



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 1059

Thursday 13 March 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 13 March 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Hansard Society](#)
- [Electoral Reform Society](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mark Durkan; Paul Flynn; Fabian Hamilton; David Morris; Robert Neill; Chris Ruane

Questions 81-141

Witness: **Ruth Fox**, Director, Hansard Society, gave evidence.

Q81 Chair: Ruth, welcome. I think you know we are looking at voter engagement, which is timely. Well, it is always timely. I think it was in the *Daily Mail* this morning that I saw MPs are giving themselves time off. We have had this debate a little earlier in our proceedings, on a previous occasion, but MPs do more than just pass the Government's Bills. We do have the sausage machine responsibility, but there are a lot of people who do things other than hang around waiting for a vote. Certainly you can apply that description to all the members of this Committee. I am a bit offended by that but that is the *Daily Mail*, I suppose.

Anyway, Ruth, welcome, now that I have that off my chest. Did you want to kick us off with any opening remarks on voter engagement or go straight to questions?

Ruth Fox: Perhaps go straight to questions. You have had my written response. Just to say that the next Audit of Political Engagement will be coming out at the end of next month. I think you probably will not have finished by then. I will provide the Committee with a further piece of evidence at that stage, if you wish.

Chair: Fantastic. That will be incredibly helpful. My determination is to keep this Committee as consensual as possible and we have all worked together very sensibly on that. At the end of the day, we may well produce a report that is a shopping list for all the parties for potential inclusion in

manifestos and for action when elected into Government. The more ideas with substance and evidence attached to that, the easier that selling-in process will be.

We have also, on our fixed-term Parliament inquiry, talked about using the last year much more effectively. Now we know there will be a last year and when it begins and ends. I suppose it goes back to the first point. There will be a legislative programme but Parliament need not just do a legislative programme. It can think for itself about other issues and have sensible debates and the rest. I hope the voter engagement inquiry plays into that last year and we use the last year productively.

Q82 Fabian Hamilton: As we know, the Hansard Society has been looking at political engagement for over a decade now. How has public engagement with politics changed even over that 10-year period, particularly in relation to people's views on participating in elections?

Ruth Fox: We measure propensity to vote. In the event of an immediate general election, how certain are you to vote? How likely are you, on a scale of one to 10? In terms of certainty to vote, it is in decline and it has been since audit 1 and we have seen a particularly precipitous decline in the last two years, particularly last year. The nearer we get to an election I would expect that to recover and to increase. Only 41% said they were certain to vote last year. That is at a worrying level because, even if it goes up 10% or 15%, you are still in the territory of lowest turnout, with the exception of 2001. It could be lower than 2001.

The problem with wider participation is that voting is the one political action that people say they are most likely to do in any one year, assuming that they have an election. You see a mirroring of very low participation levels across the board for all other types of political activity. Whether that is signing a petition, joining a political party, being involved in a civic organisation or campaigning more generally, you see lower levels than you will for voting.

Q83 Fabian Hamilton: Yet we are all bombarded, more than ever, by e-mails from change.org and Avaaz and all the other campaigning organisations that want to petition for a debate on this or that, from badgers to Syria. Is that reflected in the information that you have collected? Is it just that people feel that voting for MPs and for Governments and for local authority representatives is no longer relevant; they can have a far more direct effect on policy through petitioning?

Ruth Fox: Those who say they are likely to or have signed a petition are less than those who say they voted in a previous year. I cannot remember the exact figures, but we have begun to separate out "signed a petition" and "signed an e-petition" in the last couple of years. The levels are relatively low. I think e-petitions are something like 20% or so. Certainly, for those people who are interested in that and think that is an effective way of making your voice heard, they are more likely to do it because it is quick and easy. The term has been coined "clickocracy". It is one click away from making your voice heard. Voting is rather different in the sense that people themselves attach to voting quite a high sense of civic duty—it varies year to year, but between 60% and 70%—that they would not attach to petitioning or other forms of political action, civic responsibility and obligation to vote.

Fabian Hamilton: That still exists?

Ruth Fox: That still exists quite high, but what you see is quite a significant gap between their sense of what being a good citizen is and their duty to vote and their actual willingness to do it. What explains that gap is quite complicated and we cannot be absolutely sure, but I would say it is a combination of knowledge, a declining sense of partisanship and, very strongly, a decreasing

sense of the efficacy of voting; all of those factors come together to impact upon their perception of it.

Q84 Fabian Hamilton: Do you think it is more a declining sense of the efficacy of voting and how effective it might be in changing policy or changing direction or simply ignorance or just apathy? Saying, “I am not going to vote because it doesn’t make any difference”, is almost a positive decision, whereas apathy is, “I am not interested. They are nothing to do with me”, and that is rather more worrying.

Ruth Fox: Yes, absolutely. I do not think the public are apathetic. If you do focus groups with them or if you survey them on policy issues and so on, there are high levels of interest and engagement in those. They are interested if they can see how it affects them and their families, if they can see the relevance of it. What we have, I think, is the voting levels are a manifestation of the bigger problem of disengagement across the board, linked to a declining sense of the efficacy of politics generally and their role in it, and a sense that the parties are all the same, the politicians are all the same, they are not like us, it does not make any difference.

For us, one of the worrying trends in how this debate is addressed is that, rather than playing on the civic duty and the responsibility to vote and being part of a collective national action, we are increasingly seeing a lot of this debate about voter participation reduced from something that is an unambiguous good that we should all participate in as citizens to something that is contingent on what we get out of it and the benefits that accrue to us. It is very difficult to link the benefits that accrue to us as individuals from one action of going to the voting booth and putting your cross down—

Fabian Hamilton: It is more like a consumer choice.

Ruth Fox: Yes. I find it quite worrying that a lot of the focus of change and reform and what we should do emphasises more that it is about people participating and what they get out of it, when I think what might be more effective is focusing on the citizen duty element of it instead.

Q85 Chris Ruane: Concerning the use of postal votes for engagement, the Electoral Commission said that 56% of postal voters would not have voted if they had not had a postal vote. We had a judge yesterday, a QC, who has politically waded into the debate and said that they should all be strapped, except for people who are ill, and he said there is party-political advantage in it. He did not specify, but a certain party. Do you think the judge is right? Should we get rid of all postal ballots?

