John Shaddock – written evidence (CCE0182)

Topic 4 Political engagement and the voting process
4.1 In 1944, a review of Parliamentary Boundaries led to a change to the current position where the voting system serves the needs of the politicians, not the citizens. Politicians are interested in electors, not citizens, so the boundaries have been drawn to suit the politicians (i.e. equalising the number of electors in a constituency). In a representative democracy, MPs should represent all those in the constituency, of whatever age, whether registered to vote or not. The voting franchise determines who can choose the representative, not who should be represented. Children, the homeless, Members of the House of Lords etc. should all be in the compass of an area’s MP. To equalise MPs’ workloads, boundaries should be drawn on the basis of population, not electorate.

4.2 The current adversarial system created by ‘first past the post’ elections has certain merits. Citizen engagement is not one of them. Not only are ‘non-winning’ votes wasted and so not fully reflected in democratic debate, but any engagement tends to be of the ‘stop the other lot’ variety – dialogue, nuance, balance are all casualties. A form of proportional representation would encourage citizens to see that, even when unsuccessful overall, their votes do carry weight. In a system where the government has only 35%-45% of the popular vote, the majority of citizens will feel their views have been ignored.

Topic 7 Supporting civic engagement
7.1.1 These comments are based on the broad assumption that ‘civic engagement’ largely takes place at the local level. The history of the development of local services was to meet the needs of the town or city - initially health, sanitation, public order etc. - with the advent of industrialisation. There has been a problem in local affairs that the recent emphasis has been on ‘service provision’. The internet-enabling of public services has further pushed the concept that local services are services in the market sense, provided in response to public demand. Despite this, at local levels there are very few universal services to individuals. Services like housing, social services, income support, aids for independent living, literacy programmes etc. are usually received by only a small proportion of the population of an area.

7.1.2 At the local level, government has been concerned not merely with providing services to individuals, important though that is. Education is a service not only for the direct recipients, but also for those who want to live in an educated society. The local level has been a focus for the management of issues of sustainability, community cohesion, economic and social development, local vitality etc. The functions government has used to address these issues include physical planning, economic strategy, environmental management, promotion and events, tourism support; there has been input on crime management, transport, waste disposal, air and water quality, health priorities etc. These are universal services; they are, arguably, the most important local services. They tend to have long-term impact. But they are not services to individuals and they are not particularly amenable to market solutions. They usually require the political balancing of competing interests.

7.1.3 Often, a solution will only be as good as its level of public acceptability and that is dependent on a number of factors including leadership, trust, communication, mode of coercion, perceived importance. All these require some degree of dialogue between citizens themselves and between citizens and government. At the community level the particular strengths include:
- Citizens have shared experience of public policy in practice (as it affects their area)
- Ability to form a common understanding of issues and causality
- Experience of interaction of different public policies on, for example, education, social care and crime
- Capacity to bring volunteer strengths to address community issues (i.e. solutions not necessarily resource-dependent)
- Long-term relationships
- Opportunities to engage with decision-making processes

7.1.4 The weakening of the role of local democracy, including the outsourcing of functions to private sector organisations operating behind the curtain of ‘commercial confidentiality’, has distanced local citizens (and local representatives) from the capacity to influence the nature of their lived environment. Local authorities now very rarely identify new functions to address emerging needs; civic responsibility – from the perspective of both leaders and citizens – has been profoundly weakened.

7.1.5 To address these issues, power needs to be given to cities, towns and villages to be able to address local issues comprehensively. The fragmentation of local services needs to be addressed and corrective action properly resourced; subsidiarity should be the order – if it can be done at the local level, it should be done at the local level. Citizens should be trusted. Central Government tends to operate in silos – the joining up needs to be done at the local level and in response to local experience. Infantilisation by centrally-imposed solutions leads to disempowerment. If people feel like citizens, they will act like citizens.

7.2 An important dimension is information. This is a vital role for central government. Citizens need information to act meaningfully at a local level. Providing tools, education, support etc. for the development of local information systems – without seeking to control the data – is an intervention which is seriously lacking in civic life. This is an area where central government could have a very significant impact on civic engagement.

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