



## Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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

Thursday 8 May 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 8 May 2014.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Dr Maria Sobolewska and Professor Anthony Heath](#)

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

Questions 326 - 376

*Witnesses:* **Dr Maria Sobolewska**, University of Manchester, and **Professor Anthony Heath**, Universities of Manchester and Oxford, gave evidence.

**Q326 Chair:** Good morning, Maria. Good morning, Anthony. It is very good of you to come in this morning. Do you want to start off by saying something by way of a statement or would you rather we went straight into questions?

**Professor Heath:** If we can, we will very briefly make one of the key points that was in our written evidence, which is that registration is the central barrier for minorities, all the main groups of which appear to have much lower rates of registration. Once registered there are some differences, but they are relatively modest and they are not the major issue.

The other point that we would want to emphasise throughout our evidence is the diversity of ethnic minorities. It is a rapidly changing diversity, and there is diversity within the groups as well as between the groups. Particularly a group like black Africans is not a single group, and the diversity means there are very different reasons—or there could be potentially—for lack of registration and lack of turnout. We need to bear that diversity in mind all the time, and it is changing. We say very little about the mixed heritage group, which is Britain's fastest growing minority. We don't cover any of the recent white migrant groups. We should be looking at them.

**Dr Sobolewska:** One point to add here is that one of the questions that we received as a likely question you would be asking today was whether the socioeconomic marginality of minorities accounts for the under-registration. I wanted to make the point very early that whatever the answer to this question may be, we still must accept that there are very strong reasons to believe that we

have to adopt a differential approach to unpacking the under-registration. Whatever the causes of under-registration, the answers and the solutions may be very different, even if they are caused by the same socioeconomic inequalities.

**Q327 Mr Turner:** You have been looking at BME groups for many years. Could you start by summarising how engagement for BME groups differs from non-BME groups?

**Professor Heath:** Using the term “engagement” fairly broadly, in many ways there are striking similarities. For example, in levels of identification with a political party, which is a key aspect, and also levels of political interest and concern, the difference is really quite small. We should emphasise that in many ways Britain has a very fine record of political engagement of minorities and, as far as we can see, it compares very well with many other European and North American countries. There are some areas like interest in psychological engagement where the differences are small. We know there are big differences in direction of partisanship—support for the different parties. There are well known patterns, which I am sure you know. If we go outside the electoral arena, patterns of engagement in signing petitions, protest activity, joining pressure groups and so on are pretty similar. So, there are many similarities. Sometimes the differences are larger between the ethnic minorities than between the average minority and the white British majority group.

It used to be thought that levels of turnout were lower, particularly among black groups. We are not sure, from our recent research, that that really is true. There may be small differences, but they are quite small. We think it may be that self-report data is misleading because the black groups seem to us to be more honest and don’t succumb to the sort of courtesy bias of telling the interviewer what they want to hear. They are straight: if they didn’t vote they tell you. There probably are some differences in turnout levels, but they are pretty small.

The big difference is registration. That seems to apply to the second generation as well as to the first generation. Often in our work we make a distinction between the migrants themselves and the people who were either educated or born and educated in Britain, because there are many reasons why recent migrants would have a lower level of engagement. There are very important differences according to when people arrived in the country, and of course many people may not even be citizens and could not be citizens for five years. So there are major differences according to when people arrived, whether they were born and educated in Britain and so on. It is another source of diversity.

**Q328 Mr Turner:** You say BAME-specific. Does that mean the same as BME?

**Dr Sobolewska:** Yes. This is a nomenclature change. Nowadays it seems more acceptable to use “black, Asian and minority ethnic” rather than just “black and minority ethnic”.

**Q329 Mr Turner:** How many groups are there? I know there is not an answer to that, but what do you do to identify these different groups, for instance Chinese or Filipino, as well as black and Asian, which usually does not mean Chinese?

**Dr Sobolewska:** Sadly, the problem from our perspective is that we are quantitative scientists, so we do large-scale surveys, and for our purposes there simply are not enough Chinese people to obtain a useable sample for a nationally representative survey. One would have to go into the field specifically to sample Chinese people, and this would be in only a few localities and over-sampling Chinese people in such a way that it would not be a nationally representative survey. The survey that we are basing this evidence on is nationally representative and comparable with the white

population, whereas a survey of the Chinese population would be quite different, very expensive and mostly quota-sampled or survey-sampled. There is a methodological difficulty.

**Q330 Mr Turner:** Let's put Chinese and Filipinos to one side for a moment. What about Pakistani and Indian? Do you distinguish between those?

**Dr Sobolewska:** We do. We have used a census question on ethnicity and we have let our respondents self-identify, so they were telling us what origin they were.

**Professor Heath:** We always use the official census question, which of course changes from time to time because of the changing nature of the population. The census question enables us to distinguish between Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi-heritage people, but within those groups we like to make further distinctions. For example, there are big differences between Indian Muslims, Indian Hindus, the Sikhs are a very distinct community—in fact, legally they are a distinct ethnic minority, following a famous court case—and we have a very important group of East African Asians, which includes some people of Pakistani heritage, who again are quite distinctive, including in their patterns of political engagement, registration and so on.

The black African group is even more diverse, with a very rapidly growing group of people of Somali background but, unlike many of the other groups, there are quite a large number of African groups from non-Commonwealth countries. Somalia was not part of the Commonwealth but it was a protectorate for a time. There are also surprisingly large numbers from the Congo. There are many different African groups. Whereas the Bangladeshi group is pretty homogeneous, the Indian and the black African groups are not, and one should be making quite important distinctions because, connected to the social processes, political engagement will be different across those groups.

**Q331 Mr Turner:** Comparing BME with UK white is not very helpful when you are comparing, say, East African Asian with white working class. How are the two groups represented in terms of the numbers? I am asking what sort of person you are representing.

**Professor Heath:** The number of people of East African ancestry is very low but in terms of participation rate you could well find—and we can check that data for you, it is very easy as we have got it accessible—that participation rates generally would be higher among the East African Asian group than among the white working class. They have been the most successful of our groups economically, and also one of the longest established, who are also very committed to life in Britain because, in a sense, they had no possibility of return. They have been perhaps the most distinctive success story.

**Q332 Mr Turner:** Looking at the Chinese and others, Arab and South American for instance, which of those are you able to distinguish—perhaps it is too long an answer—and for which do you not have sufficient information?

**Dr Sobolewska:** The Chinese are the group most strongly emerging as a community. They do tend to live together and you can identify them. The numbers are quite strong. We are unable to distinguish any other east Asian origins as far as I can say in terms of their numbers. In Britain we do not count people from, for example, South America as ethnic minorities in the same way. In Britain the concept of ethnic minorities is very much based on racial discrimination and racial

disadvantage. We often, for example, use the words “visible ethnic minorities” to describe the minorities that we research.