Ruth Fox: No, I think that would be a backward step. I am not an expert the legalities of postal votes. There are instances of problems with them but I do not get the sense of widespread corruption. At the end of the day, in all of this you have to balance risk. Is there a greater risk of eradicating postal votes entirely, which could affect people’s willingness or ability to participate considerably in some instances and drive down turnout, or is there a greater risk from a few instances across the country where things go wrong and there is mismanagement of the process or there are corrupt practices?

My sense would be that, broadly speaking, given our electoral regulations, which if you were minded to in some areas you could drive a coach and horses through, we have very low-level electoral fraud and corruption. I would be opposed to abolishing postal votes.

Q86 Robert Neill: I am going to come on to turnout issues. You made the point, which I am sure a lot of us would recognise from our own casework, that the public are “deeply dissatisfied with

the culture and conduct of politics”. Just drilling down into that, do you get from your research any hard evidence, any data, as to what it is about the culture and conduct that causes them to be deeply dissatisfied and how that translates into an unwillingness to vote? What is it about that that not only makes them dislike a party but, “I can’t be bothered to vote”, specifically?

Ruth Fox: It goes a little bit back to what the Chairman was saying at the beginning; there is this quite wide chasm between perception and reality. You have to remember that there is that big gap between how they perceive what politicians do and how Parliament is through the various mechanisms and triggers that feed that and how the reality is for those of us who are familiar with Westminster. Certainly, through the focus groups that we did about two years now—we did 14 focus groups across the country exploring this sense of anti-politics—there was a lack of understanding and a sense that it is all too complicated. Also, interestingly, what came through quite a lot of the groups is a sense that, because they find it complicated but they are bombarded with it from all sides, it almost desensitises them to it and they shut off.

They probably do not feel that MPs are accountable. That was a very strong factor in their thinking. Whereas you and I would consider a general election to be an important factor in accountability, for the public it is not that important. They do not see an election once every five years as a big element of accountability. They want more than that and I think that drives this sense of wanting some form of public oversight of the representative, which is an interesting twist for the future on the concept of representative democracy. They want some kind of citizen oversight of what you do because they do not quite trust or understand what it is that you are doing and I do not think an election to kick you out once every five years makes that much difference.

Q87 Robert Neill: There is a sense of public accountability, but do they get more specific, in terms of the focus groups, as to what the lack of accountability is?

Ruth Fox: No, and this is the problem in terms of exploring this and coming up with solutions. They know what they do not like. They can point to what, in an ideal world, they think it ought to be like and, again, you have to put a warning over that about the difference between perception and reality. For them to articulate how they would get from one to the other is incredibly difficult. That is the problem with doing focus groups with the public and trying to get them to explore that, because they have no sense of what the reform options are.

Chris Ruane: Nothing hard on that?

Ruth Fox: No.

Q88 Robert Neill: I also get a sense, from what you said, that you think that the way in which the media reports politics has an impact?

Ruth Fox: Yes.

Robert Neill: Did that come up in your focus groups?

Ruth Fox: Yes, absolutely. First, you get that desensitising element. Two years ago, in audit 9, we did a study isolating all the drivers we know about political disengagement: age, social class and so on, particularly class. We looked solely at newspapers, not the broader media, but you could isolate the impact of newspaper readership on people’s level of political engagement and it was low. There was a big discrepancy between broadsheets and tabloids and it was better for your political citizenship not to read a newspaper than it was to read a tabloid because it feeds that cynical anti-politics approach.

Robert Neill: If you get your news from other sources, you may be less desensitised by it?

Ruth Fox: Yes.

Q89 Robert Neill: That is interesting. While we are on that topic, another one I am going to come back to is you made a point about “it is all too complicated”, which I can understand. One of your findings, a specific finding, is this idea that 43% of the people thought you automatically get registered to vote if you are over 18. They did not know about doing the form. Is that an example of it being too complicated or is there something else to that or is that just misinformation?

Ruth Fox: I think that is just a lack of knowledge and information.

Robert Neill: Simple lack of knowledge. It is as simple as that. It is not terribly complicated.

Ruth Fox: No. The quiz questions we ask, the results are even more worrying than they might appear because you have a 50:50 chance of getting them right. We always ask how knowledgeable they think they are, but that is their self-perceived knowledge. What we do periodically is test it to see whether there is a match-up.

Q90 Robert Neill: It was not one of the questions we have talked about, but do you inquire of the focus groups, for example, how often they use their local council’s website maybe for other services, like when their bins are collected or something like that?-

Ruth Fox: No, never looked at that; look at websites or where you can get your news or something.

Q91 Robert Neill: It just strikes me that quite often people access that for personal services like that and then, if you scroll down, you find other links into your electoral registration, but that is not something you have explored.

The final thing I was going to ask you about was young people. I think we would all probably accept that young people are poorly represented on the electoral roll and in elections. Did you find any particular underlying reason for that? Is it simply that young people are less interested or more mobile or what? What drove that?

Ruth Fox: This is a difficult one in terms of the stage we are at with the audit. We do not have a long enough period to have been able to study it and it is not a cohort study, which is an important point. However, I think it was two or maybe three years ago we did look at seeing if there is an ageing effect, are people becoming more engaged politically at a later life stage. Whereas 20 or 30 years ago 18 to 24s would have been engaged, is it happening at a later stage of life?

Certainly in the audit then there was some evidence and I would say there was some indication—and it comes with a very big health warning—that those who were 18 to 24 in audit 1, when you look at that age group in the later audits, 8 and 9, they were more engaged. If you compared age groups, again there was a sense that, as they got older, they were more engaged. Particularly around certainty to vote, that did see some considerable improvement.

It comes with the health warning that it is not a cohort study, but there is some sense in which, as a young person, you have families at a later stage, you are coming into employment and paying taxes at a later stage, your meeting of local government services is happening at a later stage, home ownership is happening at a later stage, and all of those may be contributory factors and you are seeing an ageing effect in terms of engagement.

Robert Neill: That would link into your comments about private rental tenure. They are more mobile and they would be less inclined to do use those services.

Ruth Fox: Yes.

Robert Neill: Thank you very much.

Q92 Chris Ruane: Your written evidence states the audit of political engagement was jointly established by the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, but since 2008 the Electoral Commission has no longer been involved because of a change to their remit. Has something been lost as a result? What was that change and did they have to move so far away from it?

Ruth Fox: They started the audit and we were, if you like, the junior partners in it. As I understand it, the change came about because of a report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, I think it was, who did a review of the role of the Electoral Commission and concluded that it should not have that focus on engagement, broadly. As a consequence, that was accepted by Parliament, as I understand it. It was endorsed and it required them, therefore, to strategically refocus their efforts on what work-streams they were concentrating on. For us, the fall of that was that they no longer could continue with the audit and funding of it and we had to find alternative sources and take on the project.

