenship and civic engagement have to also focus on reforming political and public institutions, rather than simply changing the behaviour of individuals or imposing new civic obligations.

We also warn that while Brexit might present an opportunity to reform the existing way formal ‘arena’ politics is conducted in the U.K., the very real potential looms of a top-down, re-centralising of power that will potentially exacerbate some of the very issues that go to the heart of this inquiry.

How can society support civic engagement?

- What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement?
- What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

The Scope and Focus of the Inquiry

We welcome this salient and important Inquiry into citizenship and civic engagement in the United Kingdom. That said, we would urge the Committee to embrace a broad perspective to consider the issue of citizenship within the context of the crucial role political institutions play in shaping civic engagement. The two are deeply intertwined.

Previous similar themed initiatives have rather frustratingly tended to adopt a somewhat narrow focus concentrating for example on citizen disengagement re. traditional forms of ‘arena politics’ or ‘duty norms’ – e.g. voter turn-out, party membership etc. Subjects have been depicted as increasingly taking citizenship, and with it democratic politics, for granted, of being both complacent and unrealistic about what it is able to deliver. This view suggests that over time, the relationship between citizen’s rights and responsibilities has become increasingly skewed; the rights of the individual have been prioritised with insufficient focus on the reciprocal duties or obligations of the citizen.

The origins of this approach are hardly new. One only has to turn to the 1970s and the oft stated argument that citizens’ expected too much from politicians (who amplify the problem by

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1 In narrow constitutional terms, Britain of course, has subjects not citizens. Having made this point at the outset of this memorandum, for the sake of consistency with the terminology employed by this inquiry, we will use the term citizen rather than subject henceforth.
ratcheting-up expectations to get elected), and were then disappointed when such expectations were not met. The result was a growing cynicism on behalf of the electorate about the political process and in turn a growing disengagement from the formal and traditional channels of civic engagement. The problem was perceived to be exacerbated by structural changes in British society, with the latter becoming less deferential and more atomised. This was seen to lead in turn, to the erosion of a sense of civic duty and with it civic engagement.

The logic of this approach is that citizens need to be much more understanding of the work of politicians and public officials and more broadly, they need to develop a more reflexive attitude towards representative democracy. *Ipso facto*, the antidote is identified in calls for a greater emphasis on initiatives such as citizenship education programmes, often targeted at younger demographic cohorts.

Recent events in the form of the 2014 Scottish Referendum, the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union, and the 2017 U.K. General Election challenge a number of assumptions underpinning this perspective. In the case of the Scottish referendum, the 84.6% turn-out - the highest of any national or regional election in the UK since 1918 - was a democratic exercise that engaged the public, and more importantly, was an election in which every vote had the potential to count. The early evidence\(^2\) from the 2017 Westminster election also reveals a notable upturn in voting among the 18-24 and 25-34 cohort. More broadly, turnout at general elections has continued to rise since the historic post-war low of 2001\(^3\). Such evidence suggests that people participate when they believe their vote has the potential to influence the outcome of an election. We would wish to caution this Lord’s Inquiry that approaches which purport to examine issues surrounding civic engagement that emphasise only changes in the nature and behaviour of society embrace only one-side of the coin.

In contrast, the argument we wish to present to this inquiry is to encourage a broader, more holistic approach to citizenship and civic engagement which focuses on the manner in which formal politics in the U.K. is currently organised and conducted.

*The Salience of Institutions*

Our research\(^4\) emphasises that issues surrounding citizenship and civic engagement do not lie exclusively with citizens (who of course in the UK system are subjects and sovereignty resides with Parliament and not the people), but also with contemporary public institutions and the political process.