As Anthony mentioned at the beginning, we do have quite a large black spot, in a sense, of covering all these other minorities, like South Americans but also eastern Europeans and central Europeans, which basically would not come into the scope of a study like the one we have recently conducted. Also we have to remember that when we look at political participation, a lot of the visible ethnic minorities will be the minorities who come predominantly from Commonwealth countries, and we are starting off from the premise that they should be participating because they are eligible. However, a person from Mexico or Poland does not have that eligibility to start with, so this introduces an additional barrier to entry to political life. They have to apply for citizenship or can only participate in low-turnout elections, like the local elections, in the case of Poles for example.

**Professor Heath:** There are different sources of data. We are mainly talking about the survey that we conducted after the 2010 election, which is the largest and most authoritative. There are other sources of data, but they will not go into the detail about political engagement. From “Understanding Society”, which is a big new panel study, one could get some information on some of these other white ethnic minorities, but it would not be very rich data. You could do a little bit from analysis of aggregate data, using the census, but because these groups are very small it would be very difficult to do anything reliable on them. There are real gaps that will become more important because of the changing nature of immigration patterns to Britain.

**Dr Sobolewska:** As far as I know, there is an analysis like that being prepared for the Electoral Commission now from the census data on levels of registration, so you could look into that when it comes out or via the Electoral Commission, because they will have data soon.

**Q333 Mr Turner:** Thank you very much. Are there any reasons for low registration that are uniquely BME?

**Dr Sobolewska:** I think knowledge of eligibility is the one item that we can clearly identify. It has been mentioned by a lot of our respondents, and the knowledge of eligibility is very low among people of African origin especially. I think this is because of the diversity of migration. Some of these people would have come from eligible countries, Commonwealth countries, but some would not. So in terms of a community, they don’t have that support network of knowing other people from the same country who have been eligible and have been voting. We definitely see those kinds of community mechanisms at work for Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. There is research showing that in areas where they congregate and live close together the registration rates are higher, and indeed turnout rates as well, whereas the African communities don’t have that. I think this is the main obstacle for them.

**Professor Heath:** There is clearly a particular problem with the black African groups that can’t be explained by all the standard factors that account for low registration among the white British. A surprising number of Indians are not registered. That is partly because they don’t take out British citizenship. India is changing the rules slightly but does not allow dual citizenship, so there is a lower rate of British citizenship, particularly among first-generation Indians. That is a rather specific factor, and that is where the lack of knowledge about eligibility becomes important, because many of the Indian community will not be aware that they are eligible despite being Indian citizens, not British citizens. That is a special factor.

Lack of English language is clearly important and could be important with the new system of individual registration, particularly for some of the women in some of the south Asian groups,

especially the first generation who migrated here as adults. That will be very specific to south Asian women.

The other factor that we can't really demonstrate but is one that concerns me is that there are issues still of racial discrimination, which we know from field experiments in the labour market, and other forms of exclusion particularly affecting young black men. The stop and search kind of thing is deeply resented by young black men. So I think there are specific factors that may particularly affect young men of a range of black backgrounds, which may tend to alienate them so they feel that they are marginalised and excluded from British society and say, "Why should we bother? Why should we take an interest?" I can't give you chapter and verse on that, but a lot of the evidence points in the direction that there are particular concerns about dissatisfaction, alienation and the feeling that people are excluded. I think we should not ignore that, because that could have long-term, wider social consequences.

**Q334 Chris Ruane:** Why is it that the number of unregistered voters has gone up dramatically to 6 million people over the past 20 years? Has the BME percentage in that increase over those years been the same proportion, or has it increased proportionately with the whole?

**Dr Sobolewska:** The problem with identifying how much of this increase is the ethnic minorities is that our data is really the first time that we have reliable figures on this. There have been local studies that have been putting the evidence together, trying to get a national picture, but this is the first time we have actually had a nationally representative, large sample and gone to the electoral registers and checked if people were registered. It is very hard to say how much of that increase is down to ethnic minorities. I do think that generally speaking there are so many trends, which I am sure you have heard about over and over, such as disengagement but also the rise in immigrant population and the kind of population that is what we call transient. They live in privately rented accommodation; they move often; they are very hard to get. Often they receive letters of registration addressed to the household, but they don't live in a coherent household, they rent a room, and so they would not have received that letter personally. A lot of these kind of increases over the years are just so complex and multiple.

**Q335 Chris Ruane:** You are saying that you did not have the figures, you have only just had them because of this research.

**Dr Sobolewska:** There were some indicative figures but in terms of that kind of statement—you disagree?

**Professor Heath:** Yes. I think you quoted in the written evidence two studies that OPCS, the precursor to ONS, did in 1981 and 1991 and they both showed levels of under-registration of minorities very similar to the ones that we found. Insofar as we can make any guesses, it would be that the rate of under-registration by minorities has been something that has been true for 30 years.

**Q336 Chris Ruane:** Should we be guessing? This is the basic building block of democracy. Should we be guessing at these figures? Are you happy with the level of research there has been, under the previous Labour Government and this coalition Government, on the issue of registration? It is a basic building block of democracy. The ONS, the Electoral Commission, the Cabinet Office, the ODPM all thought that the unregistered was 3 million until Experian, the credit rating agency, told them three or four years ago that it was 6 million. Initially the Electoral Commission denied that. They did their own research and, lo and behold, it was 6 million. Is it acceptable in a democracy that 6 million people are missing off the register? If those 6 million were on the register, would it change the

nature of British democracy? The most marginalised off the register are two steps away from democratic participation. On the register, they are one step, one vote away, and you would not get the language that you get from certain politicians and certain political parties if there were 6 million people. Elections are won on 10 million votes; if you had 6 million people on there—

**Dr Sobolewska:** I agree. I often say that registration is an ugly sister of turnout. Nobody wants to research it. Most of the money and attention goes towards turnout, towards an actual active participation while you are registered, and very often the people who are not registered are completely ignored. So I entirely agree that there should be more money and more attention put towards registration. As you said, this is the moment when we actively exclude people from participation, so then whether they make an informed choice to participate or not is a very different issue. As a society that claims to be democratic, we must not take that first step of exclusion, and I think this is where we should be talking about the rules of registration. As we know from the international comparative perspective, Britain is not the most inclusive system in terms of electoral registration. A lot of the European countries, for example, have automatic enrolment on to electoral registers, so once you register with any official service provided by the Government you will automatically be registered to vote.

**Q337 Chris Ruane:** Should we have that here?

**Dr Sobolewska:** I think that would be very helpful, but even if we don't go quite so dramatically in the opposite direction to what we have now of individual-based registration, we can still better the one that we have now. The new reform stated that the national insurance number, being registered with the Department for Work and Pensions, should be the principal source of information on whether you exist or not, basically, for the purposes of the electoral register. I think that is entirely discriminatory against, for example, a lot of ethnic minority women. We know that up to 30% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have never worked. A lot of the time the husbands would register for benefits, so as far as this Department is concerned these women do not exist. We know that there are better sources of data. For example, for school choice the NHS data is used, and more people will have contact with the NHS, especially women and children. So there has to be a greater degree of open-mindedness about how we decide who exists and therefore can be registered as an elector.