They do continue with research specifically around the election and things like postal votes and perceptions of the efficacy and administration of the electoral system, all of which is valuable, but they cannot and do not do the work more broadly around participation. Has that been a big loss? From our perspective, it was a loss at the time in terms of the audit. I am not sure that it is a huge loss more broadly in terms of addressing democratic engagement issues and challenges in practical terms. I am not convinced that a body whose primary focus is regulation and compliance is necessarily the right body also to be leading on democratic engagement because that requires—

Q93 Chris Ruane: But if they had a foot in either camp, would that not give them a greater understanding that, if they were going to introduce measures allegedly to improve compliance, it may have a negative effect on engagement?

Ruth Fox: Yes, but, if you look at the work they do, I think they are cognisant of that. Certainly when the audit comes out we have a lot of contact with them. They are very aware of the research that is out there. They engage with academics doing research. It is not that they are unaware of it and will not factor that into their thinking and their evidence base. It is just being done by others. Would it be helpful for them to go back to doing research in that area? I just think it is being done elsewhere and can be sourced elsewhere.

Q94 Chris Ruane: Who has filled the gap?

Ruth Fox: I think a lot of academics are doing more work in this area. I think civil society groups are doing more work.

Q95 Chris Ruane: Can you give us some examples of the civil society groups?

Ruth Fox: You are going hear evidence from colleagues at the Electoral Reform Society a little bit later. They do research. You have voluntary bodies like NCVO focus not on political engagement per se but on broader democratic engagement that they will have an interest in. The Committee on Standards in Public Life, of course, used to have its study. I am not sure that more research is going to be terribly helpful. There is a huge amount of research out there. The problem is getting investment in initiatives to tackle it and focusing on the right issues to deal with the problems. I am not sure that adding more research to an ever-expanding pile is going to help that process.

Q96 Chris Ruane: Do you believe that the Electoral Commission should have a greater role in relation to improving registration and turnout? Do you think it is engaged enough? You mentioned civic society before. Is it engaged enough? Should it be doing it by itself? Should it be doing it in conjunction with Operation Black Vote, Bite the Ballot, the NUS, churches, trade unions, town councils, voluntary organisations and even engaging celebrities? If you have Russell Brand over here saying to young people, “Don’t vote”, do we need to counterbalance that? Should the Electoral Commission be working with us to create some excitement about voting and registering? Should we be doing more as MPs or as the Committee to create excitement like they did in the southern states of America, Freedom Rights and stuff like that?

Ruth Fox: I think there is merit in that, but what you need to think about is both a top-down and a bottom-up. The Electoral Commission can have a helpful role in the sense that they have the links with the electoral returning officers in each constituency and one of the problems with all of this, whatever initiatives you develop and may work, is scalability for most of the organisations we are talking about, both national and civic society organisations. They have that network through the electoral returning officers in each of the constituencies. Would it be helpful to have a white knight who is a regular voter who thinks it is their citizens’ duty to take part? Yes, I think it probably would be. Imagine 18 to 24-year-olds and younger kids thinking about voting in the future—

Chris Ruane: Do you think they might be talking about the Black Knight?

Ruth Fox: —to suddenly discover that David Beckham votes. I don’t know whether he does, but does he vote at every election? Does he regard it as his citizen’s duty? Did he use his postal proxy when he was abroad? It would be helpful certainly in creating a sense of—I think it was one of our former chairs, Dr David Butler, some years ago in a pamphlet, described it as like a Festival of Democracy, needing something that marks it out as an important national occasion once every five years. Certainly you are right. If you compare what election day is like here to what election day is like in the United States—and I have been there for not the last one, but the previous four general elections in the States—it is very different in terms of atmosphere.

Chair: Now we have a fixed-term Parliament you can plan for that, rather than there is a snap election and, “We are unprepared,” or, “We do not have a budget,” and so on.

Ruth Fox: Yes.

Q97 Chris Ruane: But the US has lower voter turnout.

Ruth Fox: Yes. They have a whole different set of problems, some similar.

Chris Ruane: Lord Dubs has told me that when he was over there the polling stations have a sticker. If somebody votes they are offered a sticker to put on. They are walking adverts to remind other people.

Ruth Fox: I worked on then Senator John Kerry's presidential campaign 10 years ago and we were giving out "I voted for John Kerry." You had "I voted for Hilary Clinton" or whatever it might have been.

Chris Ruane: But this was done by the electoral officers at the poll when they went to vote, "Here, I have done my civic duty and I'm proud of it"?

Ruth Fox: Yes.

Q98 Chris Ruane: Do we need more of that? Would that be a good idea for the EROs to do that or the Electoral Commission to do that?

Ruth Fox: I don't think it would hurt. You would have to see. We might be typically English and not like it.

Chris Ruane: We can put little roses on there.

Ruth Fox: Slight reservations. It is very different. I think anything that raises the profile and also raises the profile in those constituencies that are not heavily fought. That is the other element where, when you go through the constituency, you do not see the evidence of the advertising board and window bills and so on that you might see in a heavily-fought three-way constituency. I think anything that raises the profile would be useful.

Q99 David Morris: One of the things in your written evidence says that we have to do better citizenship education. What improvements need to be made so that citizenship education translates to higher voter engagement, do you think?

Ruth Fox: The big challenge for citizenship education at the moment is that, until the end of last year, for the previous two years there had been an expectation that it would be struck from the national curriculum. It was a big surprise that it was retained and I think it is very good that the Government listened and it has been, but the big problem is there has been a reduction in resource. Training already was not very good and that has fallen back. There is a considerable amount of retrenchment that has happened in schools and a lot of ground that will need to be recovered.

I don't think citizenship education should be used as a tool for voter turnout or an expectation that it will automatically lead to voter turnout because, again, you still come back to the problems of efficacy and all the rest. What citizenship education can do, particularly in regard to voting, is two things: first, to address the gap that exists—and it is a long-term challenge, it is not going to happen in just two or three years—between perception and reality and, secondly, address the issue of citizen duty or citizen responsibility, that sense of the collective effort rather than what you as an individual get out of it.