The United Kingdom’s political system is essentially shaped by a nineteenth century conception of representative democracy prioritising top-down accountability over bottom-up engagement\(^5\). Both the model and its related institutions no longer work effectively in the context of a 21\(^{st}\) century world defined by transparency and open information. Cynicism, mistrust and lack of civic engagement are a consequence of the failure of long-standing public institutions to reflect the

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needs and interest of citizens, the increasing ability of citizens and the media to obtain and analyse information about public and private institutions and in so doing, be perceived to be properly accountable.

The last decade has seen a number of high profile institutional crises or scandals often involving trusted institutions such as the Police (Hillsborough; ‘Plebgate’; the use of undercover officers; Stephen Lawrence), the BBC (salaries and payoffs for senior staff; and Jimmy Saville), Parliament (in relation to expenses, cash for honours); the NHS (over standards of care and the reporting of information) and most recently, local government in the light of the Grenfell tragedy (safety standards in social housing). Within this context, civic disengagement and a growth in cynicism is not surprising. Public institutions have failed to act in ways that might be expected in a democratic society.

We would argue that in many ways, these scandals are linked by a set of embedded practices within institutions, and the failure of organisations to adapt to a world of open information. The problem with all these cases is that the ‘truth’ has only been revealed after the event. There is a pattern of flawed decision-making in closed systems which when investigated and exposed, fuel perceptions of crisis and a growing loss of faith in public institutions.

What binds these scandals together is the distance between citizens and those who lead public institutions, particularly where policy-makers effectively take decisions in secret, and then try to cover up mistakes where failures have occurred.

Yet, it is increasingly difficult for institutions to control the flow and interpretation of information. For instance, the manner of Ian Tomlinson’s death was revealed by mobile phone footage. The mistakes of Hillsborough were revealed by a long-standing campaign involving the relatives of the victims. Failures in the NHS have been revealed by a succession of whistle-blowers.

Historically, UK institutions have been self-regulating, stemming from what was essentially a nineteenth century artefact, effectively holding themselves to account. As Mick Moran has persuasively argued, the British approach to accountability was one of ‘club government’, whereby institutions set their own rules and were judged by other ‘good chaps’, in terms of whether they had broken the rules or not. This nineteenth century vision of accountability was based on the notion that citizens had to trust organisations to make the right decisions. From this perspective, the public were deemed to be either too self-interested or too lacking in expertise to be able to question the decision-makers, who with a strong sense of public duty, would ensure that the UK was governed effectively. It led to many public organisations operating within the context of an institutionalised culture of secrecy.

This approach to accountability through self-regulation was sustainable when institutions were able to control the supply of information. Hence, the accountability processes were validated against information that they formally released, while citizens usually did not have the information or resources to challenge the established, institutional account.

**Citizens, Institutions and New Forms of Open Information**

Overtime, this process has been undermined by the development of new forms of information:

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Freedom of information and data protection has meant that organisations have been subject to pressures to release large swathes of information, often at the behest of the media.

The development of meta-data which allows analysis of organisational performance (for example comparison of organisational performance is now relatively easy to organise).

The growth of open information sources for developing political organisation around exposing institutional behaviour.

The digital storage of data means that large swathes of information are accessible in ways which were never possible before.

This digital storage has been exploited by the growth of whistle-blowers and leaks: the activities of individuals such as Edward Snowdon and organisations such as wiki-leaks have exposed institutional information in ways that previously were not possible.

The politicisation of information – information is now subject to a wider analysis and critique, as institutions lose their monopoly of control, and there is growing distrust of institutional accounts.

Citizens, the Rise of Anti-Politics and Calls for a New Politics

This mistrust of institutions has had a growing impact on Westminster politics, reflected in the perceived growth of ‘anti-politics’, witnessed in a perceived increasing divide and disconnect between citizens and politicians.

Studies of anti-politics reveal it to be a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon throwing-up numerous pathologies concerning power, democracy, legitimacy, participation, and accountability. There has been longer-term patterns of public disengagement from traditional forms of ‘arena politics’ or ‘duty norms’ expressed for example, by declining electoral turnout, party membership and wider political participation in mainstream politics.