**Q338 Chris Ruane:** Joseph Stiglitz in his book *The Price of Inequality* said that political inequality is part and parcel of social and economic inequality. In the American instance, this was deliberate. It was part of voter suppression. Do you think in the British instance it is just happenstance—it has just happened—or is it deliberate?

**Dr Sobolewska:** I think it happened at some point, certainly with the household registration, but I do think with the new reforms the attention has been too much on the safety of elections, given how little fraud we can prove exists, and they have forgotten about the access aspect of voter registration.

**Professor Heath:** Can I add a couple of points? One is just a footnote and goes back to your earlier point about the increase in non-registered. It may be nothing to do with minorities, and it may well be among young people. I think there is a real issue, which I am sure you are looking at separately, about the political engagement of young people. There is evidence of declining turnout among young people and that they are turned off by politics. There is also evidence that whether you register and vote at your first election can have long-term consequences for future participation. If we have a generation of young people who are turned off politics that will live with us for many elections to come. They are not things that can just be immediately reversed once people have got

into the habit, and that could also apply to minorities. If they are excluded initially, as perhaps with asylum seekers, that may have long-term consequences of them feeling they are not part of it.

Now I have forgotten the second point I was going to make.

**Chair:** Don't worry, we can come back to it.

**Q339 Chris Ruane:** Finally, part of the voter suppression that I mentioned in America is the need in certain states, in Republican states, for voter ID before you can go down to the poll. It is a deliberate, right-wing Republican policy in states. The Electoral Commission are proposing this for 2019 in the UK. How will this affect BME electors who may be shy about having their photograph and being properly documented? How will it affect them?

**Dr Sobolewska:** I do believe that it will affect them. In our research, we experienced difficulty with the lack of trust that some of these minorities show. For example, we have gone and checked the registers for all our respondents but almost half of our ethnic minority respondents said that they did not want to have that registration status linked back to their survey answers. That is unprecedented. This kind of exercise has usually been done on the British election studies on the general population, and the level of decline is much lower. They clearly have this distrust, and it could be linked to their eligibility status and immigration status: are they actually allowed to be here?

I do think, depending on what identification you request, it will have a huge impact but, as with everything, it is a trade-off. If there was the possibility of on-the-day registration but against an ID, that perhaps would be a valuable trade-off. However, if you just introduced one more obstacle without giving anything back, then I think that would be very negative.

**Chris Ruane:** Especially when there has only been one case of electoral registration fraud since 2008.

**Q340 Mr Turner:** Could you describe the number of steps that now require one to vote once and the number of steps that would be required if we were to change to your proposal—I am not quite sure which proposal you are putting forward—for a new, more effective way of getting people on the register and voting? We have such complex eligibility. I am still unclear whether a person who has come from Zimbabwe is or is not able to vote. I have lots of Zimbabweans of both colours who vote, as far as I know, but I don't know whether it is legal that they should do so.

**Professor Heath:** You are more expert on the actual procedures, I suspect.

**Dr Sobolewska:** This is a tricky question about the new system, because it is not entirely clear what is happening as of yet. In the olden days you would get a letter and you would have to input any changes into your registration. You would get a letter with the previous registration status—all the people registered in your household—and you would send it back. Now I think there is a system of rolling over. If you can be identified as existing against the data that the Government is, using your name is kept on the register, but we have changed to this system of individual registration.

I have tried to clarify this with the Electoral Commission, but the response was very patchy, because I don't think they know very well yet either. You can definitely register online, but I am not sure what the present status of letter sending is—whether you will be getting a letter addressed to the individual or not—but I presume that this is what is going to be happening. You will get a personal letter that you will have to send back to the electoral register, or you will be able to

register online and then you receive a polling card and take it to the polling station, or send it if you have registered for postal voting.

**Q341 Mr Turner:** From the point of view of the people deciding whether to put somebody's name on the list, who knows whether they are UK or Zimbabwe? That is what I am trying to work out; how do we know whether they have a vote or not?

**Dr Sobolewska:** That is what I find unclear with the current status. The Government has produced impact assessments and the Electoral Commission has produced a document when they have piloted this rolling-over and checking system, and to me it is not entirely clear what is happening. We know that the success rate for this rolling-over and checking is not high. It is only about 75%, I think, so that is slightly worrying. I think the Electoral Commission did not find that ethnic minorities were particularly disadvantaged, but they found that some areas of minority concentration were worse in terms of the success rate. As of yet, I am not entirely sure how you decide, but under the previous system you just put which citizenship you had. You had your nationality and you put it on the form, and I presume this will be the same to an extent.

**Chair:** We will research this and make sure that all members of the Committee get a note, including Andrew.

**Q342 Robert Neill:** I was troubled, Dr Sobolewska, by some of your answers. You are not saying to me, are you, that the integrity of the register is not the prime consideration in any democracy that tops everything else, or do you not think that?

**Professor Heath:** Can I answer?

**Dr Sobolewska:** You can answer for me. Go ahead.

**Professor Heath:** It is really about trade-offs.

**Robert Neill:** Can you trade off the integrity of the democratic register?

**Professor Heath:** You do all the time. You always make trade-offs. You could have the most perfect system that was 100% accurate, and it would be enormously expensive and you would probably have to check with the Passport Office to get citizenship and so on. It sounds as though at the moment you do have a compromise, in that you don't check the status. People say they are British citizens and it is not checked, as far as I know, but I am sure you will find out the technical details. You are already making a trade-off between practicality and expense and having the most perfect system full of integrity. You are already bound to be in that situation.

**Q343 Robert Neill:** But as technology improves, logic says it is easier to carry out those checks, so should not the logic be that we should be more rigorous in the checks at the same time as we seek to ensure that those who are properly qualified are encouraged to be on the register, as Chris was saying? There is no trade-off needed.

**Professor Heath:** It would be nice if it was the case that large-scale Government IT schemes did not have a poor track record.

**Robert Neill:** Are you saying "Don't try", then?

**Professor Heath:** No, I am saying you should probably do pilots, and you should test things out to see that they are cost-effective, otherwise you would get the National Audit Office after you for value for money. You need to remember value for money when you are devising a system. You can have the best possible system—have you read that excellent book by Ivor Crewe and Tony King about Government blunders?

**Robert Neill:** Yes. I disagree with a lot of it.

**Professor Heath:** It is a great book.

**Chris Ruane:** That is because you were responsible for them.

**Robert Neill:** There are some of yours, Chris. It seemed to me it was classic academic stuff.

**Chair:** I won't go too deeply into other people's work, but I think Bob has made a very important point about the balance. I think the Committee—

**Robert Neill:** It is the balance.

**Dr Sobolewska:** We care very deeply about the integrity of elections.

**Chair:** The Committee will be very interested in that question of balance, and whether we have got it right and how we adjust it if we feel it is not quite right.

**Q344 Mark Durkan:** You have raised concerns about the implementation of individual electoral registration—that it could have an adverse impact on the levels of registration for BME groups. We may have our own impressions or assumptions around that. Based on your own study, what are the factors that give you that cause for concern that it would be particularly detrimental to BME groups? In respect of those factors, are there any particular steps that you think could be taken to ensure that it does not have a disproportionate impact on BME groups?