More broadly, it should not be a focus on mechanics or institutions, solely. You have to have that base, but it is about how you as an individual can get involved and participate. Ideally that would be elections, but there are other things that you can do, particularly at the local level. It is developing that sense of the active citizen who might have that approach of seeing it as a duty or as a responsibility—part of being a citizen of this country—that they might be more likely to vote in the future.

Q100 David Morris: The Cabinet Office has recently made £4.2 million available to maximise voter registration. So far £3.6 million of that has gone to local authorities and just over

£200,000 has gone to projects, including one involving the Hansard Society. Do you have a view on where funding for maximising voter registration should be best directed?

Ruth Fox: I don't know what the £3.6 million is going to be used for by the EROs, so it is difficult to give a view as to how they are going to spend it and whether it is going to be effective. They have the advantage of the local presence and the local network, so they ought to be ideally placed to do this, certainly more than we are. As I said earlier, one of the challenges that we are looking at is how we develop innovative ideas that are scalable because otherwise you cannot address the nature of the problem.

If the EROs are going to use it to fill gaps in local government budgets because their administration costs have already been cut because of austerity, all understandable. However, if it is just plugging that gap then I am not sure that we will necessarily see a significant step change in voter registration, particularly in those hard-to-reach groups. Again, it is a little bit like with the Electoral Commission in terms of the people who work in these organisations. They have access to the networks, but essentially they are civil servants and, again like the Electoral Commission, they have a focus on administration, regulation and compliance.

I do wonder whether they have the skill set and the sense of innovation and the willingness, frankly, to take on risk, because some of these projects will require a bit of risk. Not all of them will work and there is a risk that they are going to be accused of wasting money trying to reach the hardest people to get on the register. There is a sense that possibly they are not the right people because of the skill set. If they can source that within their local government staff or they can source it through local strategic partnerships, with the schools, the colleges, their local voluntary sector groups and so on, then great. At the moment I do not know what they are proposing to do and I imagine every one of them will be different.

They do have the advantage over the rest of us in that they know in great detail where the gaps are, state by state, which is something that is problematic for the rest of us who might want to work in this area. We need them to work with us and we will have to see. We hope they will, but there has to be willingness on their part to do so.

Q101 David Morris: Perhaps you could tell us about the project the Hansard Society and Homeless Link have received funding for.

Ruth Fox: Yes. In terms of our bid with Homeless Link, it is called "Your Vote Counts", and it arose out of the results of the audit that showed concerns around the private rental sector generally. There was a sense also that, in the Electoral Commission's findings about the register, those in the rental sector were more likely to not be on the register. They are classified as the hard-to-reach groups.

Homeless Link is an umbrella organisation of housing associations across the country, some of the biggest housing providers. Those housing associations will already be running for their residents, week in-week out, information sessions and support sessions around financial advice, legal advice, benefit advice and so on. What we are proposing to do is put together essentially a training pack and run some training sessions for their housing association teams so that they are in a position to incorporate elements of our wider democratic training project "People to Parliament", which we have been running with ethnic minority communities in London, quite successfully, for the last 18 months.

We are proposing to incorporate that into their broader sessions. It is not about advertising, "Come and learn how to vote" or "Come and learn how to participate". It is just integral to a wider support system and we are branding it ourselves as moving people from complaining to campaigning and

that they see being on the electoral register as helpful for credit checks—so there are real advantages why they should be on the register—but stressing that sense of collective citizens responsibility; making it part and parcel of a broader package of support and advice and information that they are offered, rather than something that is completely separate to their normal life.

We will see. We have said we will endeavour to get 4,000 people on the register through this system nationally over the coming months, which will be a challenge given the group we are talking about. As a consequence, if it does work we will know whether it is scalable through other housing associations.

Q102 Chris Ruane: I tabled a parliamentary question about the Electoral Commission co-operating with CAB, Citizens Advice Bureau, who are national. They are trusted and they deal with the exact profile of the people that are missing off the current registers. The Department said that they will look at that. Do you think CAB would be a suitable organisation for additional funding, whether it be from Government or the Electoral Commission, to help in those registration drives?

Ruth Fox: Possibly, yes. You would have to think carefully about how they would do it and what kind of activity they are doing. People normally come to them for information and advice on a one-to-one basis.

Chris Ruane: Isn't that the best time to register?

Ruth Fox: It may well be.

Chris Ruane: "We will help you on this and here is the form."

Ruth Fox: It may well be. You are right. It is that trusted endorser, the trusted person who recommends it to you, that will help. It is that peer-to-peer element that is more likely than mass election campaigns and all the rest to have an effect on the ground. It could help, yes, but I think it should be part of a package.

Q103 Chris Ruane: Are there any other organisations that you could think of that we could possibly recommend in our report?

Ruth Fox: I shall have a think and come back to you.

Chris Ruane: Thank you very much, and make sure you include the Hansard Society.

Ruth Fox: Yes.

Q104 Chair: Ruth, is there anything else you want to add? We have come to the end of our questions. You will obviously write to us if you have other thoughts, but if there is anything right now you would like to get on the record, feel free.

Ruth Fox: I know in previous evidence and quite a lot of the written evidence you have had material about compulsory voting. I place on record that we are not in favour of that for first-time voters. There is a case for doing it but, if you are going to do it, do it across the board. Do not pick on 18 to 24-year-olds. I cannot think of anything more likely to turn them off the whole political process.

Q105 Chris Ruane: Do you support it for the wider population?

Ruth Fox: There is a case for it, but I am not greatly in favour because I think it is putting a sticking-plaster on the problem. My worry is you have compulsory voting and all of a sudden voting levels go massively up into the 90s and everybody sits back and says, “Well, that is that problem sorted” and it masks the much deeper and much more complex problem below the surface. Voting participation is the problem that is highly visible every five years. It is what is below the surface in terms of broader democratic engagement that concerns me. Compulsory voting could be used to mask that and delay activity in other areas.

Q106 Chris Ruane: What about compulsory registration?

Ruth Fox: Yes. I think if we need to fill in a census form and fill in other things, I would not have a problem with that.

Chair: Ruth, thank you so much. You have been very helpful, as always and we are very serious about our business, particularly at the moment. Well, I think that has always been the case, but with politics being decried in many areas I think it is so important that we get this right and produce a good report and you are going to help us in doing that. Thank you so much, Ruth.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Jessica Garland**, Research Officer, Electoral Reform Society, and **Will Brett**, Head of Media, Electoral Reform Society, gave evidence.