Elsewhere, there is the depiction of the so-called ‘left behind’, of those who are: ‘on the wrong side of social change, are struggling on stagnant incomes, feel threatened by the way their communities and country are changing, and are furious at an established politics that appears not to understand or even care about their concerns’. As Peter Mair observes: ‘...traditional politics is seen less and less as something that belongs to the citizens or to the society, and is instead seen as something that is done by politicians’.

Westminster politicians are by no means immune to these challenges given their reliance on claims to democratic legitimacy as the lodestar of the representative process. Yet, it is here that our current research reveals the emergence of an intriguing paradox: a pattern stretching back over two decades of leaders of mainstream opposition parties espousing the case for a ‘new politics’, but when in office adhering to the established ways and means of governing.

In surveying these calls for change, while the context behind them may vary, advocates for a new politics are united by a familiar ring in their rejection of the old ways of doing politics and the need for an alternative. Illustrative, but by no means exhaustive examples include:

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May 1997, Tony Blair arguing his government: ‘...will govern in the interests of all our people...and restore trust in politics in this country. That cleans it up, that decentralizes it, that gives people hope once again that politics is and always should be about the service of the public.’

April 2010, David Cameron observing that the UK electorate had been: ‘...betrayed by a generation of politicians, by an elite that thinks it knows best. People have lost control. The politicians have forgotten, the public are the master, we are the servant. That’s what needs to change in our system...Blow apart the old system. Overthrow the old ways. Put people in the driving seat.’

Similarly his Coalition partner, Nick Clegg, reiterated, ‘This government is going to transform our politics so the state has far less control over you, and you have far more control over the state,...break up concentrations of power and hand power back to people...This government is going to persuade you to put your faith in politics once again.’

In the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum Alex Salmond asserted that: ‘Whatever else we can say about this referendum campaign, we have touched sections of the community who have never before been touched by politics....I don’t think that will ever be allowed to go back to business as usual in politics again.’

The latest Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, saw his elevation to Leader of the Opposition as: ‘...a vote for change in the way we do politics...Kinder, more inclusive. Bottom up, not top down. In every community and workplace, not just at Westminster...Something new and invigorating, popular and authentic, has exploded.’

In different ways and at different times, each leader in seeking office for their party has called for an alternative approach to the conduct of politics that is more devolved, bottom-up, deliberative and participatory. There is some evidence of established parties seeking to reform from within. Collectively, leaders have invoked similar rallying calls to reject the status quo by taking on vested powers and interests to change the way politics is practised. In the context of the UK, we might frame this as a search by politicians to offer a new social contract of political renewal and re-legitimation in response to a growing climate of anti-politics.

Yet the very same politicians when in power have continued to work within the existing institutions of the state, and with it the way politics has traditionally been done. When surveying the recent landscape of reform in the UK, change has been limited and where major reform has occurred, for example further Scottish devolution in 2014 [alongside English devolution as a corollary] and most recently Brexit, it appears more as an unintended consequence, rather than the culmination of government policy, even less so a new form of politics.

As such, reforms have been predominantly ad hoc, grafted on to the existing Westminster system. The calls for a new politics as an antidote to the rise of anti-politics have largely gone unheeded. Instead, the British political tradition’s mode of governance, captured in the Westminster model’s centralising and top-down tendencies, has remained ostensibly intact. This dynamic of central control is germane to the wider issues this inquiry seeks to examine.

Civic Engagement, Governance and Pressures for Institutional Re-Design

While the Westminster system has largely remained intact, the process of governing bears almost no relation to nineteenth century governance. The levels of intervention of the state in everyday life today are manifestly different. Moreover, state intervention does not just come from a centralised government (which oversees the process) but from an almost infinite range of fragmented institutions that deliver public policy – ranging from private bodies to local government, to regional organisations, to semi-independent NHS trusts, free schools and universities.