**Dr Sobolewska:** As I said, for example, changing the data against which you check the status of a person—adding NHS data to the roster, for example—would have been helpful. One of the worries is Asian minority women who have thus far been registered by their husbands. Often they are economically inactive, don't claim benefits, don't even speak fluent English, and so they would be significantly hurt by the programme. On the other side, we do feel that perhaps some of the minorities, like the younger minorities in more transient situations in privately rented accommodation, could benefit under the system.

We feel that you do need to conduct a lot more research, which we are currently applying for funding for, to say definitely what the impact will be of this reform. We are basically raising some concerns, but we are not saying that it will definitely hurt minority registration. We are just worried that it will be much difficult for some segments of the minority population, especially the south Asian women, to participate.

**Professor Heath:** The written evidence we gave was that a higher proportion of minorities told us that they were entered on the register by somebody else, so we think there is a high rate of that. That makes perfect sense, given the nature of many of the south Asian communities. That was one factor. The second factor I think we emphasised was that a much higher proportion of minorities say it would be difficult for them to find their national insurance numbers, and they may not have them. Those are the two factors where there are special problems that minorities will face with this new system unless the risks are mitigated in ways that we don't yet know about.

**Q345 Mark Durkan:** A unique identifier number such as national insurance is going to be a problem?

**Dr Sobolewska:** I think this will be the problem. The Government did say that they would look into other ways of verifying people's existence but thus far, as far as I am aware, they are unclear about what these different ways will be.

**Professor Heath:** That could be a major barrier.

**Dr Sobolewska:** That could be a huge barrier, so we are advocating that they use, for example, NHS data, which will include a greater number of women.

**Q346 Mark Durkan:** Would that NHS data be used to automatically register people—the NHS data might not keep track of where people are living, and people could be moving—or is that used simply to make sure that a form, which people then have to send themselves, is presented?

**Dr Sobolewska:** This is data for verification, not automatic enrolment. Automatic enrolment would be the ideal-world scenario in my mind, but that would be a very costly and very big step in terms of reform.

**Q347 Mark Durkan:** Would there be any issues around individual registration? We have heard the evidence that shows that women in this community are more likely than others on the register to have been registered by the head of household. Is there any reason to believe that in the move to individual registration they might be less likely to register themselves?

**Dr Sobolewska:** Considering that these women are often economically inactive, have lower levels of English fluency and that often the expectation in these communities is that women take a less prominent role in public life, I think we can be very confident in saying that these women will be less likely to take the active step of individual registration.

**Professor Heath:** There is also an issue that there is another barrier if you require more information from people on the registration form, like the national insurance number or any other piece of information. We need to remember that for most people outside this room politics is right at the bottom of their list of priorities, so they are not interested, particularly away from election time. I think there is a risk—and we find it with our own surveys—that if you ask people more questions or difficult questions they say, “I can't be bothered, I won't fill it in” or “I will leave it until later”, and this could affect everybody. Adding complexity is a trade-off. It may be better from a verification point of view, but it may affect even more people, particularly young people who can't be bothered, are not interested in politics and are generally switched off. I think there is a big risk that with individual registration these barriers won't affect people like us but will affect young people, less educated people, people who feel less competent with writing and numbers. The social class and other inequalities could get bigger.

**Dr Sobolewska:** There is a lot of variation in the American research on this, because different states have different registration laws and they change them all the time as well. So they have a lot of research on this, and that shows that education, class and race matter, but actually everybody registers less if there are more obstacles. Making it easier for everybody will cause everybody to register more. That number of 6 million will melt if we make it easier, and it will rise across society, across the board, for everybody, if we make it harder to register.

**Q348 Mark Durkan:** We had the experience in Northern Ireland of the move to individual voter registration, leading to a significant reduction, and that was across socioeconomic groups. One of the issues in some households was that people did not trust that the system was not doing this for ulterior purposes. Is there a danger that when we talk so much about the idea that we will do it right in England and Wales because there will be matching datasets and all the rest of it, that will reinforce the suspicion among some people that there is an ulterior agenda and that the information is going to be used in the context of welfare measures and other things?

**Dr Sobolewska:** Yes, or immigration status. We definitely think that may be a worry for a lot of minorities. I also wanted to make a very quick point about what we think is easy information to provide, like date of birth. There are people in this country who don't have one. If they have come from Pakistan and India and they were born right before partition, they often don't know their date of birth. The problem of verifying their existence is that they would have accepted some date of birth and it could have changed because it is not set in stone, it is not an actual official document. Therefore, they won't be matched, because they said 1 December and then forgot and said 1 November.

**Q349 Robert Neill:** You are not saying anyone who does not have proper immigration status should be voting, are you?

**Dr Sobolewska:** No, but people are not sure.

**Robert Neill:** Yes. That is a better point. Given it is often uncertainty that is the barrier and suspicion, as my colleague just said—

**Dr Sobolewska:** Yes, and the worry, especially in today's climate.

**Robert Neill:** Exactly. If you are going to get round that, there is an argument that there ought to be some attempt to campaign to give better information, more reassurance and so on, which I think most people would sign up to. If that is the case, do you think it is just BME communities, where we know there is an issue? You mentioned, Professor, young people and other groups who are less willing to get involved. Is there an argument, therefore, for a more systematic approach to meet that reassurance and information and, if so, who should be doing it? Is this something that should be done by Government? If so, is it at a national level; is it a Cabinet Office sort of thing; is it something the registration authorities should be doing; is it something for political parties, the Electoral Commission or whoever? There is a raft of agencies out there. Who do you think are the best placed people to do that in a way that would reassure some of the suspicions that people may have?

**Professor Heath:** I think we would probably want to do a little bit of homework first and just see which organisations are most trusted. I know that in India the electoral commission is the most trusted of all Indian institutions. I don't know if our Electoral Commission has the same high profile and reputation, but that is very researchable. We can find out, and I think it is a crucial issue that the organisation responsible should be trusted. As we saw with the sharing of medical health records, Care.com, there were very low levels of trust and they are tending to fall. My hypothesis would be that it should not be Government, because Government is not trusted at the moment, unfortunately, particularly by some of these marginalised groups.

**Dr Sobolewska:** Another difficulty is that we don't know how to raise the levels of registration. There is a lot of research on how to raise levels of turn-out but we don't actually know if the same incentives will work on registration.

**Q350 Chris Ruane:** Would you be happy with an £80 fixed penalty notice—a knock on the door and “Sign this or you get an £80 fine”?

**Dr Sobolewska:** We will have to research that, I think.

**Chair:** Maria and Anthony, thank you very much indeed for your evidence this morning. It has been incredibly helpful. As you leave there is always something you wish you had said, so please don’t hesitate to drop us a note, and if there is additional evidence we would be grateful to receive that too. Thank you so much. It has been very helpful. Thank you for coming.