Q107 Chair: If I can now move on, we are going to ask Jessica and Will to come and join us. Good morning, Jessica. Good morning, Will. How are you? Welcome. You know the inquiry we are undertaking. Thank you for sparing the time to come along to advise us this morning. Is there anything you would like to begin by saying?

Will Brett: We do have an opening statement, which is that we would like to thank the Committee very much for inviting us to give evidence. Voter disengagement is an extremely pressing problem, as you all know, and it is also a very complex problem. Our evidence is around the solutions to voter disengagement. It is going to range across a very wide variety of areas. The commitment from this Committee on voter disengagement is very welcome, but we need commitment from all sorts of other areas as well, including Government, the rest of Parliament, schools, civil society and media. We need a combination of public policy, institutional reform and cultural change, all driven by a relentless focus on what will reengage the public in politics.

Chair: Jessica, you have nothing to add?

Jessica Garland: Nothing, not yet.

Q108 Paul Flynn: You state in your evidence that low voter turnout “has a high cost for decision-making”. How?

Jessica Garland: Obviously, in a representative democracy, legitimacy is conferred through election and I think the assumption is that the majority of people must be more than 50%. I think it has a cost for both Governments and citizens. If you look at Europe, there has been a trend to farm out political decisions to unelected technocrats and that has had some pretty bad consequences. It is a problem for the citizen because, while a technocrat might make the most efficient decision, it is not democratic and it is not necessarily in the public interest. Of course, what that does is expand it out.

Q109 Paul Flynn: Would you explain this to the people in Rome, that when they had very high turnouts for a whole multiplicity of parties that produced better Government than they had being run by the technocrats?

Jessica Garland: It does not always produce better Government, but the issue here is confidence in decision-making and what you get is an increase in the gap. People vote when there are high stakes, when they feel that their vote is going to make a difference. If the person you are electing is not making that decision that is obviously going to have an impact on you. You can see a bit of a vicious circle created there.

Q110 Paul Flynn: The percentage of people who voted in 2010 was 65% compared to 59% in 2001. Has that resulted in a happier, efficient democracy?

Jessica Garland: That is a big question. The rise in turnout in the 2010 election was obviously because the contest was much closer. That resulted in the turnout. We, the Electoral Reform Society, do not see an inherent problem in coalition governments. We think they can be very positive for democracy. We will leave that answer there, I think.

Q111 Paul Flynn: The people who have decided to vote are usually those who have the strongest motivation and are probably the best informed. Will it be helpful to get those who are less well informed and more susceptible to the pleadings of the tabloid press to engage in voting? Do you think we would improve the quality of Government with 100% of people, a large number of whom have no deep commitment to the issues or no great knowledge of them?

Will Brett: It is a founding principle of democracy that there is an equality of participation and that all votes are equal. I think it would be a mistake to see some people who might vote as inherently more valuable than others.

Q112 Paul Flynn: Would you be in favour, when the demise of the Queen takes place by abdication or death, that we should exercise democracy to elect her successor and choose between Charles, William or AN Other? Wouldn't this be a final scenario?

Will Brett: Elect them all at once.

Chair: Maybe putting his name into that.

Jessica Garland: I think that is straying a little bit from our submission and our policies there. Yes, we think democracy is a good thing but I am not sure we would stray into republican conversations about it.

Q113 Paul Flynn: Why is that? You are advocates of 100% turnout and demographic decisions on everything.

Jessica Garland: We are not in favour of 100% turnout in any sort of forced way. We would echo Ruth's comments on compulsory voting. We do feel that in a representative democracy, which we have, you want a large majority of people to take part in it and equally as well.

Q114 Paul Flynn: Your written submission also calls for some wider reforms to the culture and practices of representative democracy. One of the ones you suggest is tackling the adversarial nature of Westminster politics. I can recall when I was a young man one of my great heroes referring to the opposition to his party as being lower than vermin. While it was a gratuitous insult to vermin, it seemed to strike a political nerve. The greatly revered figure of Churchill said in the House, when he was accused of being drunk by a lady Member, "Madam, I am drunk but you are ugly and by tomorrow I will be sober". These insults have been part of it. Adversarial politics adds some life and colour. Could you imagine the policies of the nation being hastened and quickened by this Committee rather than what happened in the insults in the Chamber yesterday?

Will Brett: Of course adversarial politics does provide great anecdotes and often good copy for newspapers and the press and so on. Ruth Fox's organisation has just done a study of Prime Minister's Questions and has found that people are genuinely turned off by that culture. No one wants to see—

Chris Ruane: Why do they watch it if they are turned off?

Will Brett: Not that many people watch it, I think. It hits the news bulletins and so it has a very important place in the public imagination and politics but I don't think many people are tuning in at 12.00pm on a Wednesday. No one wants to have a completely anodyne political culture where there is no real debate or opposition, but there is a clear desire from the public to tone down adversarialism and there are various ways that you can do that.

Q115 Paul Flynn: You also suggest reforming the electoral system. If we look at one of the most recent measures of public opinion we have, which was a vote on the Alternative Vote that was decided by a placard on Vauxhall Bridge, that I crossed every morning, saying, "If you are in favour of AV you are in favour of more babies dying in hospital and more of our soldiers dying in Afghanistan". I don't exaggerate. The suggestion was it was going to cost money, there should be a cut and the cut would be in hospital facilities for young babies and in body armour for our troops in Afghanistan. Do you think this is a fine example of democracy in action and fully informed voters who voted on AV?

Jessica Garland: No. I think we could probably fill the rest of this session with discussion about the pros and cons of that campaign and some of the publicity that came out of it.

Q116 Paul Flynn: Doesn't it shake your faith in democracy? People who voted then, the top 30% who don't vote normally, might well find that argument plausible and AV was little understood, I would suggest, in that election. The chances of getting a real argument about the advantages or otherwise of AV were lost in the media babble and the tabloid nonsense.

Jessica Garland: Yes. We would have much rather have seen a full debate on the pros and cons of voting change. Widening that out to a question of how people engage with Parliament, there is an issue there, which I think Ruth mentioned, about levels of interest and knowledge being very much

tied into whether people turn out to vote. When there is no space in the media or anywhere else for the full facts to be debated then that obviously does turn people off.

Q117 Paul Flynn: How do you react to Russell Brand telling young people that they shouldn't vote, remembering that Russell Brand has 7 million followers on Twitter, which is rather more than we members of the Committee have among our followers, all put together, or all politicians in Western Europe put together, I would thought? Is this the way forward? Do you think that it is legitimate for Russell Brand to do that or what effect will it have? How could that be countered?