There is a need in these circumstances to re-think both the nature of institutions, and with it the mechanisms of civic engagement. Institutions have to accept that they operate in an open information world, and that there will be challenges to their decisions if they attempt to take policies in ways that are not transparent and accountable.

In addition, both citizens and civil society organisations are participating more readily in political debate, but they are doing so outside the traditional arenas of parties and parliament. Blogs, tweets, petitions, social media forums, internet based lobbying such as 39 degrees, and the growth of political movements like Momentum illustrate a wide interest in the political, but a disillusionment with the traditional forms of Westminster arena politics.

The issue of civic engagement, both in terms of its potential decline and how it might be re-invigorated, can be understood in terms of the increasing perception of a gap between citizens/civil society and decision-makers and with it, the failure of political institutions to adapt to the demands and pressures of 21st-century democracy.

Elite government sits uncomfortably with what Manuel Castells\textsuperscript{11} identifies as the rise of the networked society based on a sharing of information driven by new digital technologies. Moreover, whilst inequality has increased since 1979, citizens have more control over their own lives. Elite government may have been able to function in a world of limited horizons and the ability to control information, but it is increasingly difficult to sustain in a climate in which people have greater expectations for themselves and their children.

The problem is that the flaws of the ‘club government’ model through which many of the UK’s institutions operated has been revealed, but it has not been replaced by an alternative form of legitimation. A process of demystification has led to a loss of faith in institutions among the public. What we have seen in recent years is not, as is so often claimed, a process of depoliticisation but in reality a process of repoliticisation; through different mechanisms, institutions are opened up to greater scrutiny in how they operate.

Decisions which in the past were made behind closed doors are increasingly coming under the spotlight; whatever the many faults and limitations of digital politics, new media is making a difference to political legitimacy and accountability. Information is transmitted more rapidly while disparate groups of people are able to respond at low cost. Smart phones and tablets have become an instrument of accountability over public officials, while freedom of information and large data sets are allowing challenges to the arguments of elites at the apex of large institutions. Contrary to the defenders of the current model, accepting our democracy as the ‘least worst’ system is not enough because it is alienating voters (particularly the young), eroding civic engagement, and producing a dangerous flight from institutional politics.

The UK has never had a participatory and democratic culture; it has a politics centred on holding a circulating elite to account. But a more sophisticated electorate in a world of greater open information is no longer convinced by this system. There is a need to build a new model of politics for the 21st century rather than sustaining a model organised round the mores of the 19th century.

This requires the stretching of conventional approaches to civic engagement by adopting a broader understanding of what constitutes political engagement beyond traditional ‘duty norms’ and appeals to the need for ‘thick’ over ‘thin’ democratic practices. In so doing, the Inquiry should consider how to systematically evaluate how far people and civil society groups can be engaged, through, for example, digital media and the different and innovative ways in which they can be included in debate and decision making. Institutional re-design might include:

- developing real-time accountability rather than post-hoc accountability;
- a cultural ‘accountability shift’ where the presumption is that decision processes will be exposed rather than hidden to ensure organisations abandon a ‘goldfish’ bowl ethos;
- developing open policy making, with officials losing their monopoly over access to decision makers and the sources of advice being widened considerably (something previous governments have supported in principle);
- organisations using meta data and open forms of communication to rebuild trust with citizens;
- using the internet and digital fora for political engagement and bypassing traditional forms of representation such as parties and voting.

_Civic Engagement and Decision-Makers – Bridging the Gap_

Civic engagement requires people to become involved in decisions that are salient to their own lives, that are not party political in a way that one party monopolises the process, with the outcomes that are about allowing ‘normal’ citizens to become involved in politics and decision-making. It may be that it has to take account of new media, that it may be populist and result in decisions that Westminster’s governing class does not like. It may be that it has to be much more flexible and responsive than existing institutions allow. It may be that participation varies from issue to issue. What blogging and Twitter and discussions boards on other social media platforms reveal is that there are many people who have distinctive views; that people are not ‘anti-politics’ when politics is about issues that interest or affect them, and that they think they can have some control over; something that has been clearly illustrated by the activism of the Grenfell tower residents.