### Examination of Witness

*Witness:* **Simon Woolley**, Director, Operation Black Vote, gave evidence.

**Q351 Chair:** Welcome, Simon. It is very good to see you again. Do you want to say anything to kick us off, or do you want to jump straight into questions?

**Simon Woolley:** I think I will, actually. This feels a little bit like déjà vu all over again, and I am not laughing. I was here on 4 November 2011, and it was some few months after the summer riots in which we were forced to look long and hard at why thousands of young people, a significant proportion of whom were black and minority ethnic but not by any means exclusively, were rampaging through the streets. I said then, as I sat in front of the Select Committee, that this was an opportune moment for us to see what our shared responsibility is that begins to give young people hope and a pathway to become positive, active citizens. I said then, and I will say it now, that feeling part of society, engaging in its civic activities, believing that these institutions belong to all of us, is a critical facet of a vibrant, dynamic, inclusive society. I said that when we started Operation Black Vote in 1996 we said a key tenet of all of that was about voter registration and making sure people are involved.

The Select Committee took their notes and went away, and here we are again some years later discussing the same thing, the difference being, as my good friend Anthony and his colleague have highlighted, that the gap, emotionally, politically, physically, is in some parts getting wider. I don’t know what it is going to take for you men and women to say, “The buck stops here, and we will have a comprehensive programme to close these gaps and to make sure our democracy is vibrant”. I don’t know what it is going to take for you to grab the thorns and deal with it. I simply don’t know.

**Q352 Chair:** I think it is going to take some very specific proposals that witnesses like yourself, Simon, come forward with and that we can put to Government of all parties that is workable and practicable. That is our intention. We intend to do that, with your help.

**Simon Woolley:** Okay. I think it is more than that, as a matter of fact. Central to us getting from A to Z, and there is no quick fix—Anthony and others have highlighted that—is the political will. Let me try to give you an illustration about political will. Robert might remember that some years ago when people were talking about the mayoral election, we brought over a mayor of Missouri, Mayor Emanuel Cleaver, a wonderful man, African American. He was the first African American to be mayor of Missouri. He was talking about political will. At the time when he took over his institution was predominantly white in a town that he said was pretty much like London—one-third

teeming, dynamic diversity. He said to his team, “You have got one year to ensure this institution is diverse, and if you don’t you are out of this building”. He came back and he said in less than a year his team from top to bottom was diverse. It is the driver that makes these changes happen. We know there are teeming priorities, but as Chris said before, and I think Robert mentioned it too, how important is democracy to us?

**Q353 Robert Neill:** Simon, I first came across you in 2000 at the mayoral elections. Over those years, what would you say are the key practical things that you would claim you have achieved with Operation Black Vote and what bits have you got wrong?

**Simon Woolley:** I am glad that you have given me the opportunity to talk about our successes, because bear in mind that we are poorer than church mice. In the last four years alone we have gone from 12 staff to three to try to undertake a national project, and work has got greater. Yet in spite of that, I am proud to sit in front of you and say that the only two black and minority ethnic Ministers in this Government come from Operation Black Vote: Sayeeda Warsi, who helped us launch in the north, and Helen Grant, who, as a young solicitor, came to us and said, “I want to be a representative. Can you help?” We twinned her with Oliver Letwin and Francis Maude and the rest is history. There are some 40 councillors that have come through the scheme. There are a dozen bag carriers here working in offices. That is on the political side.

I am equally proud, Robert, that back in 1997 I managed to bump into—not bump into, almost chase after—Lord Derry Irvine when he was Lord Chancellor and, having cornered him in the corridor, I said I would like to try to transform the magistracy. He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “We will have a scheme where we will get young black men and women, Africans, Asians, Caribbeans. They will learn what it is about and they will find their way to sit on Her Majesty’s benches”. He said, “Good idea, young man” and we did it. Some years later now there are over 100 individuals who have gone from A to Z and who are now magistrates, changing the face of the magistracy, with an average age of 20 years younger than the average age of magistrates.

What have we got wrong? We have not had enough support or enough resources to help transform our society. It is my fault that I cannot convince you and others to give me the support to do a better job. That is my fault.

**Q354 Robert Neill:** Do you think there are other things you do differently as well as you go forward, looking at your future plans? You have done some good work.

**Simon Woolley:** Let me just say this. When we set out, Robert, in 1996, bearing in mind that then 85% of those black and minority ethnic communities voting voted Labour, it would have been very easy for me and my team to say, “We are going to be like the African American project that joined in with the Democrats”. We chose not to; we chose to be vociferously non-partisan. As a result, if you want to talk about successes—I still do—I sat in front of subsequent Tory leaders and said, “The black and minority ethnic communities are conservative with a small ‘c’ but the reason they don’t vote for you is they think you are a bunch of racists and you have got no representation”. Over the years—and you have been aware of this specifically—the party have listened. I take great pride that in 2010 your party broke British political history by having the largest number of black and minority ethnic MPs ever in this institution, because we helped persuade them that it was good for them and good for democracy.

**Q355 Robert Neill:** And plans going forward?

**Simon Woolley:** Now they have stopped.

**Robert Neill:** Your plans, I mean.

**Simon Woolley:** No, I am talking about your plans.

**Robert Neill:** I am asking about your plans, Simon.

**Simon Woolley:** This is not so much about me, but we can talk about that because I have got plans too.

**Robert Neill:** Your organisation's plans. You are the witness.

**Simon Woolley:** Okay. It is a kaleidoscope of solutions that will deal with this problem, and fundamentally it is not a quick fix. You will be aware that the Cabinet Office announced a voter registration campaign before Christmas. I think the budget was some £4 million over three months to solve a problem that has been going on for decades. Give me a break.

**Robert Neill:** Is that it?

**Simon Woolley:** What I am saying to you is it is not a quick fix.

**Robert Neill:** I get a sense of blame-passing.

**Simon Woolley:** No, I am not blame-passing. I am trying to get you to a place where you say, "What are the long-term solutions?" I am saying this is what it should not be.

One of the solutions must be that we start this citizenship education programme in a comprehensive way at our primary schools. I recently went into my son's school in Woodford. Actually, I took along Iain Duncan Smith, the local MP, but I went there before on my own. Eight-year-olds to 11-year-olds are so fantastically receptive. We talked about Nelson Mandela. I spoke to the kids beforehand and I said, "Iain Duncan Smith, who is your MP, has a budget of £179 billion. That is a lot of Lamborghinis". They got that. They got that he had a lot of money to spend and one young child said to him, "Mr Duncan Smith, how are you going to spend that £170 billion?"

The gap is that a lot of MPs go into schools, but then there is this monstrous gap. By the time people get to 15 we have lost them—16, 17, 18. It is incredibly difficult, once they have fallen off, to get them back on. Recently I went to Hackney College. These are students studying law, business, engineering. I asked them were they registered to vote, and they looked at me as though I had just sworn at them. "Registered to vote? Get involved in politics?" some of them said to me, "You've got to be joking". After half an hour of me challenging them, unpacking their baggage, they all registered to vote, but I am forceful. In a situation where they don't have that, getting them back is incredibly difficult.