Will Brett: I think Russell Brand's intervention is a really good example of the pros and cons of celebrity interventions in this debate. He gave a lot of oxygen to the issue, and that is quite important at a time when the issue is becoming more and more serious, but at the same time his recommendation is not very helpful. With celebrity interventions in general, anything that helps to bring focus to politics and helps to focus minds and brings tension is good, but you just need to be careful.

Q118 Paul Flynn: He is attempting to focus minds on our traditional drug policies and advocating a policy that is happening in Uruguay, Colorado and Washington at the moment and trying to get people to sign petitions to get rid of our 42 years of utterly failed drug prohibition in this country. Do you think he is right to say, "Don't vote in general elections but sign petitions"?

Will Brett: There is clearly an irony in that development in which he has told people not to be involved in politics and then has moved swiftly on to talking about politics himself, the sort of politics that is dealt with here in Westminster and representative democracy. There is clearly an irony there, but I don't think Russell Brand should be dominating this conversation.

Q119 Paul Flynn: We have a vote in this House at 5.00pm tonight on which Members have had hundreds of e-mails. Do you think MPs are more likely to be voted by the petitions, by the e-mails that have come in rather than by what happened to us in 2010 when the electorate were wise enough to choose us?

Jessica Garland: I think the public are choosing to use more direct methods of engagement. In 2011 the number of people contacting their MP online rather than on the phone or through letters exceeded traditional forms for the first time, so there are more people contacting MPs online than anything else. I am sure you all know from your own inboxes that it is quite a popular way of exercising some sort of political voice. Whether one way or another is more important is a wider question. The more ways you can involve the public between elections can really help boost engagement, interest and knowledge, but in a representational system it can never be more important than the election of course.

Will Brett: Single-issue campaigns in isolation are problematic for representative democracy. If people are part of associations of any kind, unions, churches, political parties, and they are having to prioritise the issues that they care about and decide which ones they want to give most of their focus to, that creates a more representative version of collective decision-making and gives people the experience. But of course over time membership of that kind of association has dropped and people's individualism and consumerist culture has risen, which has made single-issue campaigning of this sort much more prevalent, and that is one of the problems that political parties and Government have to deal with.

Q120 Paul Flynn: Finally, two groups who have given evidence to us have urged that the voting age be reduced to 16 and that voting is made compulsory. What is your view?

Jessica Garland: We strongly support votes at 16. We don't think this is going to solve the whole turnout problem but we do think it could help. One of the reasons for that is it obviously lessens the gap between when you learn about voting and elections and democracy at school to being able to exercise that vote. Depending on when your birthday falls, it could be almost a good seven years before leaving formal education and exercising your vote for the first time. As we have heard from any other contributors, that age group of people tend to be in private rented accommodation, they are moving about more, so they are more difficult to get registered and there are problems following on from that.

We don't support making it compulsory for first-time voters. I would support what Dr Fox said in the sense that that is probably more likely to turn them off politics than anything else. We don't think they should be treated as political apprentices or a separate section of the democratic society.

Q121 Fabian Hamilton: Can I move on to inequality of turnout? We have had evidence given to us previously that the inequality of registration and turnout is a more serious issue than low turnout generally. Your written submission says that, "Inequalities in voter registration seriously undermine the principle of democratic representation". Could you both expand on this point, please?

Jessica Garland: I think it is fairly obvious that in a good democracy everyone participates as equally as possible. The particular problem with inequalities in turnout and registration is that they do seem to be affecting one group, and that is young people. That is a problem for the future of democracy. People do get into a habit of voting, so if you vote the first time or early on you tend to vote again and again for the rest of your life.

Fabian Hamilton: Which is why votes at 16 are so important, of course.

Jessica Garland: Absolutely. But if you don't you develop this expectation of non-participation and that tends to be reinforcing. If you don't vote the first time, if the cohort you belong to is not listened to, if you don't see your views represented in policy or in political debates, then you are less likely to feel that politics is anything to do with you and that reinforces not wanting to participate the next time. So you can see that trend. I could see us sat here in 10 years' time addressing the same questions but with much lower turnout and much greater inequality because, of course, that gap is expanding.

Will Brett: The other major inequality in turnout is socio-economic status. That is a real problem. There was a time when that was not the case. The US historical data over a long period of time shows that back in the 19th century you were more likely to vote if you were of a lower socio-economic status than not. That is a really important problem.

Q122 Fabian Hamilton: How do you explain that inequality? I represent a constituency that is part of the city of Leeds that has a very poor and mainly immigrant area to the south and as you progress up the road, it is like a pie slice, it gets progressively better off, more middle class, and then quite wealthy. We do see huge inequalities in turnout in the poorest areas. It is almost reflected by socio-economic class and family and household income, but how do you explain that? Is it simply because more people are moving about? Is it because this is the least priority in people's lives if they are struggling to put food on the table? What is the explanation for that lack of interest?

Jessica Garland: I think there are many factors, although both of those are quite important. We also have to look at the culture of politics and look at Parliament. Do people look to Parliament and

say, “That is really representative of me. I can identify with Parliament”? Do people see themselves represented at Parliament? I think that is a big question that they would be asking. How representative Parliament is plays a big role in it as well.

Q123 Fabian Hamilton: Wouldn't you have thought that the more people are struggling, because they see the whole economy as being unfair and distribution of wealth as being unfair, that they might want to change it? They might have more reason to want to change what is going on through the political process and therefore there is something wrong with the political process rather than who represents them. My experience is that most parliamentarians of all parties do their very best to represent the people who have elected them to the best of their ability. They may not reflect them in terms of class, race, religion or gender but they try to represent everybody because that is the principle that underlies British parliamentary representation, as opposed to many other countries that have list systems or anonymous faces.

Will Brett: As Dr Fox was saying earlier, there is a real problem with efficacy, the perception that your vote makes a difference. Lots of voters in safe seats are going to struggle to see the point and if they have lots of other pressures on their time and resources, if they have limited resources, the point of voting is going to be harder to understand. I think that is part of the problem.

Q124 Fabian Hamilton: Let me just challenge you on that. I would say you have quite an old-fashioned view. Maybe 10, 15, 20, 30 years ago you could say there were safe seats for each of the parties and it didn't matter what the MP did, they were always going to get elected, but I would say that has changed hugely in the last 10 or 15 years, wouldn't you?

Jessica Garland: No. Actually the number of marginal seats has gone down.