We would emphasise that this inquiry should prioritise the view that longer-term trends over the issue of civic engagement need to be understood in terms of citizens’ disengagement from the traditional arenas/institutions of formal politics, not from politics itself. The British political tradition and its emphasis on accountable government over democratic engagement fosters a culture where policy-makers tend to infantilise the electorate.

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12 Thick democracy here invokes a sense of politics occurring within traditional arenas, between groups involving face-to-face engagement. Thin democracy offers a wider and loose connotation of politics based on [digital] communicative networks, accessing different resources and with faster means of information distribution.
The most recent, high-profile example of this approach is evidenced in the Brexit negotiations. The Government’s position is one in which it will deliver on a Brexit deal [ostensibly forged behind Whitehall’s closed doors] that will then be put before Parliament in March 2019. The Government argues that it is at this point that it will be held to account. It is an approach that shuns consultation, civic engagement, the binding in of civil society, and more broadly political pluralism which given the highly divisive nature of Brexit would appear to be a pre-requisite for a successful and potentially lasting settlement.

Do current laws encourage active political engagement?
- What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age?
- Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

In our view, the evidence provided by proponents of electoral reform that a more proportional electoral system would decrease the number of ‘wasted votes’ remains compelling. The First Past the Post electoral system is increasingly untenable in a devolved polity such as the UK: for instance, until the 2017 election, the Conservatives had no Scottish representation in the House of Commons, while Labour was severely under-represented in southern England. This situation has a damaging impact on the legitimacy and effectiveness of the political system, and appears to have exacerbated civic disengagement from the formal electoral process. Crucially, the current system is failing to deliver on its supposed strength: clear accountability with the election of strong, single, majority party government.

There a powerful argument for lowering the voting age to 16 in that there is evidence that the younger that people vote, the more likely they will continue to vote throughout their lives. Moreover, it creates an incentive for young people to engage in the political system. Nevertheless, voting at 16 should be introduced with stronger civic education in schools so that the responsibilities of political engagement can be properly understood.

We are sceptical about the case for state funding of political parties: the danger of state funding is that such arrangements would further distance citizens from political parties, who would no longer be required to gather resources by encouraging citizens to donate money or time. The issue is that party politics will operate even more within an exclusive elite arena disengaged from the issues and problems that voters encounter in their daily lives. State funding also creates disincentives for parties to attract members and to engage more widely with society. One of the key issues in terms of engagement is that most people are put off existing forms of party politics. State funding would likely entrench current practices.

Concluding Comments

The case we have presented here seeks to prioritise the view that efforts to encourage citizenship and civic engagement have to focus on reforming political and public institutions, rather than simply changing the behaviour of individuals or imposing new civic obligations.

In concluding, we note that the vote to leave the European Union presents a window of opportunity for institutional reform and re-design. We caution though that the manner in which the current government is approaching Britain’s withdrawal is not without concern: the result of the referendum on UK membership of the EU can be read as an expression of dissatisfaction with the way in which elite politics and policy-making has been conducted in recent decades; this
discontent is especially pronounced among so-called ‘left behind’ voters. Yet the May Government’s approach captured in the Vote Leave mantra of ‘taking back control’ appears to re-establish the British political tradition - a re-assertion of sovereignty, Whitehall centralisation, and executive prerogative – which in all likelihood will exacerbate the very disillusionment that led to the Brexit outcome in 2016, even when the UK is outside the EU. This re-imposition of Whitehall control and the attempt to claw back discretionary powers from the devolved institutions across the UK will merely risk fanning the flames of ‘anti-politics’, leading to further citizen disengagement from politics over the long-term.

4 September 2017