**Q356 Robert Neill:** That is very helpful. I agree. My experience is not dissimilar to yours at all.

**Simon Woolley:** If I was in your position, if I had a position of power, I would run a campaign in which you would encourage parents to take their eight year-olds to go out and vote. I take my son. That is our thing. He has been doing it since he has been four years of age—he goes with his father to vote. Thereafter it becomes the norm. It is what you do. In the education process we should be telling these kids that you, ladies and gentlemen, are public servants and they are the political masters.

**Chair:** We could have a separate debate about where political power actually lies and whether it is in the House of Commons or in the Government in Whitehall, but that would divert us considerably. I think to a large extent we are very much on the same side and need to have a common agenda to make Government listen to us and to make those steps that you are thinking about, Simon. Those things have to be in our report as specifics, so we would get the Government on the spot and they would say yes or no to a request from Parliament.

**Q357 Paul Flynn:** It is interesting you mentioned that it was 4 November that you were here giving evidence before, because this is the day that we celebrate in my constituency as democracy day because it is the day when 20 chartists were shot. They were after the vote; that is what the demonstration was about. It is also significant that there was one Member of Parliament, who recently left us, Mr Patrick Mercer, who celebrated that day because it was his regiment that shot the chartists. Building democracy is a work in progress, and it does take a long time with many stumbles on the way.

I am trying to get into practicalities, because, as the Chairman said, we are very much of the same enthusiasm that you have to try to build up the vote, but we hear of situations where in some areas there is nearly 100% registration. My constituency is 85%. It is a great shame that we are told that among black and other minority ethnic communities there are fewer people registered than there are in other communities. Why is this, and what can we do about it?

**Simon Woolley:** I am pleased that I listened to Anthony and his colleague beforehand, because they highlighted some of the fundamental reasons that we have to deal with. Yes, there are some technical difficulties, and I leave that to them. I am talking about the emotional alienation that I think is the largest problem here. When you consider that literally hundreds of thousands of black youths have been stopped and searched by the police, how does that translate in their view of authority? We are talking about hundreds of thousands of people going about their law-abiding business.

**Q358 Paul Flynn:** I agree with you entirely. I did a quote in the House the other day and the figures show that seven out of 1,000 people are likely to be stopped and searched in London if they are white, 15 out of 1,000 if they are Asian, and 45 out of 1,000 if they are black. It is an outrage. But on the question of the alienation of young people, do you think it is any worse among black and other ethnic minority communities than white? The white youth regard being registered or voting as naff. There is an alienation there.

**Simon Woolley:** Let's unpick that a little bit, because it is really important to do that. There is a big distinction between apathy and a conscious opt-out. There are too many within the white community who are apathetic. They may have feelings of distrust—I think that was spoken about in the previous session—but there is a conscious kickback with African, Caribbean, Muslim young men and women to the system that in the media gives them a hard time, and when they are confronted with authorities it is often negative. So, until we deal with that massive mistrust that translates to all aspects of civic and democratic society, we are wider than not closable.

**Q359 Paul Flynn:** I have lived longer than you, and longer than anyone in this room, I think, with my age of 79, and I see a great improvement since I was a child, living in a very diverse community and it is very encouraging the way that things have happened since 1987 in this place. There does seem to be grounds for being very optimistic about the progress that is going on. Are the differences, if there are differences there in the percentage of vote in the black and ethnic minority

communities, to do with practical things like many of them living in rented accommodation where people are unlikely to go? It certainly happens with others. What are the reasons?

**Simon Woolley:** I think those technical details are across the board. For the transient communities, it is an obstacle to register to vote if you have to send details off to the local authority to get them to verify it. But I come back to the fact that this emotional motivation for registering to vote is the biggest factor. If you are a graduate, if your parents have said to you, “Go to college, go to university, get your degree” and you are still twice as likely not to get a job, you have this feeling that things are not right. I say that is precisely why you should engage, but unless there is the preparatory stuff beforehand in which you see Parliament as a mechanism for change, then you reject the whole shebang.

**Q360 Paul Flynn:** The Hansard Society gave what appears to be some hard evidence that an audit that they did of political engagement suggested that 38% of BME respondents were very or fairly interested in politics compared to 50% or the white respondents. Do you think these figures are correct and representative, and why should that be?

**Simon Woolley:** If you go to a barber’s shop, if you go to the supermarket and you listen to the black women in the supermarket or in the hairdressers, they are talking politics all the time—about their school, about the housing, about mental health. The effects of politics are particularly dramatic to poorer people, to black and minority ethnic communities. We feel powerless, sadly, that we can make an effective change, and it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that we are not registered to vote. Look at the data just this week from the Policy Exchange on the change in demographics, the power of the black vote. It is for all of us to ensure that they have that power and then the changes that will affect all of us in a positive way will occur.

**Q361 Paul Flynn:** We have asked other witnesses about the apparent disparity between the unfavourable treatment of young people compared to rich elderly people like me who get unneeded benefits from the Government, which are sacrosanct when they are willing to cut benefits for young people. Do you think this is true of ethnic communities—the fact that they are not wielding their political muscle and they are being punished and neglected because of that?

**Simon Woolley:** I think you are absolutely right. I have lamented on the three main leaders that since 2010 David Cameron, the Prime Minister, and Ed Miliband have made no major speech about tackling persistent race inequality. Nick Clegg did. He made a speech for the Scarman Trust lecture, and he did talk about the fact that we need a nuanced discussion about how not all minorities are stuck but some are. He made that speech but nothing transpired thereafter. BME communities see that, but also the politicians react, as you said, to the elderly, the grey vote. Am I joining the grey vote now? I guess I am. We vote and we demand and we get listened to. I think that it is not enough for politicians to be cynical and say, “I am only going to listen to those who I know will vote”. I won’t tell you which side it was, but a politician looked me in the eyes and said, “Can you go and tell the black community thank you for not voting?” I said, “Why is that?” He said, “It means I don’t have to knock on their doors”.

**Q362 Paul Flynn:** I think politicians have higher ideals than just their own survival, and I am generally cynical about this, but I believe that politicians will want to improve society and have a fair deal for everybody. What do you think that we, as MPs, should be doing in practical terms?

**Simon Woolley:** Again, I come back to the long picture that you have to take with this. You have to roll out comprehensive civic education schemes that start in primary schools and continue. We are not talking about the idea that you talk politics once in a while. It has to be embedded. You have to have a plan to get those 6 million-plus back on the register, not a quick fix of “Here is some money. You will get paid on results”. It is the most difficult job we do. The most difficult job is getting those cynical non-voters and non-registerers to get on, because we have to make the political case. Once they are registered and they believe they can make a difference, then they will go out to vote. It is the registration—I am sure Anthony said this in his book—that is the problem. It is not so much the voting; it is getting them to that place. If I was the Prime Minister I would be calling in the faith leaders, every university head, the housing trusts and saying, “What assistance do you need to make sure all those within your constituencies, within your institutions, are registered to vote?” I would be calling in people like us, who the community trust, to say, “What do you need to get your people registered to vote?” There is Bite the Ballot and there are others that are simply not supported.