Fabian Hamilton: Really?

Jessica Garland: Yes.

Fabian Hamilton: Do you have the evidence to show that?

Jessica Garland: I don't have the figures to hand but I can certainly send them to the Committee. The way that you measure marginals, the number of seats that can be swung within a certain percentage has gone down.

Fabian Hamilton: I would very much like to see that evidence.

Jessica Garland: Yes, of course. We will send that.

Chair: Mark, we are very grateful you have landed in this country and the first thing you do is come to this Select Committee, which is a great tribute to us. Thank you, Mark.

Q125 Mark Durkan: I left Capitol Hill just 12 hours and 10 minutes ago. We are having this inquiry because we are all taking it as a given that there is lower voter turnout. We have talked and we have received evidence about some of the worrying effects of lower turnout, particularly if that continues. Causes of lower turnout: what is actually causing it in your view?

Will Brett: One way of looking at it is that you have short-term causes and long-term causes and what you are getting at the moment is a kind of perfect storm between those two ranges. In the short term we have had a whole series of crises and scandals, the expenses scandal, cash for honours, and also wider scandals around elites generally, not just in Parliament but in the media

and banks and so on. That has been the fuse to light these long-term cultural changes, societal changes, that are deeply entrenched and more or less impossible to shift. You have globalisation that creates the sense that politicians' ability to shape society is less than it was and that feeds through into the public. They feel that politics is less efficacious than it was. Many have changes in societal cultures. You have the rise in consumerism. You have a more autonomous and more highly educated population that is less willing to be represented or told what to do or is much less deferent. You have these long-term changes that militate against people finding formal politics something to engage in. When you have these long-term changes lit by the fuse of short-term changes, that is why we have something approaching a crisis in voter engagement at the moment.

Q126 Mark Durkan: It is basically just because of that switch-off, the powerlessness, the irrelevance, the venality of politics. It is those sorts of perceptions. Is it anything to do with the methodology, methods of voting? Do you think changing the voting methods would make a difference to voter engagement?

Jessica Garland: Yes. People turn out to vote when the stakes are high and when the contest is close, and so there is obviously a per election impact there as well. You don't turn out to vote if you don't think it is going to make any election, so we will of course say that a change in the electoral system is quite important for that. These are big changes and they are happening all across the world in fact. The Scandinavian and Nordic countries that tend to have higher turnouts have really rigorous registration. That is obviously a factor there, but they also have different political cultures so they are not as affected by some of the things that might be affecting British turnout.

Q127 Chris Ruane: Just a point to Will, you said that those who are university educated for the most part don't want to be told what to do. Is that correct?

Will Brett: It is a generalisation but it is the higher levels of education generally, not necessarily university education but higher levels of education generally over 70, 80, 90 years.

Q128 Chris Ruane: The differentials between voter turnout for the university educated, the ABs, and the non-university educated, the DEs, are massive. How do you square that?

Will Brett: It is not a direct relationship between university education and not wanting to vote. It is more that higher levels of education generally in the population, not just higher education itself but standard education, have created an entire cultural shift. It is the sheer difference between the 1930s, the 1920s society and the 21st century society. It is very different in terms of how people relate to authority, to government, to the perception of their own self-worth or their own autonomy. People have a much stronger sense of self-worth. That is a long-term cultural shift and it makes it harder for them to accept the idea of being represented in Parliament or giving over their power to a representative.

Q129 Chris Ruane: Secondly, you mentioned the issue of trust and stuff like that and equality. Joseph Stiglitz in his book "The Price of Inequality" has a whole chapter, chapter 5, on democratic deficit. He makes a link that economic inequality and political inequality go hand in hand and it is not just something that has happened. It is something that has been construed; it is something that has been designed. He is talking in an American setting. He points to issues like Republican states putting forward photo ID before you go to vote; a whole range of values put in place to keep poor people, blacks and Hispanics, off the register. In fact, I think in American law it is okay to keep a person off the register if they are a Democrat but it is not okay to keep a person off the register if they

are black. He said the whole system in America has been manipulated, deliberately party politically manipulated, to keep the poorest off the register and from voting. Are we seeing an element of that in the UK with the media, judges, senior politicians dripping the issue of voter security while neglecting the fact that there are 6.5 million people not even on the register and 11 million people that don't vote? What are your views on that?

Will Brett: I think most people would say that we have nowhere near the kinds of problems that America has on that front. On the other hand, there are certain—

Q130 Chris Ruane: Are you aware that the Electoral Commission is proposing to introduce photo ID in 2019, which has been introduced by Republican states in America?

Will Brett: We have some concerns about that, not so much because we think it is gerrymandering but because we think it is putting up barriers to voting. Any barriers in the current state of affairs are problematic, in our view. In this country there are certainly cases in which political inequality, the inequality in turnout, shapes public policy. The fact that young people don't turn out to vote as much as older people has been shown to shape public policy.

Q131 Chris Ruane: So they get the tripling of tuition fees. They don't vote, they get tuition fees.

Will Brett: Not to be specific about it but I think the Intergenerational Foundation have a whole set of data on that. There are always going to be dangers with inequality in turnout but those who don't turn out are going to get left out.

Jessica Garland: It is always a matter of balance and you mentioned earlier about the postal votes. We would strongly advise against getting rid of postal votes or any sort of retrograde step because, as you say, the really important thing is the number of people off the register and the cases of fraud are very small. Where we are seeing the election process tightened up, we would want to see a balance there and the big issue of under-registration and low turnout is the key focus.

Q132 Fabian Hamilton: Can I continue the theme that Mark Durkan started about modernising electoral administration? You have proposed various reforms to modernise electoral administration. Could you outline the main changes that you think would improve voter engagement?

Jessica Garland: We have put down election day registration. I put that first today because that is the one reform that has been shown to improve equality of voting most. In the US where that has been introduced, it has been shown to have the highest impact on people who move home regularly, so we know those are the people who are less likely to register and to vote.

Q133 Fabian Hamilton: Can I just be clear on that? If you turn up at the polling station and you are not on the register you can still vote.

Jessica Garland: Yes.

Fabian Hamilton: How can you ensure that there is not fraud?

Jessica Garland: In the US the way they do it is with identification, plus you sign an oath. You declare an oath face to face with the registration officer there and they do an audit afterwards as

well just to check up on that. But in the last presidential election, of the top five states for voter turnout, four of them had same-day registration.

Q134 Fabian Hamilton: Is that the only one?

Jessica Garland: No. I will go on. We also very much like the idea of motor voter style registration, which we will have to find a better name for. This is where you would be encouraged to register to vote with your government transactions, so with your council tax or when you apply for a driving licence. At different state interactions you would be encouraged to and given a form to register. Lots of people think they are already registered when they pay their council tax so it would not be a massive leap there. In our research we found at least 38% of people felt they would be more likely to register with that sort of encouragement.

Fabian Hamilton: It seems very sensible. I wonder why it has not been done already.

Jessica Garland: One of the things that would be really innovative is if we had votes at 16 they could send the registration form out with your national insurance number card, so you become a citizen in the eyes of the state in two ways there.

Q135 Fabian Hamilton: Any other reforms?

Jessica Garland: Yes. I have mentioned early registration. A larger change but one that would be worth thinking about is allowing voters to vote anywhere in their constituency. At the moment you have to go to your specific polling station. I am sure you can think of all the administrative changes that might occur, but if you think about it in connection with same-day registration, if you are registering on the day and you don't have your poll card, being able to turn up anywhere would be a massive boost as well. In New Zealand, you can vote anywhere in the country on election day, but that is because the returns don't come in until much later. They don't declare the election until later.

Q136 Fabian Hamilton: I agree with all your suggestions, and it is certainly worth looking at that last one. The only problem is that for all of us in this room who rely on the accurate data from polling districts to see where our strengths and weaknesses lie, I don't think the political parties would be too happy about it. But my view is that if it increases voter registration and participation in elections, it is a sacrifice worth making.

Will Brett: Parties can evolve.

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, that is very true.

Jessica Garland: It is how we look at the system, in whose interest it is working. We would say make sure the system works in the interests of the voter first and that could mean some big scale changes.

Fabian Hamilton: Absolutely right. Thank you.

Q137 Chris Ruane: The Electoral Commission started in 2001. Up until 2011 it didn't know how many people were unregistered or it had the wrong figure. They thought 3.5 million. In 2011 they revealed it was 6 million. I told them two years prior to that that it was 6 million, after having a meeting with Experian who told me. You mentioned before about the balance between security of the

vote and the size of the electorate. Do you believe the Electoral Commission has got that balance right? Do you think there is an over-focus on security of the vote, introducing cutting back on political parties touching postal votes, introduction of photo ID, even before the new changes have been bedded down? Do you think the balance is right within the Electoral Commission? Could they do more on voter turnout? They are great at saying, “You should do this, this box, and you should send out this form”. They measure all the inputs but they don’t measure the outputs; how many people have been registered in a local authority or nationally. They didn’t even have the figures. Is the balance right?

Jessica Garland: I think the introduction of individual electoral registration has raised a lot of issues here and it has raised the issue of millions unregistered. I think that has been quite a good catalyst to look at the role of the Electoral Commission and also ways of getting people registered. The Electoral Commission has had more of a focus on compliance and regulation and we would like to see a more positive focus on issues like registration and turnout, but the Electoral Commission is going to be doing a huge marketing campaign when IER starts coming in later this year, and I think that is something worth looking at and evaluating to see if it could be continued.

Q138 Chris Ruane: Are you aware that the outputs, the electoral registration campaigns that the Electoral Commission has run in the past, they judge by the downloads from their website? In 2005, having spent £3.5 million on advertising, each download cost £80. On average it is £25. The best was £5 a download in the 2010 general election. Bite the Ballot can do it for 18 pence. Is there a case for more efficient use of public money, whether it be through the Electoral Commission or through the Cabinet Office, for the purpose of electoral registration? Should we be working closely with groups on the ground that have those connections in those communities or with that cohort or with that demographic? Should we be using the Electoral Commission having greater focus on its value for money?

Jessica Garland: Bite the Ballot do an enormous amount of work on a very small—

Chris Ruane: On a pittance.

Jessica Garland: Absolutely. You have met them, I am sure. Their enthusiasm for getting young people registered is absolutely infectious.

Chris Ruane: Is that enthusiasm tapped by the Electoral Commission, the Cabinet Office or the Deputy Prime Minister?

Jessica Garland: I know that the Cabinet Office has engaged Bite the Ballot in doing some work and I think that is really exciting, and if it works it should carry on. Their national voter registration is a brilliant idea and we were involved with that. Those sorts of initiatives, the bottom-up stuff, is fantastic for getting people registered, but I think you need that top-down approach as well. The Electoral Commission have the national focus and are in a position to be able to really push voter registration.

Q139 Chris Ruane: Have they been effective in getting people on the register? Is 6.5 million off the register acceptable after 13 years of existence of the EC?

Jessica Garland: The problem, of course, is that getting people on the register is localised. There is no national register. Each ERO does their own thing and some are amazing. They get 90%-plus registration in inner-city areas where it would traditionally be very difficult to register people and then there are others, that you could say would have an easier job, who have very lower registration rates. There is a big difference in how well each local authority is getting people on the register.

Q140 Chris Ruane: Who should monitor the poor performance? Who should monitor, invigilate and punish the poor performance of electoral registration officers? Every ERO is supposed to organise a door-to-door canvass for those who have not registered. I think it is called priority 3. There are 55 local authorities that have not done this. Some of them have not done it for four years on the trot. I am not sure if the Electoral Commission has the ability to censure them but no action has been taken against these local authorities that do it. We have best performance and we have worst performance, and some of them are making no improvements. What can be done? Is it the job of the Electoral Commission? Is it the job of Government Departments? Could that be a recommendation that this Committee makes, that the invigilation, the raising of standards has to be more vigorous and properly implemented?

Jessica Garland: Given the rates of under-registration, there does need to be a very serious focus on it but I think it takes targeted action from all number of people involved in this area.

Chris Ruane: Who?

Jessica Garland: The Electoral Commission, obviously, local registration officers, groups. We can't put too much pressure on civil society groups who we are saying are doing a huge amount for very little but they can encourage it. But we would like to see a focus on the positive sides of signing people up rather than just on the negative elements.

Q141 Chair: Any other questions from colleagues? Is there anything you would like to add, Jessica or Will, to what you have said this morning, which has been very helpful?

Jessica Garland: I think we have covered everything. Thank you.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much indeed for your time and it was very good to see you. We will hopefully get our report together in the not too distant future on what is an absolutely vital topic as we are now 418 days away from the next general election. So who is counting? Thank you so much. Thank you colleagues, Mark in particular. Thank you for joining us. Time to go and have a nap.