**Q363 Fabian Hamilton:** Apologies, Simon, for being late this morning. What does Operation Black Vote do to encourage people in black and minority ethnic communities to register to vote and to turn out at elections? The Cabinet Office, as you know, made £4.2 million available to help try to increase the levels of registration. Did Operation Black Vote bid for any of those funds, and did it make a difference?

**Simon Woolley:** Yes, we did bid for the funds and, given that we are the only organisation that specialises in this, it was disappointing that we were not successful. One of the reasons why we were not successful—and I think this is a real issue—is that on one part of the scoring I was aware that we would score zero. It said that if you can get 10,000 people to register to vote in this particular time you will get 10 points. If it is 6,000—and so on, on a sliding scale. I know how difficult it is to get young Somalis who feel part of the most alienated group in this country, and that was my target group, and I knew that I couldn’t promise the figures that would get me the funds to do the research. I could have lied. There is a big difference in registering to vote an alienated, often angry young Somali and registering a middle-class white kid who is apathetic, and yet in that judgment they were measured the same.

**Q364 Fabian Hamilton:** So the parameters were flawed?

**Simon Woolley:** In my opinion.

**Fabian Hamilton:** That is certainly some feedback I think we would be interested in. The witnesses I am told we have just heard from raised concern about the impact that the implementation of individual electoral registration could have on black and minority ethnic communities. Do you have any concerns about the new system?

**Simon Woolley:** It will have an impact. Again, we have been having this conversation for some time. I know Paul said earlier that in some constituencies there is 100% voter registration. Paul, with the greatest respect, that simply is not true. Of course it says that, but it does not account for the fact that you can have 10 people living in a house and if one person signs it, it is classed as 100%. In some part I am an advocate for individual voter registration, because you get a fuller picture, but it has to be with a monstrous education programme that tackles some of the inherent problems that my good friend Anthony spoke about of family heads signing or not signing individuals to that.

**Q365 Fabian Hamilton:** But isn't that the problem—that at the moment, if you have, say, a lodger or two lodgers or students living in your house you are unlikely to register them? Under individual voter registration, they are more likely to register themselves, aren't they, with the right encouragement and education?

*Simon Woolley:* Again, this is a balancing act. The reality is that if the preparatory work is not done, tens of thousands will fall off the register, and many of them will be black and minority ethnic communities, exacerbating a problem even further. Yes, there may be some of those that you describe, Fabian, but many more will fall off through other means, precisely because people don't feel motivated to go through these hoops and over these hurdles to engage in civic society, and we have to recognise that.

**Q366 Fabian Hamilton:** Is it more about registration or about engagement? I represent the Chapeltown district of Leeds, which has a huge black and minority ethnic population—a majority, not a minority. I canvass a lot and do a lot of events in that area. What I find is exactly what you said, that people are prepared to discuss politics. They are happy to discuss politics and what is wrong in their community and what is wrong with society. Are they going to vote? Not necessarily.

*Simon Woolley:* You say that, Fabian, but I take a leaf out of Anthony Heath's book. I tell any politician who will listen, because it is in my interest and in the communities' interest, that what his book clearly shows is that when politicians do engage, when they go the extra mile and say, "I am listening and this is how it is going to translate", people will register and they will vote. Why do you think Boris Johnson went to the ExCeL Centre some six months ago and spoke with 40,000 black church members? Given that 60% to 80% of those that would vote normally vote for Labour, he stood in front of them and said, "I'm your man" and, lo and behold, they responded. Genuine engagement from the political class is critical for civic engagement. Community empowerment from people like us, education in the schools are all the building blocks that will get us to a better place.

**Q367 Fabian Hamilton:** I think to some extent that in this Committee you are preaching to the converted, because every Member in this room will engage, does engage and is involved in their communities. I am absolutely sure of that.

**Chair:** Fabian, just before you go on, I need to disengage now. I hope Simon will not take this as any disrespect. I have to make a speech on the Floor of the House, Simon, at 11.30 am, so I have to go. Bob, would you mind taking over for the last 10 minutes? Keep these guys in order, would you?

**Fabian Hamilton:** We have got one Conservative in charge of three Labour members. That is fine.

**Robert Neill:** We are being very bipartisan.

**Fabian Hamilton:** Simon, you make a really important point there, and I think it is a foolish MP or councillor who does not engage with their communities and listen to what they have to say.

*Simon Woolley:* You say that you engage and that you are listening, but we are here today precisely because Parliament is not listening enough in putting in those building blocks that will close these voter registration gaps. What I am imploring, demanding, is that you show real leadership, and it is not just you as an individual, Fabian, or your colleagues around this Select Committee. It is the institution putting the resources into local authorities, community-based organisations, the education and the encouragement of our communities to civically and politically engage.

**Q368 Fabian Hamilton:** I could make a partisan point about how local authorities are being starved of funds at the moment and have many other priorities or competing priorities, but I won't go there.

Can I go now to your report about the impact that the BME vote—I hate this expression BME—the black and minority ethnic vote could have on the 2015 general election, which I think is a year away from yesterday? You say that the black vote could decide up to 168 marginal seats, but when you talk about the black vote, surely people in black communities, minority ethnic communities, have a variety of different political views. It is not a monolith. It is not a block vote.

**Simon Woolley:** I am glad you asked that, Fabian, because the other Policy Exchange document that came out said exactly the same thing. You won't get any disagreement from me on that too, but there are two points to that. One is that I encourage political diversity among the black communities. That is good for a democracy. Why would we want all black communities just voting Labour? When that has happened in the past I believe the Labour party have taken the black vote for granted. When the Conservatives see that there are many more black people thinking about voting Conservative, they change their game.

That is a fact, but here is the difference. Whether you are a middle manager looking for that executive position or a Somali unemployed or somewhere in the middle, throughout your life you will be subject to a race penalty. That is a golden thread throughout our communities. So for me to say in that black vote that we demand that the political class tackle persistent race inequality, we can all sign up to that from A to Z—African, Asian, Caribbean, Chinese, Gypsy and Traveller, the Turkish community, that in all our trajectories, those barriers that hold them back from fulfilling their potential are taken away. We can say that politically, Fabian.

**Q369 Fabian Hamilton:** Do you honestly think, though, that there is such a thing as a political class? We were just discussing the fact there is no monolithic black and minority ethnic vote, but I accept what you say about the strand of racism.

**Simon Woolley:** But let's take, for example, the idea that we had a thread going through our political class that said, "We are going to tackle all these areas of race inequality because, first, we think it is right and, secondly, if we don't we won't get voted in".

**Q370 Fabian Hamilton:** So you believe that changing the nature and profile of those who are elected to represent us is important.

**Simon Woolley:** I didn't say that, you said it, but I agree that that is part of it. We want a representative democracy; that is critical. There should be nearly 100 black and minority ethnic MPs in this institution; there are 27. Representation is critical but I would argue that equally important, and perhaps more than representation, is policy.

**Fabian Hamilton:** I would not disagree with that, but would you say that—

**Simon Woolley:** Sorry to interrupt, Fabian. If policy does not recognise those persistent inequalities in education and jobs, you tell me why is it that young graduates and others are 50% unemployed in this country when the national average for young people is 19%. Why isn't there a policy directive that begins to tackle that?

**Q371 Fabian Hamilton:** Do you think those disproportionately small number of black and minority ethnic Members of this House are part of the political class? Have they been subsumed into it? I ask that because when I look at the profile of the nine Labour councillors in my constituency—and I just point to the nine Labour councillors—I see a brilliant diversity. I see 50% male and female, black and minority ethnic Muslim councillors, young and older members too. There is a real diversity there.

**Simon Woolley:** I would say we have got to stage 2, possibly 3, out of 10 in regards to talented BME faces in high places. They still lack the confidence to speak about these issues in any forceful way, and that is because of the institution. They feel that if they talk about race they will be seen as one-dimensional. I spoke about this in 2011. The media in particular will say, “We will only go to you when we are talking about race and not about the economy or the climate”. So they react in a way in which they can talk about everything under the sun but race. We need them to have the confidence to talk about both. The same dynamic occurred with women. When women first came into these institutions in large numbers, they felt that to be taken seriously they should shy away from talking about gender issues. Now there is a critical mass you see they are confident and that is why there is, quite rightly, a big agenda to tackle gender inequality.

**Q372 Fabian Hamilton:** I could point to one or two colleagues who will talk about race, who are from black and minority ethnic groups and are happy to talk about anything including race.

I want to move on, because I want to ask you about registration rules. We have had previous witnesses who have said that marginalised groups will benefit greatly from more liberal registration rules, such as on-the-day registration. With that in mind, are there any other changes you would see to the rules around electoral registration that would benefit black and minority ethnic communities?

**Simon Woolley:** I am encouraged that the Electoral Commission and the Government will soon have online voter registration. Technology now is such that we ought to be able to register with our mobile phones. Once the data is there in a safe place, we ought to be able to swipe it and you are registered to vote. Surely it is not beyond the means of us to get that to happen.

**Q373 Chris Ruane:** Can I come in specifically on that point? I am going to direct a note to Graham that your suggestion of involving the churches and institutions should be a recommendation we put forward. The question is, will online registration, which starts in June, allow the black churches to have it at the back of the church, “Go and register now. It is your civic duty and your religious duty”? Can you see greater involvement in registration from the BME communities from June onwards?

**Simon Woolley:** I think it is going to be mixed. My interaction with the churches has been extremely positive, but many of them are tending to shy away from politics. Graham said he saw me on the TV yesterday and I was saying that I am encouraged now that the pastors are saying it is good to pray but it is also good to vote. But still not enough are, and that is also with the imams in the mosques, and in gurdwaras. There are many not going to faith. Chris, we have to have a comprehensive programme. I heard you before talking about the American experience, and in the American experience the churches have been fundamental in getting African Americans. In fact, you cannot be a prominent politician unless you go through the churches. The churches have been instrumental.

You also highlighted the fact that in America there is far too much politics in voter registration that sees people off the register. You put the question to Anthony Heath: do you think that occurs here? My own view is that I don’t think the large numbers is a wilful act of seeking to marginalise or

alienate BME communities, but I do feel there is a lack of political will by this institution to effectively address the problem.

**Q374 Fabian Hamilton:** My final question, Simon, is what else do you think needs to happen in order to improve levels of registration and participation among BME groups? I know you have already touched on quite a bit of that, but is there anything else on top of what you have already said?

**Simon Woolley:** Your starting point when you write this document, the first paragraph must be that we cannot accept that millions of people are disenfranchised from our system if we are to be proud of it. I think your statement ought to be that this is not a wish-list, this is a demand that we seek to happen: comprehensive civic education, starting from primary school, going right the way up to college and, if need be, university; comprehensive programmes; civic programmes. If you talk about institutions to 11 year-olds, it is boring. When we did have some resources we were going into schools and talking about the politics of power, where power lies, how to affect it. We were talking about power in the fashion industry. When I see these young kids wearing their jeans hanging from their behinds, the big fashion industries changed their design to fit that need. Look, that is power. The music industry is powerful. So you can have these conversations about power to young people and then it is no longer a million miles to look at the civic institutions for change. The understanding of the kaleidoscope of where power might be is better understood, and these institutions are seen as one part of that.

**Q375 Fabian Hamilton:** When I was at school we studied civics—I don't know how many Members in this room studied civics—and that was about those issues you are talking about. But like all my colleagues, I am sure, I go to schools where there are 10 and 11 years-olds, and sometimes much younger children, on the school council who want to interview their local MP and talk about those issues. At the last school I went to they wanted to talk about toilet twinning, which when I was at school would have induced laughter and mirth, but it was very serious and these kids were seriously looking at twinning their toilets with getting decent sanitation in parts of Africa and Asia that don't have that sanitation. That is politics. They wanted to know what I was going to do about it. We are scared of that word "politics", and yet it is discussed every day.

**Simon Woolley:** If the politics are coming from grey men and women it is not going to be cool, but there are many out there that could make it much more engaging. We have to give them the platform and the resources to do that and we would all benefit from it. We are no longer in the situation where we are trying to drag millions back because we had forgotten about them about in the past.

**Q376 Mark Durkan:** Apologies, Simon, because I had to leave for another event and come back in. I had the benefit just two weeks ago today of having Congressman John Lewis in my constituency, one of the surviving big six of the American civil rights movement, and he was making points that chime with exactly some of what I have heard you say about the role of the churches and others in building up the layers of emancipation beyond the achievement of civil rights itself. But he also was making the observation that there was a danger at times that people concentrated on focusing on actions where there were particular ethnic profiles, where cities were seen as having significant black populations. Often the marginalisation of those where there was a smaller community was neglected. People were content enough to see things in certain cities—that there would be black mayors in certain cities—but there was a hangover marginalisation still in other places and that needed to be tackled as well.

**Simon Woolley:** I think you are right, Mark. I know that all the leaders would go down to Brixton to the big churches, Boris Johnson to ExCel—that is fine and it gets the headlines, but you have to go to Bournemouth, Plymouth or some of the regions up north where a lot of people feel pretty isolated, and recognise that they should be listened to and feel part of the project, part of our society.

I was here in 2011 and I am here today. I don't want to be here in three or four years' time saying the same thing. You juggle with a lot of things but I would argue it would be a great legacy from this Committee, from you as individuals, if you set in motion a fundamental programme that could dramatically close these gaps—on your watch, on your brief, that you did that. Of all your work in politics, I hope you would say, "That is the thing I am most proud of".

**Robert Neill:** Simon, thank you very much for the evidence. I think that is very useful and particularly thank you for the specifics, which I think we can take on board in the report. It is immensely helpful, and I know all of us are very pleased to see you again, as always. Thanks to our other witnesses as well. Thank you very much, everyone.